

UNDER A SHADOW.

Continued.

'I really can hardly tell you. The earl was Colonel Montague when his last escapade occurred. He ran away with some governess—a very ordinary kind of girl, I believe, and he was with her in Florence when he met the young lady whom he afterward married. Madame D'Isio knew it at the time, but she ignored it; he was to be an English peer and a rich man. She told his wife of it afterward, when they had quarreled violently one day, and Lady Cardyne has never been quite the same since.'

'Then that is the cause of the disagreement between them?' said Alison quickly. 'That and other things. For my part, continued Lady Laura, 'I think it is cruel and cowardly to tell a wife anything about her husband, and I think also that blindness in a wife is wrong.'

'But are they really not happy?' asked Alison. 'No; they are miserable. I know no people more so. Lady Cardyne has not seemed well lately, she is peevish and irritable; she has no patience with her husband; everything he does is wrong—all that he says is wrong. I am often sorry for him.'

'Yet he seems kind to her. He asked me to dine with her on Tuesday, because it is her birthday, and he thinks that it will give her pleasure.'

'We are invited, too,' said Lady Laura. 'I am glad you are going—you will see all these things for yourself.'

'Then their conversation ended; but before the ball was over Alison had an opportunity of judging for herself of the domestic felicity of Lord Cardyne.'

He came to talk to her again and again; he was delighted with her, he was charmed with her beauty and grace.

'I never hoped to see you Madame Ferrari,' he said; 'I have been always most delighted with your pictures. I hope you will come to Hargrave; we have some fine old paintings there.'

As he was saying the words, Lady Cardyne came up to them.

'Speak Italian to me,' she said; 'I am so tired of this harsh, unmusical English. Ah, madame, just a few words.'

'I will speak Italian to you Camilla,' said the earl.

'You but you have an English voice, and it does not seem like the same thing. When a real Italian speaks Italian, it sounds like music; when an Englishman speaks it, it sounds like water rolling over stones.'

'I wish,' said the earl, half sadly, 'that I had been born an Italian—I might have pleased you better.'

'No, I do not think you would,' she said, half carelessly.

Alison saw how keenly the words wounded him—she even felt something like compassion for him. It seemed so strange that this man, who had won so many hearts, should be entirely set at defiance by his own wife.

'I am so tired,' said Lady Cardyne—'so dreadfully tired.'

'Would you like to go home?' asked the earl; 'so, I will order the carriage.'

'No, thank you. I should be just as dull and tired at home.'

'Then you will remain here some little time longer, Camilla?'

'I do not care to remain,' said pretty Madame Perversity.

'But if you will neither go nor stay, what am I to do?' asked Lord Cardyne, in comic despair.

'Do! you need do nothing,' replied his wife; 'everything and every place is tiresome alike.'

'Will you dance again?' asked the earl.

'I have said that I am tired, Arthur; was the dignified reply.'

'Will you sit still here and rest awhile?' he asked.

'I never care about sitting still,' she answered.

'Shall I go and find you an ice?' he persisted.

'There is ice enough in England without eating it,' was the reply.

'Then, my dearest Camilla, I really do not know how to please you.'

'I never for one moment thought you did,' said Lady Cardyne. 'Ah, me, I am so tired. Madame Ferrari, do you ever grow quite weary of the world and everything in it?'

'No,' replied Alison, 'I do not; and yet, Lady Cardyne, I have known more sorrow than you have ever known by name.'

That one specimen was enough to convince Alison that between the earl and his young wife there was no chance of happiness. She wondered at his patience—she wondered that he could endure the peevish complaints, the utter absence of all self-control, the constant murmuring, never-ending complaints of England and everything in it.

The Tuesday came when they were to go to the dinner given in honor of the young countess' birthday. Immediately that she saw Alison she sprang toward her and clasped her arms round her neck.

'It is my birthday,' she said, 'and this will be my greatest treat, the pleasure of seeing and talking to you.'

She did not make the most dignified mistress for that superb mansion, this high-born Italian. Alison had more grace, more self-possession, more dignity. She seemed, after all, more like a spoiled child than the niece of a prince or the wife of an earl.

