'LADY ALICE.'

Continued.

'For gold or diamonds,' the girl answered significantly.

Dame Burden took no notice of the remark. She was bending over the white face on the pillows.

'She is waking,' she whispered.

Myra leaned against the stone wall and watched Alice with a dull resentful glow in her black eyes. The wonderful glory of that golden hair, the delicate white skin, and graceful limbs filled her with a tumult of maddening pain and jealousy.

'She lies as easily as she drinks,' Myra mused moodily, as she glanced at Dame Burden. 'She thinks to deceive—me as if my ears were deaf when George returns! She is my own motner, and yet she tortures me and tells me lies. The promise of diamonds is more to her than my peace and happiness. What has he brought this girl here for, with her white skin and beautiful face? He is tired of me. Yes, I know it; but I did not think he would have shown it so plainly or so cruelly. It is like his cold selfish nature to give me pain; but I won't stand it for long. She shall be in my power; if he does love her, I will torture her till she dies.'

Alice was moaning now; her hands, burning as with fever, were thrown out on either side, her throat was parched, her head swimming.

'Water! water! Davis, water! she murmured.

Dame Burden hastily lifted her head, and put the glass to her lips. Alice drank eagerly, and shut her eyes with a sigh of thankfulness.

Her senses were returning she struggled from the old woman's arm, and half raised herself; her eyes opened again, and wandered round the room in amazement.

'Where am I?'she murmured. 'Davis! Davis! Are you there?'

Dame Burden drew back quietly; Alice raised herself, and passed her hand over her eyes.

'Am I asleep, Davis l What place is this? It is all strange. I must be——'

She turned, and her eyes rested on Myra's figure drawn up defiantly, resting against the wall; she uttered a slight shriek.

'Who are you?' she whispered fearfully, the clouds rolling from her brain, and a great terrible dread creeping into her heart. 'Where am I?'

You are with friends,' Myra said clearly and quietly.

Tho sound of the girl's voice broke the last sense of dreamland. Alice pressed her hands to her beating heart, and looked round in terror.

What place was she in? Where was her dainty bed, her light airy room? Where was the window and Davis? Who was this girl, and ah!—who was that woman? She crouched down on the bed, trembling in every limb; her lips opened to scream, but the sound seemed frozen in her throat.

'You are quite safe,deary; lie down and rest again. Myra, go away; don't you see you frighten her. He will—I mean Paul—will be angry.'

'I don't mind Paul's anger. Frightened, is she? I'm sorry for her, but that will wear off; she will see a good deal of me, and she'll get used to me in time, perhaps.'

Alice was still crouched on the bed; she did not understand the words, she was in a state of bewilderment, but something in the malignant tone roused her. She realised at once some terrible event had occurred to her; she could not grasp the full horror at that moment, but she vaguely understood that she was in some strange horrible place, separated from all she knew, and the fear in her breast lashed her almost to madness. She staggered from the couch and fell at Myra's feet.

'Oh, have pity—help me!' she murmured piteously. 'I don't know what has happened to me. I can remember nothing clearly. I seem to have been asleep, but I feel—I am sure—something terrible has come. I am frightened of this gloomy place—it is strange. Oh, help me to get away! You are a woman—you will understand. I don't know where I am, but let me get out—breathe the air, and I shall feel better. You—will you will help me!'

'Come, come,' broke in Dame Burden, trying to lift her from her knees; 'you must lie down again and go to sleep. You will be ill.'

Alice clung to Myra; she pushed the old woman away with a shudder.

'Oh, have pity, help me! I am afraid. I cannot tell what has come to me; but it is hideous, it is terrible. Take me away, carry me out into the air. Oh, help me, for Heaven's sake!'

Myra stooped, her face softened; this girl was no willing accomplice. The next moment she would have pushed aside her mother and carried Alice across the vault to the other door, had not sounds of steps outside stopped her. Her expression changed.

'Here is someone coming who can help you, perhaps. I can't plead to him,' she said roughly.

