

UNDER A SHADOW.

Continued.

'I will ask who she is,' thought the envious woman; 'the men are all crowding round her. Sir Richard,' she asked, 'can you tell me who that very affected-looking woman is—the one with dark eyes and roses in her hair?'

Sir Richard looked, his face flushed as he answered her.

'That is Lady Carlyton,' he replied.

'Why do you call her affected? She strikes me as being perfectly natural, perfectly dignified.'

'You are a competent judge, of course, Sir Richard,' sneered my Lady Blanche. 'So that is Lady Carlyton?'

'Yes,' he rejoined; 'you have heard her history, of course. She was an Italian artist, of noble birth and great wealth, I understand.'

'Yes,' said Lady Blanche, impatiently, 'every one knows her story, of course. I grew tired of hearing about her last season. There should be some little distinction observed, and a peer has no right to marry an artist. It is absurd.'

'Her name,' continued Sir Richard, 'was Asalita Ferrari.'

'I wonder,' said Lady Blanche, 'where I have seen her before? Her face is familiar to me; indeed, the more I look at her the more certain I feel that I have seen her, yet I never knew her before her marriage, and I have not been introduced to her since.'

Sir Richard was not vitally interested in the question it seemed to him of very little consequence.

'Perhaps you would like an introduction to her?' he said; but my Lady Blanche answered 'No,' she would prefer remaining where she was.

So, with a bow the baronet left her.

As she had observed; 'intellect' was indeed a great thing, but beauty had a strange attraction for him; he was long to speak to Lady Carlyton.

Lady Blanche watched him as he joined the group of gentlemen surrounding her as courtiers surround the throne of a queen. She smiled bitterly, then started in amazement.

'I know that woman,' she said to herself; 'I recognize every gesture, every action—that fashion of raising the eyes and the head together. I seen it before, and have hated her for it.'

Lady Blanche was seriously perplexed, seriously alarmed; she began to wonder if she were haunted, if she had any hallucinations. What was the matter with her? Why had this face so great a fascination for her that she could not take her eyes from it?

'Asalita Ferrari!' she thought; 'I do not remember to have seen her—genius and pictures are not much in my line.'

Still sitting, watching her intently, Lady Blanche saw Lord Cardyne go up to her and stand talking by her side; his handsome face was bent with an air of reverence before her, and then, suddenly, when she saw the two faces together, Lady Blanche almost sprang from her seat.

'I remember it now!' she cried to herself. 'Lady Carlyton is like Alison Trente. I may well hate her, since her face resembles that of the girl I hate more than I hate anything in this world. I could almost swear it was Alison Trente herself—she has just such eyes, yet that never could be. Alison Trente sunk below the stream; no one knows where she went. This woman is an Italian—an artist, a lady by birth, they say. Alison Trente was none of these things, yet how like she is!'

So like that Lady Blanche was restless and miserable.

'Would to Heaven that it were Alison Trente,' she cried, clutching her jeweled fingers, 'so that I might have the pleasure of crushing her! But it is impossible; it cannot be.'

'Love has eyes,' says the sweet old song; what, then, has hate? The eyes of the man who has sworn to love her with an eternal love had rested on Lady Carlyton—rested with a vague, wondering, troubled sense of her resemblance to his dead love; but it had never occurred to him she could be his dead love changed, metamorphosed. This woman, who hated her, was far more quick in recognizing her than the man who had loved her.

Some one else came and asked Lady Blanche to dance, but she declined. There was something persevering in her character—she could not have danced or have done anything else while this restless suspicion of something strange occupied her. While the music sounded, while beautiful women smiled, while men wooed with ardent words, she sat still, watching the royal women who swayed the courtiers around her as queens sway their slaves. She had never once mentioned the name of Alison Trente to Colonel Montague—or Lord Cardyne, as he became soon after he left England—but now she resolved upon doing so. She waited for him until she saw that he had finished his conversation with Lady Carlyton; then, as he went down the room, she laid her hand on his arm.

'Good-evening, Lord Cardyne,' he said.

'If you have no particular engagement, take a seat here by me—we are old friends, you know.'

Lord Cardyne smiled, and took a seat as she bade him.

'You have been talking to Lady Carlyton,' she began. 'What do you think of her?'

'She is beautiful and gifted beyond the ordinary run of women,' he replied carelessly.

'I do not know,' said Lady Blanche, slowly if you remember a governess we had at Loam Abbey long ago.'

He could not suppress a slight start, and Lady Blanche triumphed.

'A governess?' he said, musingly.

