

UNDER A SHADOW.

Continued.

'A traitor to what?' he asked.
'To all love and to all women, she replied.'

'Nay, you are too harsh. I am a man and I love after the fashion of men.'

'Then I wish,' she cried, with sudden passion, 'that all men were struck dead.'

He turned to her in wonder, but she had vanished from his side.

He saw the gold and purple domino no more.
'What a tragedy queen,' he said, with a low, light laugh. 'She must be either an actress or a grand duchess. I cannot tell which, to wish that all men were dead. She would find it rather a dreary world on the whole, if there were no men in it.'

He forgot her. Such little encounters; such little incidents were not uncommon at such balls. He went back to his beautiful Camilla. Alison wandered through many superb rooms. Her heart was beating, her pulse throbbing, every nerve was on fire with indignant anger. Did he mean what he had said, or was it only the way in which people talked to each other at fancy balls?

She came to a small anteroom, and lying on a chair was a black domino, with a hood.

'I will speak to him again, she thought. Quick as lightning she drew off the domino of purple and gold, and put on the black one with the hood, then hastened to the ball-room. She saw her lover dancing with Camilla, and watched her opportunity again. It came after the grand banquet was over, and she saw the colonel in one of the grand saloons alone. She did not know that he had just gone through a most sentimental scene with the pretty vivandiere, but she went up to him, holding out her hand.

'Let me tell you your fortune,' she said to him. 'I have told many to-night.'

'I know my fortune,' he replied, though I thank you for the intention.'

'I have been reading fortunes to-night,' she said, 'from the palms of men's hands; shall I read what I see in yours?'

'Yes; that will be a novelty,' he replied, drawing off his glove and holding out his hand to her.

She took it, wondering that he did not recognize by instinct her touch.

'It is a white hand,' she said, poring over it—'white, warm, soft, yet strong. Has it ever clutched a man's throat or choked the last breath from a little child?'

He drew back, half offended.
'A rude question and a cruel one,' he said.

'Has it ever done worse?' she asked. 'Has it held a woman's heart and then flung it away?'

'Yes,' he replied many and many a one.'

'I thought so. I did not know whether it was man, woman or child; but I saw lines of murder on it.'

'We do not call that kind of thing murder,' he said, quietly.

'Do you not? Men use milder words for that crime, but women call it murder, and they are right. I see other pictures here. I see a river, a swift, deep stream, and on it floats a dead woman, with her face turned to the sky.'

He looked up in wonder.
'Who are you?' he asked. 'I will know. You will never know,' she replied.

'I have been puzzled twice to-night,' he said. 'I will not be puzzled again.'

He laid his hand lightly on her arm, as though he would detain her. She shook it off with a fierce cry, and the next minute she had quitted the room.

'English again,' he said. 'I seem to have a fine reputation among them. Some of them have got to hear about Alison, I suppose. What a misfortune. It will not matter, though, unless they should tell Camilla; but she would not understand it.'

Alison had flown as though for life; not for worlds would she have had him discover her identity. He had been puzzled, and pained, too, she was sure, from the expression of his face. She hastened from the ball-room, and then remembered that she had forgotten to engage any carriage to fetch her home. Fortunately for her the night was dark, and she reached home without notice. She went at once to her room: she was exhausted, no less by physical fatigue than by the emotion she had undergone. She said to herself that that night, at least, she would not think; if she were to give way to reflection, she should go mad. She laid her wearied head on the pillow, and slept the sleep of exhaustion.

'It was early in the morning when she heard the colonel return; the birds were singing in the trees outside, and the flowers were all so fragrant. Then her great sorrow woke and cried. She remembered all that had happened—all her hopes and fears; but there is something hopeful in the morning sunshine; the most terrible part of death is that while the dead we love remain with us we must shut out sunshine; wherever the light of the sun comes it must bring hope. It brought hope to Alison; it was so hard to despair in the midst of all that laughing, brilliant loveliness. The dark fears and darker doubts seemed almost insensibly to vanish with the glorious morning light and song.