Alice looked round eagerly, while Myra folded her arms and fixed her glance like a hawk on the form entering through the curtains. She saw the frown gather on the count's face as he saw her, but made no sign.

He advanced towards Alice with outstretched hands. She rose from her knees; her face was white, her hands clasped to her heart. She gazed at the count with a look of deadly horror. He did not see it, but placed his hand on her arm.

'You are ill; rest here for a while. You will——'

'Don't touch me,' gasped the girl, her brain reeling. 'You—you—Oh, God! What terrible thing has happened to me? I——'

There was a confused sound in her throat, she made a faint movement with her hands, and the next instant Alice would have fallen to the ground in a swoon, but in two strides Myra left the wall, and had clasped her in her arms before the count could touch her.

'Leave her to me, George,' she said softly, yet to a well-tuned ear her voice sounded stifled; 'I will take her to my room. You don't understand women.'

'I will carry her,' interposed George hastily.

But she shook her head, and lifting Alice in her arms moved away as though the inanimate girl were but a featherweight.

The count stood watching her as she walked away, and could not repress a feeling of admiration for her graceful muscular figure and wonderful strength and ease. He turned to the old woman as she disappered.

'She will be the kind to the other,' he muttered quickly.

The old woman nodded.

'Yes; Myra is a strange one, but she ain't cruel. She—she thinks it's Paul's girl—I told her so. I thought it would be best.'

'You did right, though I don't care much. She must know it sooner or later. I mean to make the golden-haired girl my wife.'

'Do you, George?' answered the old woman in surprise, then after a moment's pause she added cunningly; 'But how will you do that? I see she wears a wedding ring on her finger,'

The count laughed.

'Have you lived all these years, Burden, to learn from me that a ring does not mean a marriage.'

Well, well, it's nothing to me; but what about the diamonds, George?' the old woman asked eagerly.

'Paul is bringing them. Here he is.'

Paul Ross entered as he spoke, carrying the case containing the Darrell diamonds.

'Hallo, mother!' he said jocularly. 'all alone? Where's Myra and Sam?'

'Myra's in there,' Dame Burden replied, nodding her head in the direction of the inner chamber. 'Sam's out doing his duty.'

Paul laughed.

'Where is it?' asked the count abruptly.

'Scouting round the Grange, a place about five miles from her, belonging to a man named Armistead they say he has a pile of plate worth a small fortune.'

'Armistead!' muttered Paul Ross with a dark look; 'he must beware; Geoffrey Armistead is dangerous.'

'Do you know him?' the count asked as he opened the case and drew out the diamonds.

'I hate him!' muttered Paul; 'he has tracked me down all my life, curse him'

'Well, you shall help to rid him of his plate as a revenge,' laughed Count Jura.

Paul looked up quickly'

'I will not have a finger in that job, George, so I tell you. It would mean danger, perhaps discovery.'

'I an not afraid, my dear Paul, if you are. Courage, mon ami, and remember, you join in the game at the Grange. I command you.'

Paul muttered an oath and flung himself down on a pile of rugs, and was silent while the count spread the glittering gems before the eager eyes of Dame Burden.

'Here,' he said, picking out a ring that blazed like a star, 'here's your share, Burden. Paul, what will you have?'

'Nothing of that lot; give me the cups.'

The count glanced at him.

Paul, you are growing cowardly. Well, take the cups. I keep the diamonds.'

What will you do with them, George?' asked Dame Burden, holding out her hand and watching the jewels flash in the light.

'Take them abroad and dispose of them there,' the count answered shortly.

Myra was leaning against the rough plank that formed a door between the two rooms.

'Take them abroad!' she whispered to herself. 'He is going away and takes her with him. Coward! He forgets me.'

She moved back to the bed on which she had placed Alice. The fainting-fit had passed, but the poor girl lay in a state of coma. She knew nothing.

'How beautiful she is!' mused the unhappy Myra; 'fair as a lily. He loves her—all the love I gave him he treads under-foot. He remembers nothing now—that he fooled me and won my heart with his pleading. It is all gone—all—my pride, my honor, my peace of mind and happiness. And she—what will become of her?'

