

UNDER A SHADOW.

Continued from 1st page.

'You see, Alison, my love, your error was one which closes the gates of society against you. Many faults can be retrieved, this one never. When a woman once forfeits her innocence nothing can restore her—no repentance, no tears; it is forfeited forever, and all privileges are lost with it. Darling, there remains for us nothing save to look this shadowed life boldly in the face. We must leave England; it is useless taking to our hearts the false hope that our story will not be known—Lady Blanche will take care of that; it will be known everywhere, from the queen on her throne down to the servants who open doors and blacken shoes—it will be on every lip and you, my darling, with all your beauty, your genius, your fame, your goodness, you would be blackballed—society would close its doors against you; and let it cost what it may, we must say good-bye to England forever, and make our home where no calumny or scandal can reach us.

'But you will not like that,' she said. 'You love your home.'

'Yes, I love the Towers,' he replied, 'but I love you better.' He did not tell her that, in giving up his home, he was giving up the hopes and the dreams that made his life. 'I have thought it all over,' he continued; 'we must leave England. Nugent will marry Lady Eva, and they must live at the Towers.'

'But you,' she cried—'what a sacrifice for you!'

'I must make it,' he replied, trying to speak lightly. 'I shall have you, and love you best in the world. You see, Alison, Nugent will be my heir if I have no son of my own, so that he may as well have the Towers now as in twenty years' time. We will make the best of our shadowed life, my darling, we will make a home for ourselves over the hills and far away; we will travel over the wide world, and see all that is best and brightest in it.'

Even as he spoke there was something like a sob in his voice, and bending down, she kissed the kindly hands that cherished where they might have smitten her.

So it was settled, and Lord Carlyton devoted himself to carrying out that arrangement. Lady Eva and Nugent Avenham were married almost immediately—a quiet little ceremony, at which no one was present except the duke, the duchess, Lady Blesseaton, and her youngest daughter. As Nugent had foreseen, this marriage prevented, more than anything else could have done, the spread of the story.

Lady Blanche's revenge recoiled on herself. The news of her broken engagement made some little sensation, but people got hold of the wrong end of the story; they would have it that Sir Richard had quarreled with her because she had invented these stories against Lady Carlyton. Sir Richard himself married shortly afterward a widow lady of ample fortune, and he never ceased to thank Heaven for his escape.

She had her revenge but it cost her dear; she lost a wealthy husband, a good position. The duke never spoke to her again, and never allowed her to enter his house; if the duchess wished to see her, she had to seek an interview elsewhere. The time came when she owned, with bitter tears, that she ruined herself while seeking to ruin another. She became plainer than ever; indeed, a few years later on there were all kinds of reports—one of them was that Lady Blanche often sought refuge in an extra glass of wine. She grew more envious, more disagreeable; she was even glad at last to flirt with a curate, but the time came when even the curates declined to flirt with her.

She tried in vain to set herself straight with society; they would not have her, and she did not dare even mention Lady Carlyton's name. The last few years of the Countess of Blesseaton were made miserable by the presence of her daughter, which rankled like a thorn in her side.

Nugent Avenham and his beautiful young wife lived at the Towers; they were very happy, and spent one month of every year with Lord and Lady Carlyton.

Alison's story was made known; it was a nine-day's wonder, a sensation; then it died away and was forgotten. Still they never returned to England; and that absence from the home they both loved so well was the shadow that darkened their lives.

For some time afterward Lord Carlyton was coldly received. His own surprise was unbounded. At first he refused to believe in anything of the kind; then, becoming convinced, he wrote a long letter, manly and frank in its way, to Lord and Lady Carlyton, but it was never answered.

The world was merciful in one way—no one was cruel enough to tell Lady Carlyton. Even Lady Blanche shrunk from that; she never knew the story—never knew why the noble, beautiful woman she loved so dearly was exiled from England; the world spared her that. Lord Carlyton was very unhappy about it. He said to himself that he should begin to believe in goodness, for that the sins of a man's youth found him out, and became lashes to scourge him.

Alison resumed her painting (there are churches now in Italy and England where her pictures shine like jewels), so that she was not unhappy. As the years rolled, she averted to herself that, although the judgment of the world was hard, it was correct—that a woman who has once lost her place in the ranks of the good and the innocent can never regain it; that not even tears of blood can wash out the stain of lost innocence; that not even the life of a saint could make up for that one error; that the sin she committed was one which G. d. in His goodness pardons, but men never forget. She was beautiful, liberal, famous; she was a genius; she did untold good; but the sin of her youth shadowed her life, and darkened it.