Lord Cardyne found time to say a few words to Alison.

'Lady Cardyne has so earnestly warned me,' he said, 'that I am not to monopolize you, but to leave you to her, that I hardly dare suggest that I should show you a beautiful Claude hanging in the library. What do you think?'

'I think,' she replied, with a sudden smile, that a Claude, to me at least, is irresistible.'

She laid her hand with a certain sweet, imperious grace on his arm.

'I never knew before,' he said, 'how completely a smile changes a woman's face.'

Alison looked at him calmly.

'Lord Cardyne,' she said, 'if we are to be not friends, but acquaintances, you must refrain from paying me compliments; to my mind they are generally insincere, and they are always in bad taste.'

He looked half offended, wholly astonished; then recovering himself quickly said:

'I shall be only too happy to obey any wish of yours, madame; henceforth the small coin of compliment must not pass between us. Now for the Claude.'

It was a magnificent picture, and as she stood before it, lost as of old, in a wondering trance of delight, a certain light came over her face that he remembered so well.

'Great Heaven, how like you are to her!' he cried, in great agitation. 'I have seen her stand just so a hundred times and more, with that same light on her face.'

She was keenly alive to the danger of recognition. She turned to him slowly.

'Like whom? Of whom are you speaking, my lord?'

'It must be,' he cried. 'You must be Alison—Alison risen from the dead!'

She controlled the deadly fear that for one half moment had filled her.

'What droll things you say to me! How strange a name! What do you call it—Alison? Ah, here comes Lady Cardyne; I must tell her that you say I am—what is it?—Alison risen from the dead.'

'For Heaven's sake, hush!' he cried, hurriedly; and the young countess looked from one to the other.

'What is it, madam?' she asked.

And Alison smiled.

'My lord is so strange; he thinks that I remind him of some one.'

'Does he? Of whom does Madame Ferrari remind you, Arthur?'

'Some one I knew years ago, he replied.

'You ought to be flattered, madame,' said Lady Cardyne. 'Lord Cardyne has always shown great taste in the selection of his friends.'

Alison, fearful of the words that might ensue, tried to divert the channel of her thoughts. She was suddenly disconcerted by hearing Lady Cardyne say:

'You could almost fancy, madame, that your face is familiar to me. I can hardly tell why or how.'

'It is but fancy,' said Alison, calmly; 'but in her heart she felt that she had run the greatest risk by coming here.'

It passed off. The dinner was, in its way, a success, although to one so keen, so clever as Alison, the lady's dislike of her lord was very perceptible. Lady Cardyne had taken the most passionate fancy for Alison; she was hardly willing to leave her even for a minute, she devoted herself to her to the exclusion of her other guests. He was not happy, in spite of all the magnificence that surrounded him, in spite of the grandeur that was all natural to him; he looked like what Lady Laura called him—a disappointed man. Alison saw it all. He loved his wife, she did not love him. Was it retribution? Was it a judgement from Heaven on the man who had brought misery to so many households? Was it the just reward of an unjust life?

More than once she found his eyes fixed on her with an expression of curiosity that startled her. He was tracing the resemblance between the gifted artist and his old love Alison Trente.

CHAPTER XL.

"I NEVER LOVED BUT YOU."

The next time that Alison met the earl and countess was at a garden party given by the Duchess of Newnham. The duchess owned a magnificent villa at Twickenham, and it was there that she was accustomed to give the grand garden parties that usually formed one feature of the season. Alison was delighted with the scene; it did not strike her that she herself was the queen of the fête—that in the queenly grandeur of her magnificent beauty she excelled them as a damask rose does wild weeds. She watched it with dreamy eyes. After all, to her, so thoroughly an artist, it was only like a picture come to life—an animated scene on the ground instead of on the canvas.

She was sitting near the group of tall cedars under which a group of happy girls were eating fruit, when she saw Lady Cardyne coming toward her. She was certainly very lovely—the child-like, innocent face had hardly developed yet into womanhood; it was fair, and the azure eyes were clear and limpid; the soft golden hair waved over her shoulders in a hundred beautiful ringlets. Alison felt almost inclined to smile at her dress; it was magnificent, and suited her ethereal style of loveliness; but Alison thought, and thought correctly, it had been assumed in great measure to annoy her husband. It was of blue velvet, trimmed with fur, and the fur was the one touch intended for the earl. His wife never allowed him to forget the fact that his country was cold.