Her eye caught the gleam of the ring on the white finger.

'Married, too. She hates him, for that I could love her. How would it be to—'

Alice stirred, she lifted her eyes.

'Help me! Oh, help me!' she murmured.

Myra stood upright.

'I will help her,' she said to herself quietly; 'It will be my revenge.'

CHAPTER XI.

Valerie Ross was in her room alone, her face was pale, but her eyes shone triumphantly.

Her plan had worked even better than she expected; the loss of the diamonds and plate, and Alice's disappearance, were now looked upon as an arranged thing.

The country rang with the news of the young Countess Darrell's elopement and robbery.

Two days had elapsed, and as yet no trace could be found of the fugitives.

Valerie saw nothing of Roy during this time; he was shut in his own room, hiding his head beneath the disgrace.

His mother was an altered woman; she seemed suddenly aged.

The loss of the diamonds was a sorrow to her, but she grieved more over her son's acute pain; she knew alone what Alice's flight meant to him—not disgrace only, but desolation and a broken heart, for Roy loved now as he never had or would again.

In her bosom lived many bitter thoughts of Alice, and the same to the proud honored woman was a blow almost too heavy to bear.

Valerie's sympathy and tenderness were very soothing to her, but brought at the same time a sigh of sorrow as she thought of her son's wretched life, and that Valerie could never be his wife now but through the shame of a divorce or death, and though she judged Alice harshly, she was too good a woman to pray for her death.

On the third day Roy left his room and went down to the library; he had made up his mind to go abroad for a time, and also to persuade his mother to leave the Castle and seek mental change after all the trouble she had endured.

Valerie heard him leave his room, and trod softly after him.

'Roy,' she said as he was about to enter the library.

He turned.

'Valerie, he said quietly, 'forgive me; I did not hear you coming.'

She gazed at his haggard face with a heart that burned from its jealousy.

She had not thought Alice's flight would have tried him so terribly.

'How ill you look!' she exclaimed.

'I feel tired—sick to death!' the earl answered, passing his hand over his eyes.

'What are you going to do?' she asked hurriedly.

'I am making arrangements to leave here and go away.'

'Do you intend to follow them?'

The question was asked involuntarily. Roy's face darkened.

'I shall seek him, if I go to the end of the world,' he said quietly.

'Where shall you go first?' Valerie questioned him hurriedly.

Roy shook his head.

'I don't know—to Italy, perhaps, where I met him. I believe he has a castle or an estate out there. He may have—they may have gone to it.

'Roy, you will do nothing rash? Promise me, for your mother's sake. Remember, she has only you.'

'I shall avenge my honor,' the earl answered quietly. 'But you, Valerie,' he went on gently, 'you will not leave my mother. She loves you; It is a great thing to ask you to do—to give up your life, your pleasures, to be with her—but I beg it as a favor.'

Valerie felt her throat choke.

'There is no hardship I would not submit to for your mother's sake,' she replied.

The earl raised her hand to his lips.

'Thank you Valeyie,' he said simply. 'Tell my mother I am coming to speak to her soon. I want her to go to her favorite house in Scotland for a little time, or anywhere. She must leave here.'

Valerie smiled faintly, and turned away as he entered the library.

'All goes well,' she murmured to herself. 'He prays me to remain—he will soon find that he cannot do without me, and Lady Alice will be forgotten. Does he love her—is he suffering from his heart or his pride at her flight? Pride, I am certain; he is a Darrell, and therefore his honor is to him the greatest of all evils. Now, it only wants Jura to send the report of her death, and the game is mine. I feel free, light as air, after a long, wretched, dark imprisonment, Paul gone from my path—happiness before me!'

The earl shut the door of the library, and drawing a chair to the table buried his face on his folded arms.

He was simply stunned by the news of Alice's faithlessness and sin; the vision of her sweet beauty haunted him, and even when proofs were strongest against her the thought of her innate purity and goodness would come like a flash of light.