Perhaps she was jealous without cause; perhaps he loved her truly and well; his answers might have all been given in jest, believing the questions to be asked in jest. Oh, if she could but believe in him! Everything fair and beautiful seemed to rebuke her want of faith—the sunshine and the bright laughing flowers.

If she might but be happy as they were and then, as she stood watching the light on the roses, it came home to her forcibly that she did not deserve to be happy for she was not good. It was late when she saw Colonel Montague, and his first cry was:

'Death to all sentiment, Alison, and bring me a bottle of soda-water.'

'Death to what sentiment?' she asked, quietly. 'I thought you were going to inquire if I had missed you, and if I had

thought about you.'

'I believe you will be a sensible woman, after all, Alison.'

'If I ever am,' she thought, 'may Heaven pity me. It will be when my heart is dead.'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN IMPORTANT TELEGRAM.

Two days have passed since the masked ball, and not one word concerning it had ever passed the colonel's lips. Alison had not seen much of him, as the greater part of his time had been spent away from home. But this morning he declared himself tired; it was a very warm morning, too; the heat of the sun was almost intolerable; the perfume from the flowers was so strong that it made the air heavy and oppressive.

'Very delicious,' said the colonel, as he stood looking out on the lovely, laughing, sunlit world—'very delicious, but decidedly enervating. I have three or four engagements this morning, but I shall not think of fulfilling them. Can you amuse me, Allie, if I stay at home?'

'I think that is doubtful; but I am quite sure that you can amuse yourself,' replied Alison. 'Arthur did you go to the masked ball?'

His face changed suddenly—the laughing good-humour seemed to die from it. 'Yes, I went,' was the reply.

'Did you enjoy it?' she continued.

'After a fashion, Alison. Will you bring me that box of cigars? I will take a few drops of brandy in this soda-water, then I shall feel able to exert myself. It was a curious ball. I met two curious people.'

'Did you? What were they, or rather who were they?' she asked.

'One was a tall and stately English lady, who wore a gold and purple domino; and, by the bye, there has been a great excitement at the palazzo. She was the only lady present in gold and purple. Long after she had vanished, which she did quite suddenly, the domino was found in one of the anterooms. She was English—she talked English to me—and there are so few English families in Florence that it would seem easy to trace her; they cannot find her though.'

'That seems strange,' said Alison.

'Yes; there is quite a sensation about it. All the journals have contained an advertisement saying the lady who left the purple and gold domino at the Palazzo Orsini is requested to call or send for it, but no one has applied for it.'

'Perhaps it was not of much value,' said Alison.

'Yes, it was superb. There was a report that it had been worn by Miss Lornhavan, and her mother was much annoyed at it. They found out where it had been made, and asked the modiste for a description of the lady who ordered it. Still they could make nothing of it.'

'Did you see her?' asked Alison.

'That I did. She told me—it amuses me to think of it—she told me that she wished all the men in the world were dead.'

Alison laughed. He did not notice how forced the laughter was.

'Who was your other strange friend?' she asked, and again she saw his face change.

'A fortune-teller, who told me I had the lines of murder in my hand.'

'Of murder?' repeated Alison.

'Yes,' he laughed lightly; 'she called breaking hearts murder. Why, that is every-day pastime.'

'Is it?' she asked, briefly. 'Then it is sorry pastime, Arthur.'

'We cannot alter the world, Alison, or make it different. Men will be men always.'

'I do not see why they need be quite so wicked,' replied Alison.

'Are they wicked?' he said lazily. 'Well, that is decidedly wrong; women's hearts should be warranted not to break. After all, it is nonsense, you know—they never do break. It is only a figure of speech. How many times in one's life does a woman declare that her heart is broken? Now, if I wanted to express real sorrow, I should use the Irish expression—'My heart is scalded'—that is far more expressive.'

'It was a curious thing for any one to say to you, Arthur,' she continued.

'So I thought. The doll part of the matter is that the fortune-teller was English. I tried to detain her, but she sprang away from me. She said such strange words to me that I should have unmasked her. It made me feel uncomfortable, Alison, for I am afraid people in Florence here begin to suspect us, and I should be annoyed at that.'

'Did she say anything about me?' asked Alison.