She came up to Alison with a smile that she never wore for any one else.

'I am glad to see you here, madame. They call this sunshine. Now, do look round.'

Alison looked, with a laugh.

'It lacks the fervor of an Italian sun,' she said; 'but, with that exception, I see no difference.'

'Ah! the countess, pathetically, 'you are prejudiced.'

'I really think,' said Alison, gravely, 'that I might return the compliment. Do you think it quite wise, Lady Cardyne, to set yourself so completely against your husband's country? It should be yours by adoption.'

'The sons of a perfidious mother are always perfidious.'

'So you believe in the old title of 'Perfidious Albion'?' said Alison.

There was a shade of bitterness over the fair young face as the countess answered:

'Yes, I believe in it.'

'Well, I know,' said Alison, 'what, in your case, I should do. I would, for my husband's sake, try to love England and the English. After all, they have great virtues, you know.'

'I would rather have Italian faults,' said the wayward girl, 'than English virtues—a thousand times rather.'

'That is unjust,' said Alison, frankly. 'Now tell me, would you like it if Lord Cardyne were always speaking unkindly of Italy?'

There came a sudden flash in her azure eyes.

'He would not dare!' she cried. 'He could not; all is beautiful in Italy. Since I have been here in England I have learned that men, and women too, are perfidious—that men swear they love you with the same lips that only perhaps a few hours before have sworn love for a rival; women smile at you and stab you with cruel words.'

'Perhaps you would have found the same thing had you remained in Italy. That kind of insincerity is not peculiar to England; it is known all over the world.'

'I never saw it or met it,' said Lady Cardyne sadly.

'Because you were so young. You look so young now you could not have been more than a child when you were married.'

'I was a child. Ah! madame, had I been older and wiser?'

'It is useless thinking of that,' said Alison. 'We should all do and act differently if the discretion and experience of years were given to us in our youth—it is not. True wisdom teaches us to make the best of our lives, not to repine at them.'

'That is easy to say,' sighed the young countess.

'And to do, if we will be brave over it. See how very much you have to be grateful for; you have youth, beauty, wealth. You have a most devoted husband.'

Lady Cardyne looked up at her eagerly.

'I trust you,' she said, in her eager, impetuous way—I trust you madame, and I love you. I can open my whole heart to you as I could not do to any one who was not from my own land. I can confide in you. You would think, you not, from all outward appearances, that my husband was devoted to me—that he loved me very truly and faithfully would you not, madame?'

The azure eyes looked eagerly into her own, and Alison answered:

'I should, most certainly.'

'He does not, she cried; 'he does not care for me; he married me because I was Prince D'Isio's niece.'

'I do not believe it,' said Alison, curtly. 'But, repeated Lady Cardyne, 'I know that it is true.'

'I do not believe one word of it. Who told you so?'

'My grandmother, Madame D'Isio. She and Lord Cardyne quarreled one day, and after he had gone out of the room, she told me that he had not married me for love—that he had loved some one in Florence.'

'I do not believe it, and if I may speak my opinion, I think it was a cruel thing to tell you anything of the kind. If he did not love you why did he marry you? I consider myself a very fair judge of character, and I say that he does love you.'

'But he did care for one in Florence; Madame D'Isio told me so—a very beautiful English girl.'

'He did not, could not have cared for her as he does for you, or he would have married her, said Alison, with a beating heart.

'Do men always marry the women they love?' she asked.

'Always, I believe, when they can afford it.'

'And do you think, madame—I know you will speak frankly—do you think from what you have seen, that my husband really loves me?'

'Yes, I do indeed, really and truly. I think that the happiness of his life is all bound up in you.'

'If I could really once think so, I should try to like England and the English. I should be quite different if I really believed it.'

'I am quite sure you may. I know love when I see it, and I tell you that your husband loves you.'

'Do you think he liked this other, this beautiful English girl in Florence?'

