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'LADY ALICE'

Continued.

'Actress' repeated the earl, vexed beyond measure at the words; 'it is not acting Valerie; it is nature.'

Valerie bit her lips, her worst fears were confirmed. She altered her mood. 'I congratulate you,' she said softly, just glancing at him with her lustrous eyes; 'it has been a severe test, and no one among your friends is more pleased at the success than I am, Roy.'

Roy's face softened.

'Thank you, Valerie; it is like you to be so kind. I am anxious that you should be friends with my—my—the countess. You are so clever, you can help her.'

'My Lady Alice does not need my aid, Roy; but since you wish it I will be her friend, first for your sake and then for hers.'

The words were spoken bravely.

None knew what an agony of pain was living beneath that smiling exterior.

Lady Darrel overheard her son's request and her face was puzzled.

'Roy is like all men—clumsy,' she said to herself. 'Valerie will never be a friend to his wife.'

Alice, meanwhile walked away with Count Jura. She scarcely heard what he was saying. All the evening her memory had gone back with a thrill to her husband and his request. To-morrow they were to meet and walk together.

It was like a beautiful dream to her, and unconsciously brought her happiness.

Count Jura led the way to a marble anteroom.

Status gleamed white amid the foliage of rare tropical plants, dim lamps were hung about, and a fountain played in the centre.

'Let us sit here awhile,' he said as he led her towards a velvet couch, placed close to the fountain; 'we have had no time for a chat, Lady Darrel.'

'Nor shall I have any now,' she said hurriedly, forcing herself to smile. 'You forget, count, I have my guests to attend to.'

'And am I not one?' he asked quietly. Alice opened her fan and moved it to and fro, but did not answer.

'So you were frightened in the ruins to-day?' went on the count, drinking in the fair loveliness of her face with passionate avidity.

'Yes; but it was very stupid of me. Please do not think me a coward, count.'

'And if you are afraid in broad daylight, how can you have the courage to sleep in a room with all these glorious jewels?'

He touched a glittering bracelet as she spoke.

'I am not frightened in my own apartment,' Alice said, wondering just a little at the way in which he always discussed the diamonds.

The count noticed her surprise; he adroitly changed the conversation.

'Ah, you should see the wonderful caves and weird nooks I have beheld in my travels. Ghosts and spirits dwell in them, indeed!'

'I should be glad to travel and see other lands.'

'You would?' broke in the count. 'Ah, how would you like to leave this cold desolate place, and see nothing but blue

sky, sunshine, and flowers? Fancy a garden with orange groves scouting the air, with terraces leading down to a bay as blue as blue as your starlike eyes! One can be happy in a home like that!'

'Do you know of such a place?' the girl asked, eager to continue this conversation.

'Yes, I know of such a paradise. It is mine—all mine. Now it stands empty and deserted; it only waits for a mistress—a mistress fair, lovely as the sun, with gentle grace and maddening eyes—such as yours. Yes, you are—'

'Count!'

Alice rose quickly, but his arm stole around her slender waist.

'Yes, yes—you are the only woman in this wide world that could bring happiness in such a home. Have not my eyes spoken clearly? Did you not understand? Alice—my lady Alice—listen! I will take you away from all this gilded misery; you are wretched here. I can give you more—love. Yes, girl; you cannot comprehend what a passion is devouring my heart. For you I live alone, for I love you!'

'Let me go!' breathed Alice, wrenching herself from his grasp. 'How dare you? How dare you insult me like this!'

'Insult! The man laughed. 'What! you pretend you have not seen my love?'

'Your love?' repeated the girl with deepest scorn. 'I have seen nothing. If I had, should I have come here to bear your insults? Go—go—at once! You are a coward! I scorn you! I hate you!'

'Hate me! Beware Lady Darrel! I am your friend, your lover now, but make me your enemy, and I will fight you to the end.'

The girl drew up her figure to the full height, and pointed her right hand to the doorway.

'Go!' she said quietly. 'I am not frightened; a man to use threats to a woman must be a coward. Go!'

The count turned, then swiftly moving back, he seized her arm and pressed his lips to it with a passionate force that hurt her.