He remembered her as he held her for tbat brief few seconds in his arms that night in the conservatory; it was the face of an angel in its fair lovliness.

Such a woman could not sin!

Yet how could he explain the circumstances? Look which way he might he saw nothing but the most damning and conclusive evidence of her guilt.

A knock at the door roused him, and his man Mason entered.

'There's a gentleman wants to see you my lord,' he said quietly.

'I can see no one,' the earl replied hasily.

'He told me to give you this card, and beg you to see him for a few minutes, my lord.'

The earl took the card.

'Frank Meredith—staying with Armistead at the Grauge. Well, let him come in, Mason.'

Mason bowed, and in a few seconds returned, ushering in Frank Meredith.

'I must apologise for intruding on your privacy, Lord Darrell,' Frank courteously; 'but I wish to speak with you most particularly.'

The earl bowed; he seemed to know his guest's face.

'You are looking at me, I see,' Frank went on. 'We have met before. Do you remember, a few days ago, you had a riding-party to the old Abbey ruins?'

The earl ruminated.

'Yes, I remember now. You are the gentleman who very kindly assisted my—the—the Countess of Darrell. I thank you, sir, for——'

Roy's voice failed.

Frank went on quickly.

'Lord Darrell, it is not a moment to mince matters. I know your trouble. I think I can appreciate your grief. have come here to tell you I think you have been the victim of some horrible treachery.'

Roy's heart stood still, then beat quicker than ever.

'Go on,' he said in low tones.

'I had the honor of a short conversation with Lady Darrell that morning at the ruins, and thinking her a neglected sorrowful woman, urged by some strange feeling I begged her to let me be her friend. After a moment's hesitation she agreed, and I handed her two cards with my address, one at the Grange, and the other in London. She promised me if ever she needed help she would send for me. Have those cards been discovered?'

Roy rose hurriedly.

'I will ring for her maid and ask.'

He paced the floor in wildest agitation till Davis came. How he reproached himself! A stranger had read her misery, and he was blind!

Davis knew nothing of the cards.

'I have looked through everything, my lord,' she said, coming back after a time. 'They are nowhere. My dear mistress left all her clothes. She had only her white silk peignoir, her cloak, and hat. Oh, dear! I feel something terrible has happened to her.'

The earl waved her away, and Frank only waited till the maid had gone. Then he walked up to the earl.

'Did you hear that? Would any woman deliberately go away in this damp cold weather, clad only in a dressing-gown. I am convinced there is some treachery. Listen: I came over here at Armistead's request. Last night we were sitting up late, when we heard a slight noise, and going to discover what it was, we discovered two men crouching outside the house. They fled like hares. We chased them, they took the direction of the Abbey ruins. Two nights before I imagined I heard something outside, but I took no notice of it. Armistead has gone up to town to bring down a couple of detectives, and we will get to the bottom of the affair. I have come to tell you this, and so support my theory that the disappearance of the plate and diamonds is all part of a systematic robbery.'

'Yes, yes; but——'

Roy had risen in his excitement.

'You mean, how does this account for Lady Darrell's disappearance also? I cannot explain that; but something tells me she is in trouble, and needs our assistance. But you look pale, Lord Darrell. Let me get you some brandy, or—

'It is nothing only your views upset me. It is dreadful to think of—of her, perhaps in danger, and I cannot help her. What shall we do?'

Roy had covered his face with his hands, and now looked up.

'Do!' echoed Frank; put the detectives on the track at once. Will you ride with me now as far as the Abbey? We might reconnoitre and find out something.'

'Let us start at once; Have you a horse? No? Then I will order two.'

The earl seized the bell:

'Two saddle-horses, Mason, without delay. Mr. Meredith, you have given me the first moment of gladness since that dreadful morning. You have given me hope.'

'Do not be too sanguine,' Frank observed quickly. 'They are only my own ideas on the affair. I have no proof; but to convict Lady Darrell of such odious crimes seems to me impossible. She has the face of an angel. If ever human eyes spoke the truth, hers did.'