Young eyes read my story—eyes that grow lighter for a lover's coming. Young girls read it, whose greatest happiness consists in the love of one whom they believe good and true. The wind that rustles in the trees, the stars that shine in the skies, the flowers that bloom, all whisper the same warning to you, and it is:

'Never believe and never trust a man who talks to you about love and does not mention marriage.'

[THE END.]

'LADY ALICE.'

CHAPTER I.

Alice! Alice! Alice! The shrill tones resounded through the chill evening air. They reached the ears of a girl reading, curled up in a corner of a deserted old barn.

At the angry tones, she closed her book with a sigh, and rising slowly, made her way to the step-ladder that led from the barn to the yard.

A woman stood here—a coarse stout woman, with arms akimbo.

'Where 'ave you been, idle vagrant that you are!' she cried loudly, as the girl crept down the ladder.

'In the barn,' Alice answered.

'In the barn, indeed! I'll have that door locked—that I will, or else I'll know the reason why. Do you think I've got nothing to do but keep you in food and drink—to let you idle your days through as you like? If you do, you're mistaken finely, I can tell you.'

Alice stood silent as the angry woman scolded on; her small hands were clasped tight together, a mute look was on her pale face.

'What do you want me for?' she asked at last.

The woman ceased. Never before in her remembrance had Alice taken her scolding so quietly.

'Get on your hat, and carry me this basket up to Mrs. Grey at the Castle; it ought to have been there this hour past.'

'To the Castle, faltered Alice shrinking back, to-night? Oh, Aunt Martha!'

'What are you frightened?' said Mrs. Martha Brown with an angry laugh. 'What are you fit for, Alice? Your head's just stuffed with all the nonsense you can get out of books. Off with you! Here's the basket.'

'It is so dark,' murmured the girl letting her great eyes wander from the yard to the deserted country lane, and then there's 'Madman's Drift' to pass.'

'Well, what of it?' asked the other, fastening down the basket-lid vigorously. 'A place where a madman put an end to his life. Dead men do no harm, you poor fool!'

Alice shuddered, but there was no sign of mercy in her aunt's face.

'Give me the basket,' she said suddenly. 'Any message?'

'No; unless you ask Mrs. Grey when she wants the next lot of eggs. Now, don't stay long; there's the boy's supper to get, and I'm worked to death.'

Alice turned away without a word. She pulled her thin cotton jacket close round her supple young figure, for the autumn night struck chilly, and stepped into the lane.

Her thoughts were a tangled mass as she hurried along; anger and weariness of spirit, as her mind turned to her aunt, under whose care she had lived ever since she could remember; disappointment at leaving the beautiful story in her book, and fright of the dark lonely path which grew greater at every step she took.

'Oh, if I saw my home here!' she said to herself as she hurried on, not daring to glance to the right or the left for fear of seeing phantom forms her vivid imagination supplied.

Sam was one of the farm-helpers. Under any other circumstance Alice shunned him, but now she would have welcomed him with open arms.

She left the lane, and approached an open waste of land.

A sudden break in the road at one side showed a steep incline and chasm, down which the unfortunate man who gave his name to the spot had sought his death.

Alice crept towards the dreaded place, quivering with fear.

Although grown out of her childhood, she still lived in a world of fairies, evil spirits, and phantoms.

As she stole through the dusk, with her pale face peeping from beneath the mass of golden curls, her small hand clutching the basket as if for support, she looked almost a fairy herself—a strange frail flower to fairy to so coarse and common a woman as the farmer's wife she called aunt.

All the village girls regarded this pale slender creature with contempt. She was so white and poor-looking beside their buxom charms—fit for nothing but books.

Alice heeded not their contempt. She would have been happy—with her beloved books, but she had a hard life—nothing but scoldings from Martha Brown, jeers from the boys and maids about the farm for her strange quiet ways, and heavy work for her young hands, which brought the tears often to her beautiful eyes and a sob from her lonely heart.

When work was over and she was alone in her bed, she turned once more to her beloved books, and her mind was crammed with weird stories of knights and chivalry that pleased and excited her.

She crept past the Madman's Drift with closed eyes, and gave a sigh of gladness when she was once safe away from it. Her arms ached, her limbs trembled with her excitement, and her steps grew slower as she entered the wood which led to the back of the Castle.

Suddenly, as her heart was growing more settled, it gave one leap into her mouth; she clutched her basket, staggered to a tree, and then waited and listened. The rapid thump, thump, of her heart was the only sound in her ears at first; then came more terrible ones—muffled groans and confused noises, then just

before her she saw two men, one uttering faint cries, while the other's arms were wound round him, grasping him till he sank to the ground and lay motionless.