'You shall sue to me yet,' he murmured. 'You shall be in my power—I swear it!'

Alice stood watching his retreating form, her hand was clenched on her arm where his lips had touched it. She felt sick and ill, and was trembling in every limb; she put out her hands wildly; pride had lent her strength, but now when she was alone, her strength went quickly, and scarce knowing where she was, she sank on the couch, white and almost insensible.

Her eyes were closed; she did not see a man's figure enter the doorway and approach. She dimly heard a sudden exclamation, and knew no more till she felt herself gently lifted and clasped in a pair of arms.

Then she opened her eyes, and her glance fell on the fair handsome face of Roy Darrel.

'You are ill,' he said hastily. 'What is it? What has happened?'

She drew her hand across her eyes, then with a shudder remembered all; her lips opened to speak of the count's deed and insult, but she suddenly recoiled, and she was the earl's guest, and checked herself.

'I am tired,' she murmured; 'the ride was long, and the evening has tired me.'

'Yes, yes, you are quite fatigued; why not retire to your room, my mother will relieve you of the rest of your duties.'

Roy was gazing at her unconscious of the glow of tenderness that shone in his face.

Alice felt it, and it thrilled her strangely; she stood upright and put aside his hands.

'No, no,' she said hurriedly; 'I must remain; it will not last much longer. Thank you for your kindness. Had we not better go to the salon again?'

'Yes, if you wish it,' the earl answered gently. 'But where is the count—he came out with you?'

'He left me a few minutes ago.'

Roy noticed the sudden flush on the fair face, and again that pang of jealousy came.

'You like the count?' he asked abruptly. Alice hesitated a moment, then looked at him full as she replied:

'No, I dislike him.'

Roy felt his heart rise.

'He will not remain much longer now. Let me lead you back; we may be missed.'

Alice put her hand on his arm, and together they moved towards the doorway. As they reached it Roy stopped.

'Remember you have promised to come with me to see the flowers to-morrow,' he said hurriedly.

'Yes, I remember,' faltered Alice, her eyes sinking beneath his gaze.

They went on to the salon, both their hearts filled with a strange and beautiful dream, which they knew not was love.

As they passed out, Valerie Ross stood from behind a statue; her face was bloodless, her lips compressed; she glared at the girl with a form with a tempest of rage and hatred in her face, unconscious that she herself was being watched.

'Valerie hates her,' pondered Count Jura from a dark corner. 'I must enlist her sympathies; she will rejoice to be rid of her rival, and I shall get the girl into my hands. I will speak now; there is no time to be lost.'

He approached Valerie, softly whispering her name. She turned away a few words, the expression of her face changed to fear and surprise, then, as he went on to hatred, and lastly, as he finished, to a glow of unrestrained joy and triumph.

CHAPTER IX.

The guests were all departed, the lights extinguished, the great castle was as silent as death.

In the young countess's bedroom, however, the lamp still burned.

Davis very sleepily was engaged in putting away the gleaming satin her young mistress had worn, and, that done, approached the table to replace the magnificent Darrell jewels in their case.

Alice who had been standing lost in a delicious reverie, woke from her dream.

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She had donned the long white peignoir, and her masses of golden hair hung unbound over her shoulders.

'You are tired out, Davis. Go to bed,' she said kindly. 'Leave me to put away the diamonds; I am not the least sleepy.'

Davis looked up gratefully.

'Are you sure you are not too tired, my lady?' she demanded.

'Quite,' answered Alice. 'Go at once—it is very late.'

'I was thinking perhaps it would be better to take the diamonds to the butler's room. He always has the plate with him after one of these festivals, and he sleeps with his revolver near at hand, in case of robbers.'

'Robbers?' laughed Alice, though a slight fear crossed her mind. 'Why, who would dare attack the Castle, Davis? I am not afraid.'

'Then, good night, my lady, and many thanks.'

Alice waited till the maid withdrew, then locked the door.

She was not nervous, although she slept in a wing away from the rest of the Castle.

She returned to the table and took up the diamonds.

She gazed at each with a tender look as she replaced them on their velvet beds.

