

'LADY ALICE.'

Continued.

'Two months,' she murmured; 'it seems like two years! Am I the same flesh and blood as the girl, who two months ago, was in rags, and worked on the farm like the ploughboys? It seems like a dream! Perhaps I shall wake some day and find myself back in the farm—find all this gloomy splendor melted into mist, and hear Aunt Martha's voice scolding me as she used to do.'

She moved from the fire, and walked up and down the room swiftly.

'I wonder if I should be happier if I woke to find it all a dream—to be back once more in the old life. No, no; I could not do it. And yet—she stopped—"it is terribly lonely here. All is so grand; but I grow oppressed with it. If only my mother would speak to me kindly! She is always so cold and courteous. But I know she scorns me in her heart; she loves Valerie Ross. She should have been his wife not a farm-girl, lowly born, like me, Alice—my Lady Alice, the name condemns me; it will cling to me forever. And he, what does he think of me now? All danger is gone, and he only remembers he is tied to me forever—tied to a low-born girl whose very presence drives him from his home.'

She paused an instant, her lips compressed as if with pain, then, with a sigh she drew up a chair to the table and took up a book.

She was pondering over the words thoughtfully, when a tap came to the door.

'Come in!' she said absently.

The door opened, and a woman advanced into the room, a tall elegant figure in robes of trailing black satin, cut low round the beautiful snowy shoulders. On the masses of red-brown hair gleamed stars of rubies and diamonds; a slender chain supported a glowing star of the same jewels round the swan-like throat.

It was Valerie Ross. She came in, drawing on her long tan gloves slowly. Her face was pale, but her eyes flashed dark and glorious, and there was a strange half-contemptuous smile on her lips.

'My Lady Alice,' she observed playfully, 'still buried in your books? What a store of learning will be in that pretty golden head when your lord returns!'

Alice flushed slightly.

'I was not studying. I was reading for amusement,' she answered.

Valerie walked to the window with her swift graceful carriage. The curtains were still undrawn, and out in the darkness the trees seemed like moving phantoms.

'Amusement?' repeated Valerie with half a shudder. 'Indeed you want some! I wonder you are not dead of ennui and melancholia already!'

'I am quite content,' said Alice slowly; then suddenly remembering her duties, 'But will you not sit by the fire, Miss Ross? This chair is most comfortable.'

'Thanks.'

Valerie turned indifferently toward the fire. She did not take the chair, but stood buttoning her gloves, with one slender foot on the fender.

'You don't seem surprised to see me, she observed after a moment's silence.'

'No,' answered Alice.

She did not add that she had grown used to Valerie's strange erratic visits during the last two months, and had ceased to wonder at them.

'Have you heard from those worthy people your aunt and uncle since they left the village?' next queried Miss Ross very lightly.

'No,' said Alice again, this time with a crimson flush on her cheeks.

There was a something in Valerie's tones that always made her wretched—brought her low origin in glaring painfulness before her eyes.

'They are not considerate for their niece's welfare,' observed Miss Ross.

Her gloves were buttoned; she let her hands drop, and gazed at the young troubled face before her indifferently.

Alice roused herself, she tried to smile. 'Aunt Martha is only too glad to get rid of me. She always looked on me as a burden, and—'

'And was glad to see you happily and well married,' finished the other; 'of course that was natural, was it not?'

Alice's face was white now, her hands clasped together, were cold with the humiliation she was enduring.

She knew how cruel was the woman opposite, and how powerless she was to fight her. The shame which sometimes overcame her fell on her heart now like a heavy weight.

She saw herself as Valerie thought her—a vulgar, common girl, the relative of people who were bought out of the village, out of the home they had lived in for years, so that their presence should not shock the eyes of the castle, nor recall how low its master had sunk in mating with one of their number.

None knew—none could ever know—what an agony of pain and shame lived in the young heart of Roy Darrell's wife. She was utterly—completely alone!

The man for whose sake she bared her freedom left his home two days after the funeral of his murdered friend.

His mother still inhabited her rooms in the Castle, but there was a chasm between her and her son's wife.