'Yes; you did know her very well. Once she came with us to London; she returned with the children to Loam Abbey, and there; I think, you saw her.'

His face flushed in spite of his self-command. He remembered it all so well—the bright, swift passion of long ago; the girl who had loved him with so wondrous a love; the girl who had fled to the

river with the dead babe in her arms.

'My dear Lady Blanche,' he said, slowly, 'the most indiscreet thing in this world is to awaken memories of things long past. What of this governess?'

'You do remember her?' she said, with magnignant satisfaction—you own that? I am glad of it, because you will understand. I knew at the time of your little flirtation with her—that shall I call it?—flirtation with her; but I did not mention your name to her, or hers to you.'

He thought to himself it might have been better had she done so, then he felt annoyed that she had made him uncomfortable with these painful memories.

'Why do you open a closed page, Lady Blanche?' he asked, impatiently.

'You will know soon enough,' she replied. 'That girl, Alison Trente, left us in a very mysterious manner—strange to say, at the very time you went away. Indeed, people did say that it was all arranged.'

Lord Cardyne interrupted her impatiently.

'My dear Lady Blanche, why all this nonsense? What do you mean? I am a married man now, with a wife of my own, and the follies of my youth are forgotten. Why do you talk to me in this strain?'

'You will hear. You admit that you knew this girl Alison Trente. Now look at Lady Carlyton—look well and tell me if ever you saw a more marvelous likeness. Those are Alison Trente's eyes, that is the very pose of her head. Do you see it? I could almost swear it is Alison Trente herself.'

Lord Cardyne looked at the flushed face, the vindictive smile, the lips that seem to tremble again with ill-nature and envy. Then he said slowly:

'That is quite impossible.'

'Such things have been,' she cried; 'adventurers have made their way even to the throne.'

'I repeat that is impossible,' he said, solemnly. 'Alison Trente died in Italy years ago.'

She laughed.

'Ah! then I am right. She went away with you—I knew it. Base-born, designing.'

'Nay,' said the earl, gently, 'she was neither. She was, when I knew her, pure as an angel and simple as a child.'

'Yes, when you found her; what did you leave her, my lord?'

His face grew grave and pale.

'Never mind that,' he answered. 'I can tell you that she is dead; nay, more, to convince you I will tell you how she died. She flung herself into the river that ran near her home. I can assure you it is so.'

'That must have been when you deserted her. Well, that is not a pleasant story, my lord. I believe that you believe it, I can almost swear that woman is Alison Trente.'

For the first time something like a doubt occurred to Lord Cardyne; he would not listen to it.

'This lady,' he said 'is an Italian, a lady of birth, wealthy, a genius, a pure, good woman, whose name is never pronounced without a blessing in her own land. You forget that this poor dead girl Alison Trente, was English, was lowly born, penniless—above all, she is dead.'

'I remember all you say. Let me ask you, did you ever discover that Alison Trente was a genius? We did. She was an artist born, if ever one lived. You say she died in Italy, and this woman comes from Italy; then I say that there has been a miracle—that Alison Trente has risen again as Asalita Ferrari. I speak,' she added, in a bitter tone, 'with the certainty of hate, and hate is never mistaken.'

Lord Cardyne recoiled from the terrible words.

'Hate!' he repeated; 'why did you hate her, Lady Blanche?'

She bent forward and whispered to him: 'Because you loved her and I knew it. I hated her with the hate of hell, and I would to Heaven that she stood there, that I might crush her with her own shame.'

'I always thought you a woman, Lady Blanche,' said Lord Cardyne; 'I am mistaken—you are a fiend.'

Turning abruptly away, he left her.

CHAPTER LVIII.

AN OLD Foe AT WORK.

Lord Cardyne was unhappy, it was easy to turn from that malicious woman—it was not so easy to forget her words, the hate of hell!

Poor Alison! Memory was strong with him just at that moment. He remembered her so young, so loving, so tender, so lovely; he remembered her agony of jealousy, her trust, and her despair. His heart was softened as it had never been before. Of course it was all absurd; Alison was dead long ago; he remembered the description of her death—dead with the little babe in her arms.

There was a great resemblance—he had always thought so; but then such things were common—he had often known two people so entirely alike it was with difficulty one could be distinguished from the other. Then the circumstances differed so completely; Lady Carlyton was a queen among women—Alison had only been a governess. Even when he loved her most, his eyes had been blind to her genius; it was not of a nature that he could understand. He tried to shake off all these thoughts, almost detesting Lady Blanche for having aroused them.

'That woman is a perfect nightmare,' he said; 'I will never talk to her again.'

