

Wild Valtie's Elopement.

IN FOUR INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER IX.—Continued.

It was a lurid light that flashed into her brain all suddenly—a blighting revealing glare that for a moment stunned her senses.

Benson, Colonel Woodford's valet, had been stabbed, and the count had in his possession this sinister poniard, the blade of which bore signs of having been recently used.

Valtie sat so though electrified, a frigid wildness on her blanched face, ice in her veins, and watched Count Lodi with frozen fascination, as, his tread measured and echoing, he crossed from his room, through her boudoir, towards the door.

From the singular, masklike passivity of his expression, and the aweless gleam of his eyes, she knew that he was walking in his sleep!

Slight past her he glided, going with mechanical intuition to the closed door, which he softly opened.

Out into the darkness of the passage he stole, and his wife rose, staggering and giddy, and, securing a light from the toilet table, crept after him.

Down the stairs he went, steadily as an automatic figure, and, looking like a little wan ghost in her pale wrap, Valtie followed him.

Did he mean to leave the house in the dangerous unconsciousness of somnambulism?

She drew a stifled breath of relief when he turned into the library, remaining herself at the threshold, with the awful certainty of finding that the guilty workings of his mind would lead to some hideous detail in connection with his fell secret.

He went noiselessly to his desk, unlocked one of the drawers, and lifted out a cash box.

Then Valtie's dilated eyes beheld the glitter and sparkle of gems that blazed in the half gloom.

Her cold limbs seemed to lose power when the scintillations of those flaming stones mocked her sight.

She grasped the frame of the door to keep herself from falling.

The room reeled, and the wild panting of her heart was almost fatal.

How had those precious jewels been obtained?

What did he mean to do with them? Still with that uncanny precision of motion, he selected what looked like a brooch from the shining mass, and deftly commenced to extract the shimmering brilliants from their gold setting.

Then he put gems and weapon carefully into the box, and locked them securely away.

But, as he stood up, turning his sleeping face to Valtie, something fell from the folds of his dressing gown, on to the fleecy fur of the hearthrug.

It made no sound, and he walked towards his receding wife with the same unseeing stare, as she drew shudderingly back going along the hall to the stairs, and ascending them mechanically.

The light flickering garishly in her trembling hand, she groped her way to that twisted piece of gold, from which the diamonds had been wrenched.

The outline of a distinct monogram remained, and the linked letters were 'E. W.' The awful truth rushed upon Valtie in an instant.

It was worse a thousand times than she had imagined.

A degrading horror of crime and vice, with no higher motive than that of theft! Shame flooded her whole being—shame and anguish—to think that her love had been won by so crafty a trickster.

She tottered forward, moaning as though vitally wounded, and then all grew dark to her tortured brain.

She sank to the floor insensible.

CHAPTER X.

Fortunately, the light was extinguished by Valtie's fall, or her misery might have ended in a dreadful death.

A greyish glimmer was creeping into the library when she opened her eyes, and, recollecting the cruel cause of her swoon, as her dim vision recognized familiar objects, she struggled to her feet, and stood, dizzy and shivering, her icy hands pressed to her clammy forehead.

It all came rushing back to her with odious clearness—the robbery at Colonel Woodford's with that felonious attack upon Benson, and the mysterious appearance of the girl with the flaxen hair—a girl who seemed to be always dressed for some part, which she acted with marvellous ease and skill.

The brooch, betraying Count Lodi's guilt beyond question, must have belonged to Ethel Woodford's mother, and was part of the stolen booty, for possession of which an infamous plan had been deliberately devised.

Valtie was no longer a trusting dupe of iniquitous deception.

She slowly made her way to her own room, and began to dress, resolved to quit the roof that sheltered criminals.

When, she wondered, could she get a train to Brookvale?

She must return to her home, and now was her chance of escape.

To meet the Count again would be impossible.

He would read in her face her abhorrence of his guilty secret, and she thought

of the lonely Grange, recalling, in a flash of horror, the image of that dead, tree-lashed form seen in the mist veiled dawn of St Valentine's Day.