She treated the girl with ceremony and courtesy, her wishes were consulted in every way, but the older woman—the proud descendant of an ancient race—refused to eat or be familiar with a girl, who, a few days before, had consorted with farm-help and laborers.

Occasionally the two Lady Darrell's met, and the older woman would always drop a deep courtesy to the shrinking timid form of the younger, but they exchanged no word.

Valerie Ross alone appeared to notice the girl thrown so suddenly into this strange life, but though to the world her overtures of friendship seemed the essence of kindness and good nature, Alice knew to the contrary, and always suffered to torture during the visits she received from the beautiful woman.

About a month after Roy's departure, news reached the Castle that the Earl of Darrell, his elder brother, a man who had been a wanderer from his home for many years, was dead, leaving no heir, and Roy Darrell succeeded to the title and the estates.

The tidings were communicated to Alice in the most ceremonious manner, but the fact that now she was a countess, and moreover, entire mistress of the Castle, did not appear to touch her.

She was growing day by day more wretched as she saw how great a mistake it had all been, and how wrecked her life must be, henceforth passed in the gloomy solitude that appeared to be her lot.

Valerie Ross, standing by the fire watched her face blanch with pain, and the smile on her lips deepened.

'It was almost a pleasure to her to make this young heart suffer. She had gone through such tortures herself when her faithless lover died, that it seemed to have killed all the tenderness and womanliness in her.'

Alice roused herself at last.

'Have you anything particular to tell me?' she asked hurriedly, turning to open her book with trembling hands.

'I bring an invitation from the Dowager Lady Darrell, to Margaret, Countess of Darrell—an invitation to dine in the Blue Chamber. You will refuse, of course my Lady Alice. Ancestress like you, never dine out, you know.'

Alice met the merciless glance of those golden-brown eyes.

'I accept with pleasure,' she replied quietly. 'Pray convey my thanks to Lady Darrell. At what hour does she dine?'

Valerie drew herself up and frowned. She had come to torment and trouble this low-born girl, and now found herself treated with almost as much haughty indifference as she herself could assume.

Where did this girl get her manners and ways of speech? queried Valerie angrily. She was no ordinary common creature, but bore herself with a grace and ease that might well have become a queen.

'There will be guests,' she observed coldly, smoothing an imaginary wrinkle in her glove. 'And you will pardon me, perhaps, but Lady Darrell is very particular about one's garments, so if I—'

'Thank you,' answered the young countess quietly; 'I have my maid, Davis; she will assist me. I could not think of giving you so much trouble on my behalf.'

Valerie's brows met again. It was the first time Alice had shown her spirit of determination, and Miss Ross resented it now most bitterly.

Hitherto she had looked upon Alice as a plaything, an amusement, an object on which she could pour out the overflowing bitterness of her heart; but now she saw before her a woman, as beautiful as herself, and every whit as proud.

'As you like,' she observed indifferently; 'I thought I might have been able to give you some hints. The dinner-hour is eight, it is usually half-past seven, but Lady Darrell has it later to-night, on account of the earl's arrival. I forget what train he is to come by; but of course he wrote to tell you.'

Alice's right hand grasped a chair for support; a mist clouded her eyes. One thought was alone in her mind—the earl was coming—the earl, her husband.

All else was forgotten; Valerie, her stings, the long lonely months—all but the one thought, she should see once more that handsome face, hear that deep manly voice, clasp that strong hand.

A joy seemed to come to her so swift and sudden that it illumined her countenance as with glorious sunshine.

Valerie saw the transient gleam pass over her pale face, and her heart grew still more bitter towards this girl—bitter, and then triumphant, for in that glance she had read Alice's secret, the secret that Alice herself as yet did not comprehend, that Roy Darrell's low-born wife loved him.

'He has not written to you?' she broke in. 'Ah, that was remiss! I thought he would have fixed to dine with you instead of his mother. But I expect he forgot all about that—at least, he said nothing touching it in the letter I received from him this morning.'

Alice's joy died as suddenly as it had been born. She flinched as though a blow had been struck her, but she said nothing, and Valerie Ross walked gracefully from the room, feeling that she had triumphed easily.