"Why have not I had this faith?" cried Roy passionately; "I should not have wasted three days. But come, the horses are there; we can start at once."

"Do you know anything about this Count Jura? Where did you first meet him?" Frank asked as he mounted.

"In Italy. He represented himself as a scion of a noble and ancient house, and certainly I found him charming. Why do you ask?"

"Because Armistead seem to think him a scoundrel; but you will meet Geof tonight and learn more."

Valerie Ross heard the sound of horses on the path and looked from the window. As she saw Roy ride away hastily with a stranger her heart contracted as if with fear. What had happened? Suppose they have traced Count Jura, and Alice found? She summoned her maid, and, after much questioning of Mason, Valerie's fear died away. Roy had but gone for a ride. All was safe yet.

CHAPTER XII,

Alice lay unconscious half through the night that followed on her abduction; she tossed and turned in her fever; her lips murmured words incoherenlly; her small hands were held out as if begging for pity.

She knew not that Myra Burden sat beside her through the silent hours long after the voices had sunk down in the next room, tenderly and patiently tending her.

The chloroform had made her feverish, the shock of seeing Count Jura simply prostrated her.

A vague dream of horrors filled her brain. Valerie's malignant face, Count Juras dark eyes, haunted her like demons; then for a moment would come blessed happiness, as Roy's tender handsome countenance floated before her, only to melt again into terrifying figures of Myra and her mother, bringing that sense of dread and horror.

'Yes,' mused Myra, as she sat in the long night silence, ever and again moistening Alice's parched lips with water: 'she is here against her will and knowledge; he has evidently carried her away drugged and insensible. Who is she? A lady, her hands are white. I will help her; my heart burns against her, she is in my power, yet I cannot do her harm. It is he who shall suffer. He loves her,' she shuddered; 'yes there was a look on his face he never gave me—he shall suffer. I will get her away, but how? Let me think?'

As she pondered, Alice moved over restlessly; the actions caused two cards to fall from her pocket to the ground. Myra picked them up.

''Frank Meredith, the Grange.' Why that's the next plant! Is he a frrend, or perhaps her husband. The same name 'Saville row London!, This is luck. I will keep them, and George shall find out.'

The words died away in a stifled shriek a hand was placed over her mouth, another snatched the cards from her.

This was done by Count Jura; he had pushed aside the curtains noiselessly, had watched the girl sitting quietly, had listened to her half-whispered musings, and when she picked up the cards he dashed forward and grasped them.

'So, you viper, you are planning against me, are you?' he hissed, drawing her by a tight hold into the other vault. 'Treacherous—eh?'

'Yes, treacherous if you like,' Myra answered sullenly, snatching her arm from his hand; 'though it is not from you such words should come, George Fox.'

'Hush!' Count Jura glanced round fearfully—'dare to breathe that name again and I'll——'

'Kill me? Well, do it. What have I got to live for? You've treated me like the dirt under your foot, George.' Myra flashed her great black eyes on him like scorching stars. 'Do you ever think of my ruined heart, of all the misery I am suffering, of my degradation, of the aching void, the never-dying despair!'

Here she smote her breast as she spoke passionately.

'I know all about that.' returned the man cooly. 'I am not in the mood for recrimination, Myra, so I tell you plainly.'

'Have you forgotten all you swore to me? Have you forgotten your promise that I should be your wife?'

'Yes,' he said quietly with a sneer.

Myra shrank back; his cruel coldness cowed her, she could say no more. She turned, and sinking on to a mattress, buried her face in her hands.

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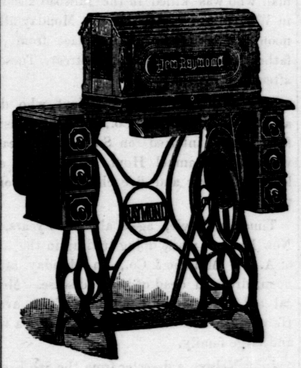

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