Was that some mode of punishment for those who gave offense against the sinister rule of the evil chief of that dastardly gang?

With a shudder, Valtie hurried on her outdoor costume, and, stealing noiselessly from the house, turned in the direction of the nearest station.

It was still so early that a damp gloom hung over the earth, and the trees looked grim and gaunt, shadowed against the dull sky.

Valtie thought of Basil who was making rapid strides as a journalist—thought of the scent of the violets she had scorned, and her wild elation at the prospect of the brilliant marriage which had ended so fatally.

It she could only then have seen into the future! But her mind had been dazzled, and blind love had enslaved her reason.

She had thought of nothing but the glory of being Countess Lodi.

She was conscious of being out at an unusual hour, and walked along with face as white as death.

The rumbling of any vehicle made her flinch and tremble with a thrill of dread that her flight had been discovered, and, when a cab came rattling down the road at a reckless speed, stopping sharply at the side of the pavement she was traversing, a great agony of apprehension turned her cold and sick.

Then, as someone sprang from the conveyance, a speechless sort of paralysis seemed to fall upon her; she stood stock still, while a delicately-powerful hand clasped her wrist, and the voice of her husband said, harshly—

'What, in the name of mischief, is the meaning of this? Where are you going my dear Valtie?'

She could not utter a sound, and her limbs seemed to have lost their power; she felt that dreaded hand drawing her towards the cab, and was unable to rebel, for once, with her usual wilful spirit—felt herself lifted into the vehicle, and saw, with dim comprehension, that she was being driven rapidly back to the house near Park Lane.

The count did not speak once during those horrible minutes in which his wife sat as though petrified, in a stupor of despair.

His eyes glittered under his scowling brow, and his teeth were set snarlingly; he looked dangerous in his savage rage.

He knew, on waking from the trance-like sleep that had followed his strange revelation of the stolen gems, that he had betrayed himself while in a state of somnambulism, and he had gone in search of the missing poniard—to find the clue of the gold setting denuded of those flashing brilliants, and the candlestick of chased silver which belonged to his wife's boudoir.

That she had been a witness to the weird working of his crime racked mind was too evident.

He had found her gone—had rushed out in search of her, and, knowing intuitively that she had gone in the direction of the nearest station, he had jumped into a cab.

She been simply dazed into a stupor by his sudden advent, and was led from the cab into the house, unable to withstand the compelling force of that white, cruel hand.

Pauline glided into the hall to meet her, a hard, repelling look on her face, and fixing her grey eyes on poor Valtie, she said scornfully—

'This is the result of your wild marriage! Why didn't you remain in your simple sphere at Brookvale? You have become one of us, and you must bear the burden of the mystery in which all our lives are involved!'

Valtie staggered, with dim sight, into the room to which the count led her, and sank on to a chair, nearly swooning with deathly terror.

Before her mental vision kept rising that spectral form of St. Valentine's Day—the horror she had seen from the east room window of the Grange.

She could hear the count and Madame Delmont conversing together in low tones and something convinced her that she was the subject of their discussion.

For many moments she sat there with swimming brain, and then Count Lodi said, in tones that made her shiver—

'We are going to Blackwood, Valtie. I think you will be happier there than here for a month or two.'

She looked up at him, saw the indomitable sternness about the rigid lines of his mouth, and sprang to her feet with a cry of fear.

'You must let me go, Marc! I cannot

stay with you now that I know the truth! 'You will obey me, Valtie! he said calmly. 'Come, Pauline is waiting. She kindly volunteered to go with you.'

'Have pity, Marc! I cannot look at you without a shudder now that I know your guilt. The knowledge of your odious sin has killed my love for you; I dread you with all my soul!'

His eyes flamed furiously. 'Enough of that!'

He caught her hand, roughly drawing it through his arm, and led her to the hall, and out to the brougham awaiting them.

After that followed a long, dreary drive that lasted for hours.

CHAPTER XI.