He looked out for the youngest and prettiest girl in the room to dance with as the best means of distracting himself, while Lady Blanche persevered. She attacked the young Countess of Carlyne next; she affected great delight at meeting her, and talked gayly of all that was passing around them. Suddenly she turned to her, asking:

'Do you know Lady Carlyton—the last sensation I call her? It seems to me all the men are going wild about her. Do you know her?'

A change came over the face of the countess—a look of intense delight and intense reverence.

'Know her? Oh, yes, I know her well; I love her—almost best in the world.'

Lady Blanche laughed superciliously.

'That is amusing; you have indeed cause for loving her if all be as I think.'

The young countess looked at her with a startled glance.

'What do you think?' she asked.

Lady Blanche laughed lightly.

'Only a few foolish ideas of my own—noting much. But tell me, Lady Cardyne, what is she like, this Lady Carlyton?'

'I could not tell you,' was the simple reply, 'in your language, for I do not know words enough, but I could tell you in my own. She is so grand, she is noble, she is a great queen—there is no one so noble and generous.'

'Is she a lady?' asked the envious woman.

'A lady—she—Lady Carlyton? I tell you she is a queen! She has a simple, royal manner, full of dignity, full of sweetness; she is an angel, all goodness, and you ask me is she a lady—how droll?'

'She was an artist, I believe,' said Lady Blanche.

'Yes—but what an artist! The people of Italy have crowned her as Corinna was crowned; she lives in the hearts of the children of Italy; her name will never die—it is immortal! And you speak of her as you would of a tradesman, an artist. Ah, yes! if the world had known more artists like Asalita Ferrari, it would be the better for it.'

'You are enthusiastic,' said my Lady Blanche.

'I love her, and I am her friend,' said the countess, warmly.

'And your husband,' she continued, 'does he love her also—does he admire her as you do?'

'I hope so. Lord Cardyne has too much taste and chivalry not to admire one like Lady Carlyton.'

Lady Blanche laughed a little long laugh that annoyed the countess.

'Lady Carlyton has visited your house since her marriage, has she not?'

'Yes, certainly; and will visit us again this year, I hope. We are country women; it is a great treat to us to be together.'

'Cling to you illusion, Lady Cardyne,' laughed the detractor.

'What illusion—that do you mean? I have no illusion over Lord Carlyton's wife. The only thing that I blame myself for is that I cannot better express my love and admiration for her. You speak so strangely, you seem as though you would insinuate something against my best loved friend; or is it my fancy?'

'It is your fancy,' said Lady Blanche, quietly; and then she turned away.

The evening was drawing to a close; she decided in her own mind that she would not be introduced to Lady Carlyton; she would defer that ceremony until her suspicions had either grown stronger or were set to rest.

That evening had been a pleasant one to Lady Carlyton; she enjoyed in her own artistic fashion the beauty of the scene, the flowers, the lights, the jewels. She loved to watch her husband's face—the face that wore so fond, so proud an expression as it glanced at her. For his sake she enjoyed the homage paid to her; she was pleased that he should see other people esteem her, that he should see her receive the homage of the greatest and noblest men of the day. She did not dance much—once with a royal prince who had honored the ball with his presence, once with an Italian duke who had gone purposely to meet her, and once again with an English artist whose name is famous. The rest of the evening she passed in receiving the homage offered to her on all sides.

She was very happy. There was one minute in which she was left alone, and she sunk back on her velvet fauteuil, clasping her white jeweled hands with an inward prayer of thanksgiving. She saw herself at the summit of human happiness—she was the beloved wife of the kindest of husbands, she loved him, she was happy beyond all words with him. She was, perhaps, the most famous, the most courted, the most popular woman in England; she was beautiful, rich, happy, beloved. She clasped her white jeweled hands.

'I am perfectly happy,' she said. God has forgiven and men have forgotten my sin. It is not often that a woman sins as I have sinned and lives it down. Thank Heaven, there remains no trace of my error; the only person who could ever denounce me is now my true friend. I am quite safe.'

How beautiful the wide world seemed to her; how brilliant and happy the years opening to her! She was neither weak nor given to emotion; but when the sweet, half-sad notes of the next waltz sounded, her eyes filled with tears.

'I do thank God,' she murmured to herself; 'I do thank Him! They were wrong who said that a woman could never regain what she had lost; I have more regained—'

'Asalita,' said Nugent Avenham, 'I have been waiting for some time to find you alone; you have been holding such a court, no one could come near you.'

'It has been a very pleasant evening, Nugent,' she replied, 'and I have seen some very nice people.'