Alice, leaning against a tree, saw all this, yet it seemed to her like a hideous dream; she was cold and sick almost to death. Her basket slipped from her arm—she had no power to stop it—and fell with a crash, causing the man who was stooping over the body to start, utter a loud curse, then stride toward her.

She had only time to catch a fleeting glimpse of a dark face, with cruel eyes, hot with anger, a torn collar, and marks of blood on his cheek, to hear his low hurried words, 'A girl, by all that's execrable!' and she lost all remembrance, her eyes closed, her head dropped, and she fell into his arms in a swoon.

'Good,' muttered the man as he placed her gently on the ground; 'she will know nothing; as for you poor fool, moving back to the prostrate form of the man, you have served my purpose—revenge for which I have waited so long has come at last. Ah, you move.'

He bent over the man and listened to the muttered words from between the pale lips.

'Eustace—give—me—your hand; I—do not believe it. You will not take—my hand! What—she is false—you say—your villain—your black-hearted scoundrel—take that! Good God!—he is dead! Eustace—speak to me—speak—he is dead—I—have murdered him.'

The listener rose; there was curious light on his face.

'What?' he whispered to himself; 'he thinks it was his hand. Could anything be better? He does not even remember me. Stay, let me think—this is delirium; it may pass when he wakes to his senses. I must impress this belief on his brain by stronger evidence. The girl does not move. Good—in one moment more.'

He glanced round and stole through the hedge. In a few seconds, a curious sound might have reached the ears of the two silent forms, but they were dim.

The man emerged again, he was dragging something with difficulty; it was a body, the misty light of the moon shone on a dead face—on a limp inanimate form.

'Now,' muttered the worker, 'now all is complete. Eustace Rivers is dead—dead by the hand of his friend Roy Darrell; there is evidence enough to damn an angel, and he will die for it. Now I must be gone; he moves again; and the girl will awaken. So, Bruce Gardyne, your revenge is complete.'

He stole gently away, and gradually the form of the man he had called Roy Darrell moved from the ground, with trembling hands he raised his weak body to a kneeling position, then let his eyes, dazed with faintness and horror, wander round.

They rested on the figure of Alice with wonder and scarce comprehension; then they moved slowly on till they rested on the dead man, and with a shudder of horror he covered his face with his hands and groaned aloud.

'It is no dream; it is the horrible truth! Oh, Eustace, my friend, my almost brother, dead, and by my hand!'

His hoarse whisper fell on Alice's ears. She was recovering.

She helped herself to rise by the aid of the tree, then leaned against it, faint and weak; to try and think.

Her basket lay unheeded at her feet. She seemed yet to be living in a hideous nightmare, till, looking round, her eyes fell on the kneeling man and the dead body.

She uttered a faint shriek, and in another moment Roy Darrell was standing before her, glaring into her face.

'Who are you?' he asked hoarsely. 'Where do you come from? Answer at once!'

'I am Alice Dornon,' gasped rather than spoke the girl. 'Oh, do not hurt me, sir! I was on my way to the Castle for my aunt, when, when—' Her voice faltered.

He grasped her hand.

'What?' he demanded huskily. 'He would know the truth.'

For a moment a flash of joy went through his mind. This girl might have seen the fatal blow struck, the hand that took the life of his friend Eustace. She might have seen that phantom third form that haunted his memory.

'I saw you struggling with that man,' Alice said, speaking almost with difficulty; 'your arms were round him; you threw him to the ground. Then you came to me, you said something to me, and I don't remember what else. I must have fainted.'

The man released her arm with a groan. He moved with slow steps to the dead body.

'Eustace,' he said in tones of acute agony, 'my friend—forgive me. God have mercy! I was mad—mad with your words. You tried me so bitterly—I would give all that I hold dear to listen to them from your lips again, for then you would live; now—he rose slowly, still gazing at the dead man. 'Now you will never speak again—you are dead—and I have killed you!—he drew back and leaned against a tree, then started suddenly—and they will trace this back to me, and I shall be—be hanged as a common murderer! A Darrell on the scaffold! Oh, mother, forgive your son!'

Alice stood in silence.

It was night-time now; the moon had risen, and was shining down in silver rays on the strange scene.

The girl forgot everything in the flood of pity that came over her as she watched the remorse of the man.

The lateness of the hour, the fallen basket, her mission, her aunt's anger—all were swept away as she let her eyes rest on him standing with hands clasped together, and white haggard face.

His lips moved, and she could hear him murmur from time to time:

'Murder! A Darrell hanged for murder! Oh, that I could have died before I brought this shame on your head, mother! For me life henceforth will be death, for there is blood on my hands, but for you, mother, it is different, and there is no escape.'