'Well, it was, and yet it was not about you. We will say no more about her. Alison—I do not like to mention it.'

Alison flung herself down by his side; she kissed his hands and face.

Arthur, Arthur! did she tell that the time would come when you would cease to love me?

Her passion of love, her agony of fear, touched him; he kissed her with more affection than he had shown toward her for many a day.

'No, Alison, no—nothing of the kind. Of course I love you—why should I not?'

Yet, even as he said the words, he knew that they were false as any that had ever passed his lips. She was comforted by them; and as she knelt there, caressing with her light touch the clusters of hair round his brow, there came the gallop of a horse, and in a few minutes one of the servants came in to say that a messenger had arrived with a telegram.

'A telegram on a day like this!' said the colonel. What barbarity! Where is it from, Allie?'

She took the envelope from the man's hand.

It was from England, he replied.

Arthur Montague flung away his cigar and started to his feet. He knew there was only one circumstance which would cause a telegram to be sent from England he had only sent his address to his lawyers. His face changed as he opened the envelope; as he had looked two min-

utes before—careless, happy, and debonaire—he never looked again. Just as he had expected, the telegram was from his lawyers, to say that the Earl of Cardyne was dead, and that his immediate presence was required in England.

He read the words several times before he realized them.

'Is there any answer?' Alison asked.

'Yes, Alison, write for me—my hand trembles. Say that I shall start for home at once.'

Her face grew deadly pale as she wrote the words—she dare not speak them. There was something in his face she had never seen before—a sudden and new expression of dignity. She did not speak until the servant left the room with the answer in his hand, then she drew a step nearer. He waved her away.

'Be silent, Alison, for a few minutes. I want a few minutes in which to recover myself.'

He walked back to the window, and stood looking thoughtfully on the scene before him. What was it—this thought in which she had no share, this sudden shock; the nature of which she did not even know? For the first time as stood looking at him, Alison realized how completely and utterly she was outside his life. He had not turned to her in his perplexity, whatever it was, rather he turned from her, as though the thought of her repelled him; yet he had sworn to love her with an immortal love. She could not endure it, this division of their interests—this stand, as it were, outside his life. She went up to him.

'Arthur,' she cried, passionately, 'what has happened?'

He did not even hear her, he was so absorbed in thought.

'Arthur,' she cried again, 'tell me what it is!'

'I asked you for silence, Alison,' he said. 'I want to be alone with my thoughts.'

'What have I done?' cried the girl to herself. 'What have I done? Why should he treat me so?'

She stood by, her face as pale as death, her lips trembling, until he turned to her; then, touched by her drooping aspect he said:

'I am not impatient, Alison, but I really wanted a few moments in which to collect myself.'

'What has happened, Arthur?' she asked, and he saw that she trembled in every limb.

'Nothing very dreadful; something that shocked me and sobered me as nothing ever did before. The Earl is dead.'

'The Earl?' she repeated with eagerness.

'The Earl—my kinsman,' he replied. 'I am his heir—I am Earl of Cardyne.'

She looked at him, poor soul, with eager, trembling gladness.

'You are Lord Cardyne! Oh! Arthur, I am so glad for your sake; indeed, you ought to be a king!'

'It will bring about great changes, Alison,' he said gravely. 'I shall have to live in England now.'

'Of course, dear,' she said, clasping him with trembling hands, 'of course you must be in England, I know. Are you going to-day, Arthur—to-day?'

He drew out his watch and looked at it. 'I must be gone from here in ten minutes,' he said, 'Help me to get ready, Alison.'

'In ten minutes! Oh, Arthur! Arthur! hold me in your arms just one minute longer. Must you go—must you leave me? What shall I do—Oh, great Heaven! what shall I do?'

He was so touched by her agony that, despite his hurry, he stopped to kiss the pale face.

'You are going in ten minutes,' she moaned, and '—oh, Arthur, I had something to tell you!'

'Tell me now,' he said.

'No, I cannot,' she replied, despairingly. 'I thought that I would tell you some time to-day—this evening; but now—'

'I have not really a minute to spare, Alison.'

