

## A LADY'S-MAID'S STORY.

My lady was a fine beauty; a great belle, indeed. She received many offers; but she had no thought of marrying till Lord Strange asked her. I didn't believe she'd take him, but she did, though it couldn't have been for anything but his title and money, for though not so much older than she, he was very ill-favored, his face was all scarred up with a burn he had got when a child, and he had as cross and jealous a temper as ever I saw. Besides that, one shoulder was higher than the other, and he had a withered limb which made him drag one foot when he walked, so he wasn't graceful, let alone being handsome.

He was desperately fond of my lady. He was that jealous of her that he could not bear her to look at another man; and to do her justice, she honored him wonderfully in this respect. I don't believe any lady could have been more careful than she was in not doing anything to vex him.

One day, when my lord called at the house to see my mistress about some old family jewels he was having reset for her, there was a stranger with him, a dark, handsome, foreign-looking gentleman, who looked at my mistress a great deal, and could not conceal how much he was struck with her beauty.

I wondered at so jealous a man as Lord Strange bringing this handsome gentleman to see his promised wife, but I wondered still more at the way he looked at those two, and then he kept asking questions and looking at my mistress as she answered them, for all the world as if he were trying to catch her in a trap. But that night my mistress told me the handsome stranger was only a new secretary my lord had got, and I concluded I had been fanciful in my imaginings.

But the next day Lord Strange came again and brought the handsome secretary with him, this time into my mistress's own boudoir. She must have been surprised, but she never showed it. She had learned already that my lord liked her to take everything he did as a matter of course.

The secretary's name was Vassilis, I found, and I took the opportunity to be in the next room, the door of which opened from the boudoir, and I kept it ajar enough to watch what went on. I wanted to satisfy myself, you see, about that secretary. He stared at my mistress worse than the day before, and my lord watched him and her in the same queer way. Lord Strange was not at all like himself—one minute too gay for him, the next gloomy and scowling. He couldn't sit still even, but must go limping around the room and gnawing his finger nails as he watched my mistress sideways.

"There is mischief brewing somehow," I said to myself.

You see, my mistress seemed so perfectly unconscious, either of my lord's strange manner, or Mr. Vassilis' absurd behavior. But he wasn't to blame. My mistress was so handsome it was no wonder he stared—and he a Frenchman, too. I don't suppose he ever saw so beautiful a creature in his life before as my mistress was. She was so used to being stared at, I don't suppose she knew anything about it half the time.

I had been with my mistress a long while, and she knew I was devoted to her. Sometimes she would talk quite cosy-like with me. Well, that night, when I was dressing her hair, she asked me if I ever noticed anything strange about my lord; and I said "Yes, I have noticed it." She turned right round and looked at me.

"What have you seen, Annette?" said she.

"I think he's crazy with jealousy," said I, "and that's what is the matter with him." My mistress turned white as a sheet.

"Oh!" said she "I never thought of that. I believe you are right, Annette. He does act like a person not in his right mind."

"Oh, I don't mean that exactly," said I. "I know what you mean," my mistress said; but I don't think she did.

The next morning, as she stood at her dressing-room window, she called to me, in impatience and dismay:

"Annette, here is Lord Strange and that Mr. Vassilis again. I suppose we are to have the same thing over again as yesterday. I want you to go down to the conservatory, and stay there near the drawing-room door all the time. Watch Lord Strange particularly, and tell me just how he looks and acts."

"I will," I said; and I went down to the conservatory at once and hid behind some of the big plants and my mistress came and looked at me and nodded and smiled; but I noticed she was very pale.

She scarcely looked at my lord and Mr. Vassilis when they came in, though she greeted both courteously enough in words. My lord sat down a moment, then muttered something, got up and went out of the room abruptly.

My mistress looked after him with anxious eyes.