'His jewels!' she murmured. 'His hand has touched them.'

She lifted a bracelet to her lips as she spoke, then, blushing at the action, hurriedly put it in its case, replaced the leather-covered case in the small iron safe standing on the table, and locked it.

She put down the key, and walked to the window.

It was a dark night, no moon shone; yet to Alice it seemed as if she were gazing on the fairest picture.

'Why am I so happy?' she murmured, wandering slowly up and down. 'Why does my heart thrill? He spoke kindly; but it may be done to-morrow—or perhaps I only dreamed he was so kind!'

She passed her hand over her eyes, then a smile of gladness came to her face.

'No, no; it was real—it is real; he has asked me to meet him to-morrow. Oh, how long it seems till then! Something tells me that his contempt and scorn are dead—that he no longer wishes me away. If—if it could be that he is beginning to like me? But that is too great a happiness. All has gone well to-night. His mother kissed me, and gave me her blessing; everyone was kind—all except Valerie and Count Jura,' she shuddered. 'How I dread that man! If only I dared have told Roy what he had said! But it was too soon. I must be brave; and should be dare to insult me again. I will appeal to Lady Darrel for protection. Valerie, too—why does she hate me? She could have married Roy in the bygone days. I heard her say so with her own lips to her brother; and now, when he is my—my husband, she is jealous and hates me. I do not like her. But I am stronger now—now I know he is kind and does not despise me. I will kneel and thank God for all His great goodness to me.'

She sank beside her dainty bed, and buried her face in her hands.

All was silent, save for the moaning of the trees in the gentle autumn breeze, when, to break the silence, came a decided tap at the door.

Alice rose surprised, but not frightened; her prayers always soothed her.

She opened the door, and was amazed to see Valerie Ross in the corridor.

'I am sorry to disturb you,' said Valerie gently, and smiling kindly, 'but I am rather distressed. I have dropped one of my ruby and diamond stars, and I grieve to lose any of that set; it belonged to my mother.'

'Can I help you look for it?' exclaimed Alice in genuine sympathy.

She remembered now, in that conversation with her brother Valerie had mentioned she had no valuables left but these jewels.

'Oh, thank you! My maid and I have searched everywhere; and then she suddenly remembered that she heard Davis say she had picked up an ornament belonging to some one, and I thought she might have brought it here.'

'Let us look; it may be in the room.'

Alice at once lit an extra candle, and Valerie, who was attired in a long loose peignoir of crimson silk, stood gazing at the girl's figure as it moved from her with an expression of deepest malignity.

'I am sure it is not with the Darrell diamonds, for I put them away myself, Alice said, shaking back her masses of hair and preparing to search the room.

'How beautiful they are, and how well they become you! You were charming!'

Valerie uttered the words in her sweetest manner, smiling pleasantly.

Alice glanced up, and, at the kind expression on the other's face, all her feelings of dislike disappeared.

'Thank you very much,' she said quickly. 'I appreciate your words more than I can say, for I feared you did not like me.'

'Not like you, my Lady Alice! Why, it would be impossible to do anything else.'

'Ah, then we may be friends after all!'

'Cried the girl with joy, putting out her slender hand.'

'Yes—friends after all,' repeated Valerie, with a strange gleam coming for one instant into her eyes, and clasping the hand outstretched.

Against herself a shiver went through Alice as her fingers were held in the cold tight clasp, but she was too happy to give way to presentiment and fear to-night.

'Come, let us begin our search.'

She went to the dressing-table and bent diligently over it, while Valerie, glancing swiftly at her, took two steps to the door, and softly and noiselessly removed the key.

'I can see it nowhere here, but if you will wait an instant I will go into the dressing room. It may be there, but I am almost afraid to hope. I think Davis would have been sure to tell me.'

Valerie made some slight answer, then as Alice disappeared through the curtains,

into the adjoining room, she bent over the bed and deftly poured the contents of a small phial on to the lace-edged pillow. She was back diligently searching the mantles as Alice returned.

'No, it is not there, Miss Ross,' she said, feeling really distressed. 'Now, what shall I do next?'

'Nothing,' Valerie answered pleasantly. 'You have already done too much, dear Lady Alice.'