Valtie knew that she was indeed in the toils with Pauline Delmont seated opposite her as impassively imperturbable as an image of stone.

There was something to dread in the phosphorescent glister that seemed to irradiate her eyes, and, when she presently turned their sinister light full upon her shrinking prisoner, it inspired a feeling of acute aversion.

Mercy was in that gleam—a consciousness of having the power to destroy, if she could not quell.

'Did I not tell you that the count could be cruel—even to you?' she said, when the horses had reached a quite thoroughfare. 'Your own wild opposition and obstinacy have brought you to this.'

'To what?' Valtie asked, in sharp tones of defiance, sitting up straight, her little, drawn face white as a snowdrop. 'You may as well relieve your malice by talking of the horrors in store for rebels. Am I to mysteriously disappear in that delightful place at Blackwood, over which you and Marc so majestically preside?'

Her lips curved mockingly as she uttered the words.

She had not the slightest intention of letting her ill-omened enemy hold her in terrorised subjection.

'You have been leniently sentenced to imprisonment at the Grange,' was the satirical response.

A burning iron seemed to press on Valtie's brain; there was a roaring noise in her ears, and a dull palpitation of her heart.

But, with a queer little laugh that would have made Basil shudder, she tauntingly cried—

'Is that all? May I not expect to be fated to die by one of your adroit methods? If you were to leave me any choice, I should infinitely prefer to drown!'

Pauline leaned forward, her features like marble, but with glittering eyes. 'There is danger in your conversation,' she breathed. 'You know the penalty of treason, and you will not be spared if you allow your daring to carry you too far!'

'I am not afraid,' Valtie retorted. 'Marc does not wish my death, though his anger may be roused against me. I am at your mercy, but you would not dare to harm me.'

Pauline had sunk back to her old position, calmly contemplative and contemptuous.

She was thinking that in Valtie a daring ally might be obtained, once divested of her scruples and horror of their evil crimes.

'Someone will have to take the place of Natalie when treachery is proved to exist under cover of her apparent servitude, and why a stranger, when there is Marc's wife to train? The little vixen could well battle an army of law if she chose! It would be worth trying to induce her to take the oath of allegiance.'

She looked critically at her captive, whose youthful face had a careworn pallor in the sunny light which light with the carriage was how filled.

The sheeny glare seemed to have enlarged the blue eyes unnaturally, and, half dazed Valtie put up her hands to shut out the blinding sunshine.

'Something will happen!' she exclaimed. 'I have a presentiment that there will be an accident before we reach the Grange!'

'You must have had many presentiments, dryly commented Pauline. Valtie did not reply.

Her head was whirling, and the swift motion of the vehicle made it throb with pain.

She could not help counting the best-bet of the horses' hoofs, although the effort wearied her insufferably, and she longed to find ease in sleep.

When Madame's abominable voice once more disturbed her, she let her hands fall to her lap, and clasped them convulsively.

'What is the use of this wild opposition to Marc?' Pauline asked. 'You had much better accustom yourself to his singular mode of life.'

'If that were possible I would rather die this minute!' Valtie cried, passionately. 'Oh the shame of living to share his guilt! The tie of our marriage ceased to bind me when all the hideous truth was revealed, convincing me that my husband was a felon of the deepest infamy!'

'The count is a resolute man,' Pauline said, and you will never outwit him my dear Valtie. Once at the Grange, you will stay—unless you agree to my terms.'

'Your terms! I know that I shall not agree to them!' was the scathing retort. 'Well, I offer you your freedom; you can take it or not, as you prefer. Become one of our band, and you will be at liberty to leave the Grange or remain—the restraint upon your movements will be removed, and the homage of our people will be lavished freely on the wife of their ruler.'

Pauline had bent slightly forward, fixing her glittering eyes on the face of her young captive, and she drew back when Valtie sprang up.

'Oh! the wife of a thief!' she cried. 'Do you imagine that you are tempting me? I am not degraded enough to buy my freedom at the risk of my soul, even if I had any faith in your word. To secure your own safety you would incriminate me in your sinful scheming.'