Left alone, Alice flung herself down by the chair, and buried her face in her hands.

'Forget me!' she whispered. 'Yes, that is what she says; and she is right. He can do nothing but hate me. And I—oh, what shame is on me!—I cannot help him. I must remain forever a burden and a tie.'

She rose and paced the room.

'How cruel she is! What shall I do? If I remain away she will triumph, and if I go— But I must go. She stood silent, her arms crossed over her breast; a struggle was tearing her young heart.

'I will go. I must be brave; better her stinging words than her contempt. If she thinks me afraid, she will taunt me forever with it, and that would kill me. No, I will—I must do this, whatever happens.'

She rang the bell quickly, and Davis appeared.

'Light the candles in my room, Davis, and unpack those dresses that came the other day from London. I dine with the earl and his mother to-night, and I must look well.'

The maid bowed and left the room with a mind full of wonder and admiration. Never had she seen the young countess look so beautiful, yet she was changed.

There was something different, something that told she had passed from a girl into a woman, that life had begun with all its storms and joys, its trials and happiness.

In the Dowager Lady Darrell's apartment, the waxen lights glimmered in profusion from their silver stands, and shed a soft roseate hue from beneath their silken shades.

Valerie Ross was alone, she was walking to and fro the whole length of the room, her long train trailing on the carpet, her rubies and diamonds gleaming on her neck and hair like fireflies in their brilliancy.

She had a frown on her brow, and her beautiful mouth was set and hard.

She was thinking of Alice, and the thought brought vexation.

'But for her,' she muttered, 'how changed it would be. How blind I was. But Eustace wove the veil round my eyes. Fool that I was to believe him and lose my chance with Roy. Roy did love me, but does he still? Two months are not a lifetime. We shall see. And that puny creature shall yet learn the extent of my power.'

The dowager came in slowly while she was still musing. Valerie smoothed the frown from her face as she advanced to meet the older woman.

'I have not heard the wheels on the gravel,' said Roy's mother as she sank into her chair, 'it is getting late—nearly eight, and he has not come.'

'You are over-anxious, dear,' replied Valerie. 'Does Roy bring anyone with him? I fancy I heard you mention something about guests.'

'Yes; he will be accompanied by two gentlemen—one, Lord Radine. I think you know him. The other is a man he met in Italy, a Count Jura—from Roy's letters, a most delightful companion. I am glad, Valerie, he has brought guests; otherwise the life here at first might prove too trying.'

Valerie turned at the last words.

The doors had opened, and a soft rustle told that someone had entered. It was the young countess. She had heard the last sentence from her husband's mother's lips, and her face whitened a little as she put her own construction on it.

Lady Darrell had been thinking of Captain Rivers, his terrible death, and the maddening anxiety that had come to Roy, when she spoke. She rose from her chair, and bent low before the girl's fingers.

'Welcome, countess,' she said haughtily and coldly.

Alice courtied low, while Valerie gazed at her in speechless vexation.

Roy, before he took his departure, had given his wife to understand that she was expected to comply to society's laws, and had left instructions with Davis, a most experienced lady's maid, to have everything obtained as befitted her mistress's position.

The woman had obeyed him well. Dresses and many numerous things were sent down from London, though, until this evening, Alice had seen none of her marvels, contenting herself with wearing none but the simplest and most inexpensive garments made by Davis's own fingers.

To-night she had abandoned her Cinderella robes, and stood before the cold unappreciative eyes of the two women, a perfect vision of loveliness, draped from head to foot in black gossamer material and rich lace.

Her masses of dead-gold hair were coiled and gathered in picturesque confusion on her dainty head; her shoulders rose white, fresh, and round from her black gown, her fair young throat was encircled by gems.

Once again the question rushed to Valerie's mind: Where had this girl inherited her grace, her natural refinement, her pure beauty? She was no farm-girl, as she stood before them, her figure drawn up to its graceful height, her tiny well-gloved hands holding her plumed fan; she was a lady, every whit as dainty, as beautiful, and as proud as one of their own favored class.

Valerie bit her lips, and turned her back on the young countess.