But she clung to him with despairing hands; until the day he died he never quite forgot that touch. He tried to unclasp them to free himself from her grasp, but it seemed to him as though the force of her agony had driven her mad.

'Let me go, Alison, I shall be too late, my dear. It is not good-bye, you know; I am coming back.'

She looked at him with such woful, despairing pain in her eyes, that he turned his own away.

'When shall you come?' she whispered.

'I cannot quite tell, Alison; there will be a great deal to do. I shall be incessantly occupied. I shall have no leisure time; but the very day that everything is settled, I shall come back to Florence.'

'God bless you, Arthur!' she cried, forgetting poor girl, that her lips had lost their right to bless. 'You will not forget me? you will not forget how I love you? you will come back to me?'

'Of course; and, Alison—see, I have but one minute longer—you must remain here, I will take care that you have all you need; you must stay here and keep up the house just as though I were at home. Try to be happy; but, remember, it is my wish, Alison, that you should not go into Florence; send for all you want. Will you promise?'

'I will do anything you tell me. Oh, Arthur you are the very light of my eyes, the life of my soul—do not stay long from me!'

'I will not. Good-bye, Alison.'

He clasped her in his arms, knowing full well that it was for the last time; knowing that he kissed her face for the last time; dimly realizing, by the light of her great love, the wrong he had done her, and that it would be a thousand times more merciful to leave her dead than to leave her thus.

'What sins are murder, if this be not?' he thought; and in that one moment, the first remorseful one of his life, Lord Cardyne wished that he had never seen Alison Trent.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A STARTLING LETTER.

Long days, so long and dreary, so sad, so cheerless, that Alison never dreamed to know when they began or when they

ended; terrible days for her, for her lover had left her with her secret untold. There had been something in his manner—she could not tell what words would define it, neither could she decide in her thoughts—a something that seemed to put her at a distance from him. He was Earl of Cardyne now; he could never be more grand or more noble in Alison's eyes—he was always a king among men; but this would, she knew, entail upon him greater responsibilities, and he would bear them well, she thought. She did not think that the change in fortune would change him toward her. She knew that if, by any extraordinary change of circumstances, she could have been made queen of the whole world, she should only have valued her sovereignty because of sharing it with him. She brooded ever over the same thought, that if she had told him her secret it would have made all the difference in the world to her.

'He must have cared for me more than for all the world,' she would say. 'Oh, why had I not the courage to tell him?'

She heard from him once; a short letter expressing his hope that she took care of herself—that she was well and happy—that for his own part he was so entirely overwhelmed with business he feared he should be unable to find any time for writing to her, but when she required anything she could write to his solicitors, Messrs. Walton & Walton. Alison laid down the letter with a bitter smile.

'I shall want nothing,' she said. 'What are solicitors to me? Oh, if he knew—if I had but told him my secret, he would not have written so coldly.'

Her mind was in a turmoil of ideas; there were times when she believed him untrue, faithless, deceitful, lost to all honor, to all truth, lost to her; there were times again when she believed herself to blame for listening to anything that was said at the masked ball; people talked all kind of things there; nothing was really meant; it was all nonsense, all said for the sake of effect. Why should she judge her lover, whom she loved for that?

A revulsion would come, she would blame herself for having thought coldly of him. He was the only person in the wide world who had ever loved her, no one else had ever cared for her; he had done much to prove his love. She would be content and wait. He said he should return. He would return, and then all would be well again. So she would content herself for two or three days, and then the haunting fears came round again.

She wrote to him little loving letters that might have touched the heart of a stone—loving, pathetic, all pleading for kind words in return; but these kind words never came.

Arthur, Earl of Cardyne, was quite different from Arthur Montague. With the new mantle of dignity that had fallen over him came a new character—he seemed to give up at once as beneath him the vices of his youth. A peer of England, he argued, was a very different thing from the colonel in the army.

He must maintain his dignity, he must abandon all flirtations—they were very well for a colonel, they would not do for an earl—he should have to marry and settle. From all the world of women there was but one whom he cared to make his wife, and that was the beautiful Camilla—she had taken his fancy as no other had taken it. As for poor Alison; that was a thing of the past; he must be careful and steer clear of all such nonsense for the future; he must, as soon as he could possibly attend to it, see that affairs were arranged comfortably for her, and bid her good-bye.