"He's going somewhere to watch those two," I thought, and sure enough, in a minute I heard his dragging steps coming behind me, and dodged back just in time, though I don't think he would have known I was there if he had seen me, he was looking so intently into the drawing-room.

I looked too, and I saw my mistress, who had scarcely noticed the secretary before, gave her chair now and go near to him, peaking earnestly, and the French fellow

must needs lay his hands on his heart as he answers her and look as excited as if it was something of importance.

I thought for a moment my lord would leap in at them and tear the man in pieces. His eyes glared like a wild beast's, and I could hear his teeth grind upon each other.

"It is true, then," he muttered savagely; "she does love that handsome scoundrel. Oh! but it shall cost him dear."

He stood there some moments longer. But my mistress had gone back to her chair, and presently my lord retraced his steps, and I saw him alter a little enter the drawing-room by the same door he had gone out at. He was smiling in such a dreadful kind of way that it scared me even at that distance to see. I wondered how my mistress could meet it calmly.

The two gentlemen went away, and my mistress called me to come to her. I took one step, caught my foot somehow, I don't know on what to this day, and fell sprawling. That was the last I knew for weeks. I struck my head on a flower-pot as I fell. You can see the scar yet. I came near dying, they said.

Well, almost the first thing I heard when I got to know anything again, was that Lord Strange had been robbed of twenty thousand pounds' worth of family jewels, and that he had accused Mr. Vassilis, his secretary, of taking them. Mr. Vassilis was in prison, and was to be tried at the next assizes, which were almost at hand.

It was my mistress who told me this, and she looked troubled and anxious. She was to be married in a few weeks, and the preparations for the wedding were going on as fast as possible; but she seemed worried and out of spirits for one so soon to be a bride.

"Did you watch Lord Strange that day, as I told you, Annette?" she asked me, "or have you forgotten all about it?"

No, I had not forgotten. Everything came back to me as she spoke. I told her all about my lord coming into the conservatory, and what he muttered to himself as he stood there.

My mistress looked startled, but she could not understand it more than I; nor so much, for I did have my suspicions even then, though I did not dare tell them.

"It is impossible that he could have been really jealous of Mr. Vassilis," she said, "his own secretary. Why, I never saw the man in my life till Lord Strange brought him here, and I never spoke a word to him that Lord Strange did not hear till that day, and then I only asked him if he thought Lord Strange was quite well. I began to think the man was crazy himself when he put his hand upon his heart in that absurd manner, and looked so excited."

My mistress was married at the appointed time, and Lord Strange took her away on the wedding tour. I was not sufficiently recovered to go with them, but I met them in London on their return, and went down to Castle Strange with them. Mr. Vassilis had been tried meanwhile, found guilty, and sentenced to transportation. He hung himself in his cell the day after sentence was passed—made a rope out of the sheets of his bed to do it with.

I heard at the castle some particulars of the robbery. The jewels which were missing had been in town for some time to be re-set for my mistress. The day they were stolen Lord Strange had gone to the jeweler who had them, and after examining the work so far as it was completed, had found all manner of fault with it, and ended by ordering everyone to be immediately packed again in the box he had brought the jewels there in, and taken out to his carriage. He left the establishment in one of his well-known tempers. His secretary was with him. They entered his lordship's carriage, and put the box of jewels on the seat between them.

Lord Strange's own coachman was on the box. They rode ten miles out to his lordship's suburban villa. From the park gates to the house it was about a thirty minutes' drive by a winding road. When the carriage reached the house there was no driver on the box, though there had been at the gates. Both Lord Strange and his secretary were inside, in a deep, drugged sleep. The box of jewels was gone.

They found the driver in an insensible condition back almost to the gates. He had not been drugged. He had been knocked off the box by a heavy blow from behind, a blow with a club, which had only missed killing him.

Lord Strange was the first to come to himself after some hours. The last thing he remembered was drinking with Mr. Vassilis some wine, which must have been drugged. But by whom? Who beside themselves and the jeweler could have known they had the jewels with them? An accident, as it seemed at the time, revealed the fact that Mr. Vassilis had a bottle of morphine in his pocket.