She had saturated her pocket handkerchief with the remainder of the fluid as she spoke, and now drew it from her dress, leaving the phial hidden in her pocket.

'I feel so sorry for you,' Alice went on; 'if you will let me, I will help you look in the morning.'

'Yes, I shall be very glad if you will; and now I must say good night.'

Valerie held out her hand to say farewell.

Alice put down the candle, and passed her hand over her face.

'How close the room is! Good-night. What a curious odor!'

'It is the scent on my handkerchief. I am sorry I brought it up—it is some very powerful perfume given me by a friend from India. Do you like it?'

'She put the handkerchief to the girl's face as she spoke.

'It is very strong,' murmured Alice faintly, feeling strangely stupid.

'Yes, almost too strong. Well, now I must leave you. You look so very tired; it is really a shame to have roused you. Good-night.'

'Good-night,' replied Alice.

She moved with difficulty after Valerie, and closed the door. Her hand wandered to the key, but she was too confused to notice it was gone.

'How close it is!' she murmured. 'Where am I—all is dark.'

She staggered blindly towards the bed, and fell across the pillow.

There were a few gasps for breath, a slight struggle as if for air, and the young countess lay still and motionless as death.

A few seconds elapsed, then the door was softly opened, and Valerie stole in. She moved on tiptoe to the bed.

'Yes,' she murmured; 'it has worked well. She will sleep well to-night. Friend—a friend to this poor puny thing! I am her enemy, as she will soon discover—to the bitter end.'

She crept back to the door, and beckoned without a word to another form.

In an instant Count Jura was in the room. Glancing anxiously and hurriedly round, his eyes fell on the safe containing the diamonds. He opened it, and took out the case.

'Must you take those?' murmured Valerie with knit brows.

He nodded.

'How else can we throw shame on her? Have no fear. Though these go, you will soon have others from the earl.'

Her face flushed.

Count Jura moved to the bedside, and turned the inanimate face, lovely in its pallor, round, and lifting the form gently in his arms.

'You have given her enough,' he muttered.

'Will it kill her?' asked Valerie in a low eager whisper.

He shook his head, and a wave of contentment passed over his face.

'No; she will live, but she is out of your path forever.'

'What will you do with her?'

'Ask no questions,' retorted the man fiercely, 'I have served your purpose; leave the rest to me.'

'I want to know nothing, except that I am free of her,' Valerie answered with a sneer.

'I will answer for that. She will be in my hands and cannot escape me, I think.'

'Then come quickly. Here—take this cloak and hat. It will look as if she had planned everything. The window must be opened, or they will detect the chloroform.'

While she spoke Valerie moved swiftly about, then, flinging the cloak over the slender form in the count's arms, she led the way from the room, carrying the diamonds.

With gentle tread and bated breath they stole along the corridor till they came to the door Alice had told the count that morning led to an uninhabited part of the Castle.

This Valerie pushed open, and guided by the dim light of the candle she carried, the count, clasping his precious burden close in his arms, descended carefully the stone steps till they reached a corridor of stone that led to a door opening into the grounds.

'Now can you find your way?' whispered Valerie. 'Keep straight ahead.'

'I know; my cart is concealed there if Paul has done well.'

'Then farewell; but once before we part repeat your oath. You swear never to let Paul Ross molest me when once—once—I am—'

'Countess of Darrell,' finished the count quickly. 'I swear it.'

'That he shall not approach me?'

'I swear it,' he repeated.

'You can have more power over Paul than I imagined human creature to have if you can do this,' Valerie muttered.

The count laughed softly.

'And this girl shall never come in my path again?'

'Never by my help. Good-night. We must part now. Give me the diamonds.'

Valerie held the candle above her head, and nodded as she handed him the case. The count took it and gave one last glance at her before he strode away.

In her crimson gown, red-brown hair, and eyes flashing with triumph, she looked like some spirit of evil pushing aside all good.

To be continued.

Lawyer (to female witness)—What occupation did your husband follow?—Witness—He was a skipper. Lawyer—Of a schooner? Witness—No, of a bank. He skipped to the States.

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