Alice took no notice of this coldness; she was listening, listening, yet dreading the first sound of that step, the first glimpse of that tall well-built form and handsome debonaire face.

'Will you not sit down?' asked Roy's mother of her son's wife.

Alice moved towards the chair she indicated, and sank into it, while Lady Darrell gazed at the girl with astonishment and admiration.

Valerie was beautiful, but this girl was peerless in her strange young loveliness. In all her long life Lady Darrell never recollected a more purely patrician face, and she marvelled at it.

'Have you any recollection of your childhood?' she asked, suddenly and involuntarily. 'Did you always live with your aunt? Which side are your relations?'

Alice looked up, strangely surprised. 'I can remember nothing clearly,' she replied; 'but I have a dim recollection of a large house, and a beautiful face that seemed to bend over me; then came the long years with Aunt Martha, and all her angry words.'

'What a pity you cannot remember anything!' drawled Valerie, who was watching the older woman's interest with jealous eyes. 'We might have discovered a secret, or lost father—you might have developed into a queen; as it is—'

'As it is, I am only Alice—Alice the farm-girl,' the young countess finished quietly.

Lady Darrell's face clouded at the name.

'Roy is late,' she said again.

'He is here,' announced Valerie, and at that moment the door was thrown open, and Alice saw once more the man who had stood beside her that bygone morning and vowed his life to hers.

Roy kissed his mother and introduced the two guests, then turned to Valerie, and the girl standing by so quietly saw his eyes dilate as with a glow of unstrained passion and happiness, and noticed their hands lingered as they were clasped.

Alice's heart seemed to grow cold, but there was no sign on her fair face, and the next moment Roy, Earl of Darrell, was before her, greeting her with a low ceremonious bow.

Valerie was radiant, she was laughing and chatting to Lord Radine, but she was watching the husband and wife, and knew her triumph was yet to come.

Roy uttered no word to Alice. After his bow he turned from her to his mother and began to converse about his journey.

The other guest joined in the chat, but while he talked his dark glowing eyes were fixed on the girl's figure in the rich black dress, standing so lone and deserted.

He turned to Roy.

'I crave, my lord, that I may have the honor of presentation to your beautiful countess.'

The earl started, his face flushed.

'I beg your pardon; of course. Countess, permit me to introduce to you the Count of Jura.'

Alice bowed again, and scarcely glanced at the man before her. She was suffering an agony of shame and pain.

'He wishes me dead,' said her heart over and over again; 'dead, so that he may be free. Oh, why did I come? Why can I not leave it all? It is too much for me. Their scorn and cold contempt will kill me!'

Count Jura watched her expression deepen into sadness with a strange interest in his dark eyes.

'So this is the young wife,' he mused. 'But mon Dieu, how beautiful! And he has no eyes for anyone save Valerie—how dangerous she looks, her eyes flash like daggers! Poor Lady Alice! She is your deadly enemy—a foiled jealous woman is Valerie Ross. Beware!'

So ran his thoughts as he spoke to the girl and led her into dinner.

Roy followed with Valerie, and a sigh reached Alice's ear, telling plainer than words how bitter was his sorrow, and how great a burden was she to his life and happiness.

CHAPTER V.

Alice awoke early the next morning. She had indeed slept but little. Her wounded pride and aching heart proved veritable thorns in her pillow.

She was haunted by the vision of Roy's fair handsome face bending over Valerie's head, gazing into her eyes with an eternity of love.

She did not like Valerie, yet she was just.

'It is I who keep them apart. What can I do—what can I do?' was the thought that raged in her mind, and to this she could find no answer.

She rose and took her bath, then robed herself in her simple grey gown, and wrapping a mantle round her, for the morning was chilly, she left her apartment and stole through the silent corridor to the gardens and grounds.

Through the two months that had elapsed since the strange and terrible episode that had changed her whole life, the girl lived entirely alone.

She gave herself up to study, and books and for recreation walked a while in the park, till she knew every nook and corner by heart.

No thought of pride or joy that she was part owner of this proud estate came to her mind as she passed through the avenues of leafless trees, and caught glimpses of the castle, standing like a grey sentinel in the background. Instead, she wished now, day and night, for something that should free her from her husband, and take away the shame that hung over her.