'Yes,' replied Alison; 'I have no doubt that he liked her, and perhaps, fifty more before her; at the same time any one can see that you are the love of his life; those were but fancies—they have died in the light of his love.'

'How different I should be, if I thought so,' said Lady Cardyne. 'Whenever I feel the least inclined even to be happy, I think of what Madame D'Isio told me, and I make myself miserable purposely.'

'I can only advise you to do what I should do myself,' said Alison. 'I should try to trust my husband; I would say to myself that the world was full of women, some of them more beautiful, more noble, more gifted than myself, yet that from the whole world he had chosen to marry me, therefore he must love me.'

'There is certainly something in that,' said the countess, with a brightening face.

'Men differ from women,' said Alison. 'They have many fancies which we think loves. The best of them know but one love in a lifetime.'

'I think,' said Lady Cardyne, 'that I will try. I will not rail against England to-day. Oh, madame, I should love England well enough, if my husband loved me.'

'He does love you. See how anxious he is about you; how that handsome face of his clouds over when he thinks that you are not pleased; how he watches you, anticipates you every wish, delights in pleasing you; how sad he is when you repine, how happy when you say one kind word to him. I believe you hold his heart in your hand.'

'Do you?' she asked, in wondering joy—'do you?' Ah! madame, that seems too good to be true.'

'What would you do if you knew that it were true?' asked Alison.

The fair young face looked thoughtful for a few minutes, then she replied:

'If I really believed it I would go to my husband and put my arms round his neck; I should tell him I was sorry for every perverse word I had uttered; I

would tell him that I meant to love England for his sake—that it should be the home of my adoption. I wish—oh! how I wish it were true.'

There was a sob in the sweet voice as she spoke, and Alison's whole heart turned to her—this child-like girl who had supplanted her. She took Lady Cardyne's little jeweled hand in her own.

'Do,' she said, 'what you would do if you believed this to be true.'

She would have added more, but at that instant Lord Cardyne came up to them.

'I have been looking everywhere for blue velvet and white fur,' he said. 'Were you really so cold, Camilla, that you wore furs to-day?'

'The sun is warmer and brighter than it was,' said Lady Cardyne. 'After all, Arthur, there is some beauty in English scenery.'

At even those few faint words of praise his face brightened considerably. Alison watched him closely.

'Do you think so? You are beginning to like it? Oh! Camilla, I am so pleased.'

'If I ever grow to like it in reality,' said Camilla, 'it will be madame who has taught me to love it.'

'Then,' said the earl, turning his handsome face to Alison, 'I should owe madame an eternal debt of gratitude.'

'How strange it is!' thought Alison. 'I loved him and he tired of me; this girl had not loved him; she mistrusted, doubted, suspected him; she has been a continual source of anxiety to him; she has tortured him after a fashion, yet how he loves her. It is not true to say that love wins love.'

She thought it wiser to go away and leave them together. She made some slight excuse, and she saw that almost before she was out of sight the husband and wife were seated side by side. What would she have thought had she overheard the conversation? Lord Cardyne had turned to his wife.

'You are looking very beautiful to-day, Camilla; that dress seems to suit you,' he said.

'I am sorry, though, that I wore fur; it is not one half so cold as I thought it would be. I feel the warmth of the sun.'

'Perhaps that makes you look fairer. Ah! Camilla, you look to-day as you did on the morning I saw you first.'

'I remember,' she said, 'at the palace; you had come to see my uncle's pictures.'

She raised her azure eyes quickly to his face.

'I have never thought of it until now,' she said; 'there was a lady with you. Who was the lady, Arthur?'

'There were several English people in Florence just then; she was one of them,' he said, evasively.

'One of them? But who was she, Arthur?'

'I know so many people. This was an English lady, who wanted to see your uncle's pictures, and requested me, as I knew him, to procure the opportunity for her.'

'You did not love her then, Arthur?'

'Love her, Camilla? When will you believe that I have had my fancies, yet that I have had but one true love in my life, and it was for you?'

She looked up at him thoughtfully.

'And that some one, Arthur, whom grandmother said you loved in Florence—did you really care for her?'