The secretary was still sleeping. Either he had taken more than Lord Strange of the drugged wine, or had taken it later. Lord Strange at once boldly accused the unconscious secretary of having first drugged him, probably before they entered the gates, then climbed out and knocked the driver senseless on the way to the house, afterwards concealing the jewels or passing them to a confederate, and finally drugging himself to divert suspicion. The finding of the bottle of morphine on Vassilis was what condemned him. The unfortunate man denied having ever seen it before the

moment it was shown to him, and when told what he was accused of, between horror and weakness fainted, and lay unconscious for hours, in spite of every effort of the physicians in attendance to restore him.

All this time Lord Strange limped back and forth, not far away, his ugly face distorted with rage and threatening, a frightful face to see.

The footman whose place it was to be in attendance on my lord that day, but who had been left in London on what he himself considered a pretence, told me that he heard my lord mutter more than once in the days that followed, with the secretary raving in delirium:

"I don't want him to die, curse him! I want him disgraced, turned black with infamy and sent to rot in a felon's cell."

I said I had my suspicions. Now, when I heard all these things, they grew stronger than ever. But I never dared utter them. I believed that, whoever else had got the jewels, poor young Vassilis did not take them. But I did not dare say so. I used to wonder sometimes if Lord Strange, or my mistress, ever thought of him. They were neither of them happy—though my lord had got the woman he loved, and my mistress had got the title and riches she coveted.

The two never quarreled. Bad-tempered as he was, my lord never showed his temper to my mistress. But everyone could see that they were neither of them happy. One day, when we had been at Castle Strange some weeks, feasting and making pretense of being merry, the house full of company, my mistress asked her husband to show her the muniment room. This was the strong room of the castle.

When my lord consented, instead of taking any of her guests with her, she called him to attend her. She would never be alone with her husband if she could help it.

My mistress examined all the curious treasures of the muniment room eagerly, and my lord, pleased at her interest, showed her how to open the most secret repositories there, and displayed their costly contents. I don't know how it could have happened; my lord must have made the blunder himself, and opened a door he never would have had my mistress see beyond, in his deliberate senses.

I heard a sort of scream from my mistress suddenly. She was bending over a long ebony box, which was open, and Lord Strange stood by, with such a face as I hope never to see again. Livid with despair and horror, distorted with an expression more evil than I would have believed possible to a human countenance, he stood watching his wife. My mistress raised her head and looked at him. The truth had come to her at last.

"These are the jewels you accused that man Vassilis of stealing!" she said, in a voice so changed I would never have known it as hers.

"Yes," my lord answered, an awful blaze in his eyes, "they are. The only crime that poor wretch was guilty of was being loved by you."

"Liar," was all she said.

Lord Strange took a letter out of the box and gave it to her in silence. I knew afterwards what it contained. It was an anonymous letter accusing my mistress of having known and loved Vassilis abroad. It must have been written in the merest malice by someone who envied Lord Strange for having won her, and who knowing how jealous he was, played upon that weakness.

My mistress read the letter through to the end before she looked up. Then she said, in the same terrible, changed voice: "My lord, I never saw Mr. Vassilis but three times in my life, then you were with him. I never spoke to Mr. Vassilis in my life till you brought him into my presence."

My lord was a pitiable sight. He seemed to shrink and shrivel up under her looks and words, as though actual flames had touched him. Suddenly he fell upon his knees, and crawled in the dirt at her feet.

"Oh! forgive me," he moaned. "It was my mad love for you made me do it." My mistress looked down at him with a sort of shudder, as if he had been some poisonous and loathsome reptile.

"I will never forgive you," she said slowly. "I will never speak to you again if I can help it."

She took my arm and went away and left him. As we passed out of the door I looked back.

"Oh! my lady," I said, "there is blood."

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