He glanced round in the agony of his mind, and a sudden thought seemed to come to him; he moved to her so rapidly that Alice shrank back.

'Do not shrink from me,' he muttered passionately; 'but speak to me. Let me know the worst at once. Were you alone when—when—death came to him, or—were others with you?'

'I was alone.'

'You swear it.'

'I swear it,' Alice said, meeting his eyes bravely; 'few people would come this way by night, she added softly, touched by the misery in his face. 'They fear the path too much.'

'But you?'

'I was sent on a message to the house-keeper at the Castle.'

'Ah! Do they know you are coming?'

Alice shook her head.

'I think not.'

Roy Darrell stood immovable, his face blanched with the burden of his sorrow. Cold perspiration trickled down his haggard cheeks.

Watching him thus, the memory of that other face that had been before her just as she fainted came to Alice.

'You are not dark,' she said almost involuntarily.

He turned.

'What do you mean?' he gasped hurriedly.

A ray of moonlight touched him glinting his warm brown hair and golden moustache.

'You looked so dark before,' the girl said slowly, 'and—yes I am sure of it—there was blood on your cheek; you have none now.'

Roy grasped her hand.

'God bless you!' he murmured faintly; 'whoever you are, you have done me the greatest blessing a human creature can do for another—you have taken a load from my heart, a weight of deadly pain from my head.'

I was right, there was another, but how did he come! Where is he now? Tell me again,' he cried, turning to her swiftly, 'it was not my face you saw.'

Alice looked at him steadfastly; she was growing faint and ill with the horror of the scene, but she forced herself to speak.

'It was not you,' she answered with a shudder of remembrance; 'it was a dark cruel face, with eyes that looked like a beast's, and blood on his cheek. I can see him plainly now.'

Roy released her hand, and covered his face with his own.

'What can I do? He is gone, and I must bear the penalty of his crime. They know we left the Castle together, they will find his body and bring this murder home to me, and she will swear me to death!'

Alice started, and pressed her small cold fingers on her heart.

'What will they do to me?' she whispered.

'To you, child? Nothing; but your word will go against me. There is nothing to save me. I shall die a disgraced, dishonored man!'

'Die!' cried the girl, 'Oh no, no. You must not. They will not do this, I will not speak.'

'They will make you. Your friends know of your walk through the wood. You must speak.'

'But,' murmured Alice, white with horror—'poor child! her strength seemed fast going—'but that other. I will tell of him.'

'It will be useless. Where is he? No; he, pointing to the still dead form, and sinking his voice to a whisper—'he and I were friends. We had quarrelled. Everyone knew there was a coldness between us. You saw a struggle. He lies murdered. I shall be convicted.'

Alice sank back against a tree.

She had no thought, no remembrance of aught but the horror of the moment. The faint sound of a clock striking roused her.

'It is getting late,' she said, glancing at him standing with sunken head. 'If I do not go, they will send to look for me. Oh, what can I do? Do not let them make me speak. I cannot bear to think of it; it is so terrible!'

Roy Darrell looked at her thin pale face, out of which her great eyes shone like stars.

'Poor child! you can do nothing—nothing, he said, slowly; then, as if a ray of light had come to him, he checked himself, and drew a deep breath. 'Yes, there is one way,' he said thickly—'one way you can help me, not for myself, but for my mother. I am innocent of this crime. I know—I feel it. Oh, for one instant's clear memory! But all is dense and misty. I must have been stunned, for I can recollect nothing, save that I know the death blow did not come from me. But all is dark against me. I shall be convicted. My mother will sink below the horror and disgrace. You are the only witness. You can save me if—'

He grasped her slender left hand.

'You are free,' he murmured. 'It is a great thing, but—'

'Whatever it is, I will do it,' Alice said in a dream. 'I am in your hands.'

'A wife can give no evidence against her husband. Will you become my wife?'

Alice staggered back, a blush gathered for an instant on her cheek, then her eyes fell on his haggard anxious face, on the still dead body, and terror banished all other feelings.

'I will,' she answered swiftly.

Roy Darrell bent and kissed the girl's hand; she had spoken the words that gave him hope and life.

'Let me think,' he said hurriedly; 'we—were going to Nestley; I must push on there now. Can you join me early? We will be married at the registry-office, before—before this secret may be discovered; it is a hard thing to ask you, but life or death hangs in the balance. Will you be there?'

'I will be there,' repeated the girl, 'early. 'Now we will part for a time,' he said, slowly, 'and God bless you for your promise!'

Alice turned away; something urged her to look back as she left the wood with faltering steps.