'I want to introduce you to some one I have not said anything about to you—some one I love very much indeed, and hope to make my wife.'

Her beautiful face brightened as she heard the words.

'I am so glad, Nugent,' she replied; 'you deserve to be happy. Tell me who she is. What is she like? Why, she will be my sister when she is your wife—I, who have never had a sister. Imagine how I shall love her!'

Then a swift, sudden change came over her face—a swift, sweet, subtle shame; she bowed her head before him.

'Perhaps,' she said, 'you—but no; you are too noble, too generous. You are not afraid of introducing your love to me—you have no fear?'

Nugent Avenham bent his head and kissed the white hands.

'Fear?' he replied; 'no, none. I ask for no truer, wiser, better friend for the girl

who will my wife than yourself.'

Again from her heart there rose a deep song of thanksgiving that he, above all others—the only one now living who knew her sin—that he should esteem her.

Her heart gave a great throb of delight. Oh, thank God! men had indeed forgotten her sin.

'Who is this fair young love of yours, Nugent?' she asked. He was looking with something like wonder at the light on her lovely face—there were times when even the coldest of men marveled at her beauty—then he answered:

'She is very young—I am afraid to say how much younger than myself, Asalita but she loves me, God bless her! I love her. Her name is Lady Eva Blesseaton; she is the daughter of the Countess Blesseaton, who lives at Loam Abbey.'

He was leaning over the back of her chair as he spoke, so that he did not see the terrible, almost ghastly change that came over her face; it grew white as the face of a dying woman, white even to her lips.

'Lady Eva,' he continued; 'is I need not tell you, the sister of our hostess, the Duchess of Charterly.'

He did not see how she clenched her fingers until the rings made great dents in them. She had forgotten even the name of the Duke of Charterly; she had lived, suffered, enjoyed so much since then, that it was effaced from her memory. Neither had she imagined in the smiling, cheerful hostess, who was a handsome, matronly woman, the Lady Louisa, whose days had been in the fear of growing stout. Where then, was her foe, Lady Blanche, whom so long ago the colonel had effected to woo, so that he might have opportunities of meeting herself?

Nugent Avenham, all unconscious of her terror, went on talking.

'Lady Eva is considered one of the belles of the season. She has many admirers—but she loves me, God bless her—she loves me!'

The dark eyes had in them a hunted look; the scarlet lips quivered in pain. Only a few minutes since and she had been on the very pinnacle of happiness; now what had she to suffer—what had she to fear? This very Lady Eva had been her pupil. She remembered the lovely, laughing child, and very heart grew faint with a keen sense of her own misery and shame; not that Lady Eva would remember her, but how could she go through it? She had not remembered the possibility of meeting the Blesseatons in society; had she done so, she would not have gone to London. She had almost forgotten them, and the last thought in her mind was that they should be among the first people that she should meet. It seemed to her the strangest irony of fate, that her pupil, Lady Eva should be the fiancée of Nugent Avenham. What could she do—flight now was impossible. She might hope that, as Colonel Montague had not recognized her, they would not. She must make the best of it; but the fright had unnerved her—the face she turned now to Nugent Avenham had neither light nor color in it.

'Asalita!' he cried, in surprise; 'why, my dear sister, how tired you are! I shall call Basil; you must see about going home. How ill you look! Why did you not tell me?'

'I did not like to interrupt you,' she said.

'Nay, I am not so selfish. I will not bring my Eva to you to-night; you shall see her some other time. Here is the duchess; say au revoir to her.'

Looking into the smiling, matronly face, Lady Carlyton seemed for the first time to recognize the features of the Lady Louisa she had known long ago; but there was no trace of what she thought or felt in the calm, queenly woman, or the pale, proud, noble face.

CHAPTER LIX.

BLANCHE'S REUSE.

'Have you looked over our engagements, Asalita?' asked Lord Carlyton, as husband and wife sat at the sumptuously appointed breakfast table together. 'I have really—I am ashamed to say it—but I have forgotten where we are to dine.'

Lady Carlyton looked pale and tired; there was something of listless weariness in her manner new to her. Her husband looked at her.

'You will have to be careful, my darling,' he said, 'a life of excitement is not good for you—the roses are dying out from your face, and the light from your eyes. See how many invitations again this morning. I knew my wife would be honored and welcomed in the most brilliant society. I could not have thought that I should have forgotten, though, where we arranged to dine.'

'We accepted an invitation from Rock House, from the Duchess of Charterly,' she replied, in a low voice.