As he lay back in his luxurious chair, thinking over all these arrangements, there came before him a vision of her face, as he had seen it last—so full of the tragedy of woe. She would be sure to feel it, he said to himself—it was only natural to expect that, but no doubt; after a time, she would forget all about it, and, perhaps, in the end marry well.

Nothing was more probable—she was a beautiful girl, and worth any man's love.

A feeling of most serene satisfaction came over him as he thought of the future that awaited him. No remorse over Alison troubled him—she was but one of many. He never stopped to think that she loved him with an exceptional love—that she was as different to the common order of women as is a rose from a posy. He flattered himself that he was making quite a creditable beginning to a new life.

The Messrs. Walton must write to her, and tell her that her fate was sealed—that he would not return to Florence. They must tell her what income he had decided upon allowing her, and advise her to return to England; then when she was gone, he would return to Florence and make Camilla his wife if she would accept him. He did not feel much doubt of that, and he smiled to himself as he remembered her unmistakable admiration for himself.

So it was all settled in his own mind, and there was no more to be done. He went to his solicitors one day when he had nothing particular to do, and told them of this little entanglement in Florence. He did not wish to arrange it himself; he owned to being 'tender of heart,' and not liking to cause anything like pain. Would they write for him and say that the little nonsensical affair, between them must come to an end? They were to be very liberal over money arrangements; but he explained that it was imperative she should leave Florence, as he intended to marry there. Then he dismissed the matter from his mind.

'Poor little Alison!' he said. 'I really hope she will not care much about it.'

He quite forgot that when he wooed her he had sworn to love her with an immortal love.

The Messrs. Walton distinctly understood that there was no hurry over the matter—not the least in the world; it was to be done at their own convenience. He himself was going to Hargrave Park, where, in all probability, he should remain for the next few months. He intended to entirely refurbish that magnificent mansion, and prepare it for the bride he hoped to take there.

Lord Cardyne lost no time. He went down to Hargrave; he summoned the best firm in London to his assistance, and he commenced the decorations and improvements on such a scale of magnificence that half England was talking about them; and so a month passed by.

Alison was anxiously waiting. Her secret—a secret no longer—was known to the servants in the villa, to the only English doctor in Florence, and to the old French nurse, but she had not told it to Arthur Montague. He was returning; he had been gone so long now that he could not possibly remain away much longer, and, when he came back, in the very midst of the happiness of their reunion she would tell him.

Hapless Alison! She wrote and received no answer. She watched and watched in vain. She spent long hours at the window, always hoping to see him coming, always hoping to catch the first sound of his footsteps, but he never came. And one morning—he had been away nearly four months then, and the autumn had set in—she saw the postman with an English letter for her.

There was a little cry of rapture on her lips, a glad light in her eye, a thanksgiving in her heart, as she went to take it. 'He had written at last,' she cried—'at last!'

But the letter was in a strange hand writing, not in his. She opened it, and it seemed to her at first that by some mistake she had opened the wrong letter, a letter meant for another person. It began 'Dear Madam,' and was signed by 'Walton Bros.'

'DEAR MADAM.—We are instructed by our client, the Right Honorable the Earl of Cardyne, to ask your acceptance of a fixed income of three hundred per annum, paid on condition that you leave Florence and settle in England. We are also instructed to inform you that the earl makes this arrangement in consequence of his approaching marriage. We are also desired to express his regret at not being able in person to say farewell to you. All arrangements for your future have been made with us. You will, therefore, communicate with us in reply.'

She laughed aloud as she read. Did any one think for one moment, that she was so easily deceived? It was a sorry jest to play upon her; nor could she tell who had played it, but she would never believe it—never, while the world stood; the handsome, gallant soldier who had won her would not abandon her. She laughed aloud—a terrible laugh, the sound of which frightened her, then she fell on her knees, weeping and crying aloud that she was a most miserable sinner—Heaven pity her!—a miserable sinner; but believe in that story—never! She took up her pen and wrote.

To be continued.

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