Roy Darrell was kneeling by the body of his dead friend, and the girl who had promised to become his wife pushed bravely on—to face the long dreary road with all its dark night terrors; on to face the wrath of her aunt; on to sit and watch till morning came, bringing work for her slender hand and gentle heart in its golden sunbeam.

'I shall be so lonely,' she continued. 'Then I will remain, dear Lady Darrell. To tell you the truth, I was beginning to fear I had extended my visit too long, and that you were tired of me.'

Lady Darrell stretched out her slender white hand, and the tall beautiful form left the window and knelt at the elder woman's feet.

'Now I shall scold you, Valerie. How often have I begged for this visit and you would not come. Do you think I shall let you curtail it just when you like? No, no, my dear; I mean to have my way.'

Valerie bent and put her warm red lips to the white hand.

'It is dull here, I fear, Valerie,' Lady Darrell said after a pause; 'especially these two next days while Roy and Eustace are away, but they will soon pass.'

Valerie's face had flushed crimson; now it was very white as she said simply:

'I am perfectly happy, I want no one but you.'

Lady Darrell patted the soft coils of hair that crowned the girl's head. It was glorious hair, of a warm ruddy, brown shade, that matched her eyes almost in color.

The skin was exquisitely fair, tinted with a delicate warmth of rose on the cheeks, and rivaling the fairest marble by its purity.

'You flatter me, Valerie; but now to breakfast. I hope, during the day, to have some line from Roy, and I hope also that by this time they have settled their little quarrel. Do you know, Valerie, this is the first time that I can ever recollect a coldness between Roy and Eustace, their friendship has been beautiful in its strength and warmth.'

Valerie rose from her knees abruptly; her back was towards her hostess.

'Does Captain Rivers ever stay with his mother?' she asked, speaking in a hard, dry tone.

Lady Darrell did not seem to notice it, she laughed slightly.

'Well, no dear; I cannot say that he does see much of her. Roy will have him here. Eustace, of course, has to leave us frequently to join his regiment at the different towns in which it is garrisoned, but beyond that this is his home.'

Valerie drew a sharp breath.

'I often laugh at Roy, and tell him one of these days Eustace will marry, and then they must be separated; but Roy does not seem to think Eustace will ever take a wife, nor do I for the matter of that.'

'Why?' asked Miss Ross quietly taking her place at the table.

'Well, because he is too selfish. Understand me, my dear. I am fond of Eustace Rivers. His father was my cousin and friend, and I cherish the son for his sake, apart from his own. But a man to marry must give up so much, and Eustace will give up nothing.'

She was opening her letters as she spoke, and did not see the look of pain that crept over her guests beautiful face.

'Ah, here is a letter from Lord William; he is coming down to-day. I must telegraph to Roy at once. How tiresome! What induced them to go to Nestley? I cannot understand it at all.'

To be continued.

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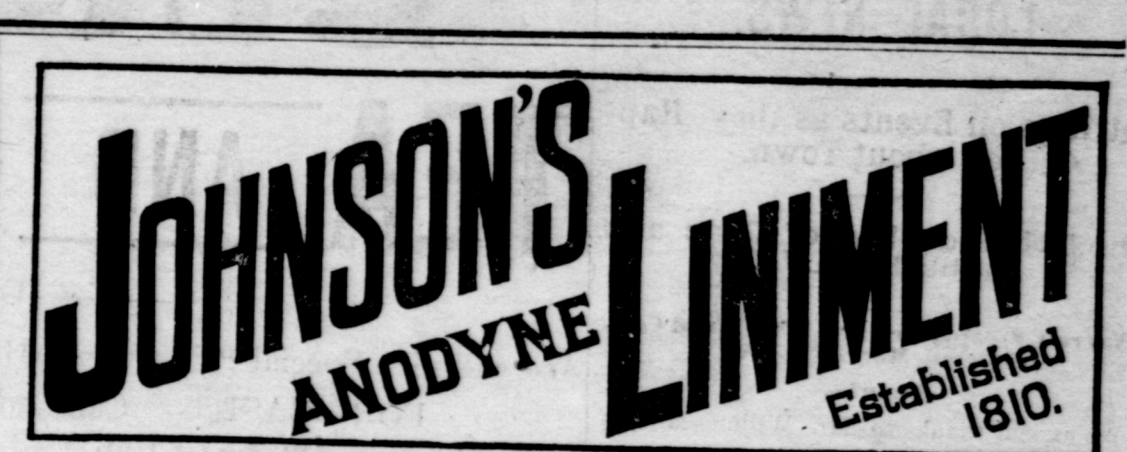
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