'The Duchess of Charterly?' repeated her husband. 'I am very glad; I like the duchess—she is good tempered and good-natured. The most disagreeable woman I ever met is her sister, Lady Blanche Blesseaton. I am not ill-natured, I hope but I do not like her.'

'I did not see her, was she at the ball?' asked Lady Carlyton.

'Yes, and I saw her watching you very silently, with a very envious expression of face.'

'It was lost upon me,' said his wife, with dainty disdain.

'I am glad we are going to Rock House; it will be almost a family party. Nugent has told you his secret, I suppose—that he hopes to marry the duchess's sister, Lady Eva Blesseaton.'

'Yes,' she replied, gently, he has told me. I hope he will be very happy.'

'I like both the duke and duchess,' continued Lord Carlyton; 'but I cannot say that I care for the Blesseatons—they are very disagreeable people. The countess is a mean worldly-wise kind of woman, Lady Blanche is even worse. Lady Eva I like—she is gentle and beautiful. Then we go to Rock House to-night?'

'Yes,' she said wearily; and, looking at

her, Lord Carlyton was struck with her pale face and weary manner.

'You shall not go if you are tired, Asalita,' he said; 'we will send an excuse if you like.'

For one half moment she was tempted—it would be such an escape. Still she had it to face; if Nugent was to marry Lady Eva, she must, sooner or later, meet the whole family; she could not make excuses forever, the battle would be fought—better have it over. Surely—surely! Heaven would protect her; they would never recognize her.

'I prefer going, Basil,' she said, 'I am sure Nugent would wish it.'

'Yes, I know he would; and if you feel well enough, I should indefinitely prefer it. Still your health is more precious to me than anything else, and you are not quite yourself, Asalita.'

'I shall be this evening,' she replied; and when he had left her she reproached herself for feeling afraid.

What, after all, had she to fear? In all probability the Blesseatons had forgotten even her name. The duchess had looked into her face without even the faintest gleam of recognition. What need to fear? Yet there was a weight at her heart—a cold, dull, terrible foreboding—she could not tell of what.

Perhaps something of the same feeling which induces a soldier to don his best uniform for battle made Lady Carlyton more dainty than usual in her dress. She had chosen a rich, sweeping black velvet—a dress made after the fashion of the Venetian ladies, and it suited her superb beauty far better than anything else she could have worn. It showed the rounded throat and the snowy neck, exquisite arms and shoulders. She had worn flowers before, but on this day she wore diamonds—a magnificent tiara, a superb necklace and bracelet. She had never looked more queenly or more beautiful. When she entered the drawing-room of Rock House the duchess hastened to welcome her.

'We shall be quite a family party,' she said, with a smile; 'my two sisters are here—Lady Eva and Lady Blanche.'

No, there was no recognition in that face; it was all smiling content and good humor. Lady Carlyton sat down while the duchess sought Lady Eva. She soon returned, leading by the hand a fair, fresh young vision of loveliness—a girl as a lily, with eyes like a wood violet, and golden hair, tall and slender, with the lovely dimpled mouth of a child; and in a few well-chosen words her grace introduced the Lady Eva.

Lady Carlyton looked for one moment intently at the girl's face; it was with difficulty that she traced ever so faintly the features of the child she had known. Lady Eva smiled and blushed; then, with a sudden, warm-hearted impulse, held out her hands, saying how delighted she was to meet one whom all the world revered. Lady Carlyton's heart warmed to the girl. There was no recognition there.

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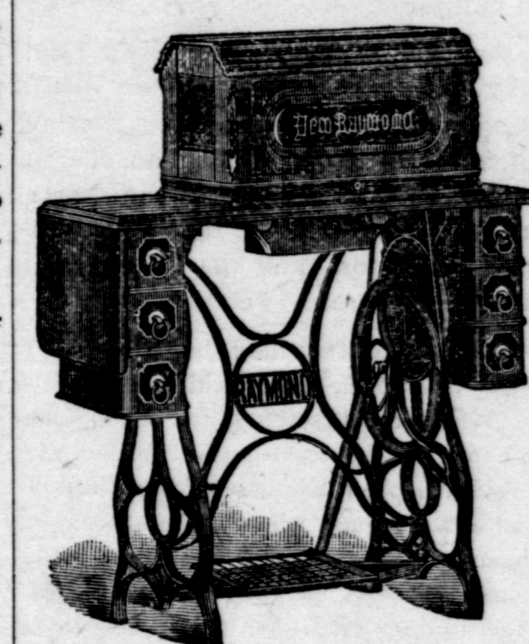
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