She walked on quickly. The wind was sighing in the trees, sounding mournful and weird to the trees.

At last she reached a spot she frequented most. It was thickly wooded, and even now, though autumn was at hand, the leaves were scarcely thinned. It was quiet and secluded, and Alice loved it.

She flung herself down on an old trunk, and gave way to her thoughts.

She heeded not the chill wind or the mournful rustle of the trees, but after she had sat some time, she became conscious of the approach of some person or persons—and roused herself to listen.

The voices came in the air.

'I tell you, Paul, I can do no more; have nothing—nothing now but my few jewels, and you know I must keep them, even if they were worth much, which they are not.'

'Can't you ask the old lady?' spoke the deep tones of a man.

'Impossible—utterly impossible, Paul! The devil knows what is to become of me, Valerie.'

Alice grew uncomfortable, she did not care to listen to more, yet disliked even still greater to rise and discover herself to Valerie.

She was surprised, and a little alarmed, but thought it wiser to sit still, and perhaps the speakers would pass.

'You know,' went on the man surlily—'you know how I am situated. I consented to wait while you came here, but time has gone, and now it is two months, and you have done nothing for me.'

'Have you forgotten how I am placed?' asked Valerie angrily. 'Have you forgotten the murder?'

The man laughed.

'No, I forget nothing; but I, none the less, am angry. Why did you not grasp Roy Darrell when you had your chance? What folly's nonsense was in your head?'

'What? Love,' said Valerie quietly.

The man laughed again.

'Pooh and bah! You, Valerie Ross, stayed by love. No, no, my sister; some other tale—not that.'

'It is the truth, nevertheless,' broke in Valerie's voice, broken, harsh and agitated. 'I loved Eustace Rivers. Ah, you may shake your head; you did not see, you were blind as to what was going on in our little cottage home in Everleigh, when Eustace's regiment was quartered near, you little thought of the dreams that came to me for one brief moment of my great happiness.'

Alice sat motionless; she heard the man strike a match against a tree as if to light a cigar.

'If I had known it I should have ended it pretty soon,' he said quietly.

'When I came to the Castle,' said Valerie, 'you thought I did so to please you. It was to follow Eustace. I had grown jealous, he was altering to me. Lady Darrell had written often pressing me for a visit, so I embraced the opportunity. Roy did at once what you pro-

phesied he would—fell in love with me, but I was blind to it then. I cared only for Eustace. All my life was for him. Roy haunted my footsteps, yet I gave him no encouragement. Then Eustace and I quarrelled. I pressed for our marriage, he demurred again and again, and a coolness arose between the two men over me. I know not how, but—God forgive me—I believe now Eustace maligned me to his friend, and that Roy in his love for me resented the affront. But let that pass. I shall never know the truth now. The day before the murder Roy sought me, begged for my love; he asked no questions, but gave me two days to consider. I wanted no time, I was bound to Eustace for ever. Then—then came his death, and then my eyes were opened. I was no longer a fool; I knew that what I had thought love was a pastime to him—that I had thrown my heart's best before the feet of one unworthy.'

'If you had confided in your brother you would have known in good time what class of man was Eustace Rivers; but—'

'But I did not,' answered Valerie's voice; and now let the past go, it is dead and buried, and with it my fool's nonsense, as you call it. You must be quick or someone may see us, and it will do me no good to let the servants observe me walking in the early morning with a most questionable-looking scoundrel like you!'

'True sisterly affection, upon my word. But you do not keep to the truth. You do not mind the servants; you fear Roy Darrell. What would he say to see you walking with a man—a questionable-looking scoundrel?'

'Paul, you are absurd! Do you forget he has a wife?'

'No,' answered Paul very slowly; but I fancy you will be tempted to do so before long.'

'What do you want?' broke in Valerie sharply. 'Money is scarce with me, I cannot keep on this constant supply.'

'You have a good banker to go to—Roy.'

'Paul!'

'Well—well, Valerie, desperate cases need desperate ends. I tell you money I must have to get me away from here. Dalton is on my track. Only fifty pounds.'

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