'No,' replied the earl. 'That some one, as you vaguely call her, was a fancy, a whim, a caprice. I have never loved any one but you, Camilla. And I never shall.'

It was well that Alison, kind generous and noble as she was, did not hear the words.

CHAPTER XLII.

LORD CARLYTON.

Alison found herself, for the first time that day, alone, she had purposely sought the most shelter and secluded nook that she could find. The interview with Lady Cardyne had agitated her—she was touched by the girl's trust and love.

'Still,' she thought to herself, 'I have missed a fine dramatic opportunity for revenge. If I were a heroine in a novel, instead of being a real human being I should have fostered this difference between them—have alienated the wife's affections completely, and have parted them forever. Instead of that, I hope and believe that I have helped to make their friends.'

She did not now even care for vengeance; the time had been when she craved for it, when she prayed for it; now it was all dead—the love, the hate, the sorrow, and the desire for vengeance, all dead; she was simply indifferent to him—no words of his could have affected her now. If he had returned to his allegiance, and offered her a passionate, never-ending love, she would have declined it with the most perfect indifference; if on the contrary, he had cursed her with the bitterest reproaches, she would not have heeded it. He had no longer the power to move her; he had sunk to the level of a commonplace man. She wondered that she could ever have made a hero of him; she had risen to heights which he could never attain—he had sunk!

She preferred to see him happy with his wife—it was much better. Happiness was a kind of moral purifier, thought Alison; she was fully capable of understanding the cruel wrong that he had done her; she knew that his dishonor and baseness had been of the worst kind, but she felt no particular desire to see him punished—all the misery that he might suffer would be quite useless, so far as rectifying that one error in which she was concerned. It seemed, even to her, that if, by any good offices, she could restore love and harmony, she should be helping to undo the consequences of the evil; it would be in itself a kind of atonement—a kind of reparation; and Alison resolved that she would accept Lady Cardyne's offer of friendship—that she would be a true friend to her, disinterested and generous—that she would try to obtain an influence over her, and that when she had secured it, she would use it to make the wife love and trust the husband.

She was aroused from her reverie by the sound of a voice near her.

'Pardon me, you have dropped this, I think.'

It was a little pink-colored kid glove, and she was buried so deep, so utterly lost in the thought, that she did not notice it fall from her hand. She turned suddenly.

'I fear I have startled you,' said the same voice; 'you have been thinking so deeply. I spoke to you twice, and you did not hear me.'

It was only a voice—deep, rich, and musical in tone. The gentleman bowing before her was not particularly handsome; there was nothing very striking in his appearance; he had a good face, kind, intelligent, and true; but, looking at him and listening to him, Alison felt something that she had never in her life experienced before.

'Have I startled you?' he asked. 'I would sooner have let the little glove lie there than have done that.'

'I am much obliged to you,' said Alison. He raised his hat, bowed, and left her. She stood looking after him; she watched him out of sight, wondering at the strange sensation that had come over her—a sense of completed life—as though she had found some clue to some mystic dream, some problem, some secret.

'I should like to hear that voice again,' thought Alison. 'I wonder who he is? What a good face!—not handsome, like Lord Cardyne's, but so earnest, so true, all women and children would trust such a face; it tells its own story; goodness speaks in every line of it. A good voice too; honest, genial, with a musical ring.'

Alison found herself recalling the tone of it, recalling the few words. Then her face grew crimson, for she was wondering if he, too, had thought her beautiful. But Alison was far too much admired to be able to enjoy much solitude. A few minutes afterward the duchess sent in search of her.

The duchess herself was one of Alisa's warmest admirers. She had purchased two of her paintings, and was delighted to have the chance of knowing her. Now she sent for her because, having a few minutes to spare, she wanted to spend them in talking to her beautiful and gifted guest.

When they had been talking for some minutes, they were joined by a group of ladies; and then, crossing the lawn, Alison saw the stranger whose face and voice had moved her so strangely. He bent his head and said a few words in a low tone to the duchess. She smiled, and crossed over to where Alison was standing.

'Madame Ferrari,' she said, 'will you let me introduce one of your greatest admirers to you? Lord Carlyton is most anxious to know you.'

To be continued.

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