Pauline's face grew terrible with the mocking, baneful gleam in her eyes. Once drawn into the meshes of our



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league you would reign through the might of your very recklessness!' she hissed. 'That is why I offered you this chance.'

Valtie sank back to the seat, shuddering. Might she have been another Natalie but for the influence that had surrounded her at home?

In humiliated silence she sat gazing drearily at the shining band of gold on her left hand.

Slowly she drew it off her finger, and held it out to Madame.

'That is my message to Marc, she said, sadly. 'You can give it to him, and he will know that our union is at an end.'

Pauline took the ring without comment. The carriage sped on, stopping once at a country inn to change horses, and then rolled along lonely roads till long past midnight.

But suddenly there was a violent collision, the vehicle swerved, and the plunging horses reared in snorting terror, then Valtie felt a shock that nearly rendered her senseless.

CHAPTER XII.

What had happened? Dizzily Valtie rose from the bank on to which she had been flung, and looked round.

Then she saw that the accident had kept the frightened horses from leaping down into a wear of rushing water, and that the vehicle had turned over at the very verge of a steep declivity.

Not far from her lay the stately form of Pauline, still as death, and Valtie, quite unhurt, would have gone to her assistance, but for a startling discovery.

Standing in consultation with the coachman was the foe she most dreaded—the swarthy-faced Ciro!

One great spasm of deadly alarm convulsed her heart, and, turning, she fled over the springy turf, racing down the declivity to a path winding round the bend of the river.

Whither it would lead her she neither knew nor cared.

Her one idea was to put as much distance as possible between herself and the man she so dreaded.

She ran fleetly as a deer, white and wide-eyed, and crossed a little bridge that spanned the weir.

But not before she had been missed. Ciro was in pursuit of her.

Looking back, she saw him gaining ground rapidly.

A sort of frenzy made the green sward appear like heaving billows under her feet. She could scarcely discern the dividing line of bank and river.

Close to her the sails of a mill were revolving, and she dashed towards it in trembling fright, the beating of her heart almost stifled by the rapidity of her flight.

Ciro was now only a few paces in her rear.

She would be vanquished in the chase—caught, and compelled to complete the hideous journey to that dismal prison in the crime haunted wood.

Fiercely she struggled to keep in advance of her crafty pursuer.

But the pulsation in her head seemed to distract her.

How could she evade the cruel fate from which this catastrophe had given her the chance of escape?

Ciro was very close to her now. Her strength nearly failed in her despair.

Then, as his sinewy hand caught her wrist, she gave a wild scream, and stood as though rooted to the spot.

'Paroon, excellenza,' he said, with excessive politeness. 'You mistake the way. It is too far to walk to Blackwood; permit me to escort you back to Madame.'

'So Madame Delmont is uninjured,' flashed through Valtie's brain. 'She is waiting for me—will, perhaps, come in quest of me.'

She looked into Ciro's menacing eyes, and saw that, unless she managed to dupe him in some way, she would be defeated in the contest.

'I am not going back to Madame,' she said. 'You had better leave me to disappear in my own way. I need never trouble Count Lodi or his associates again, I can be as one dead to him. Let me go, and I will not betray what I know of your secrets.'

'It is not for me to permit your release, excellenza,' Ciro answered. 'I must obey the mandate of my chief.'

'Take me back to the Grange, and you will find it hard to keep me there. I will set my whole heart and mind on the task of denouncing you; I will let the world know the mystery of all that I beheld on St. Valen-

tine's Day! Do you anticipate seeing my rebellion punished with equal fierceness? 'Why talk of punishment, excellenza?' he asked, and his eyes glittered mockingly. 'You are not a traitress, to expect so harsh a doom!'

'No; I promise you!' cried Valtie, desperately. 'Leave me my freedom, and my lips shall be sealed.'

'I dare not!' he replied. 'To offend my chief would be to jeopardise my own life!'

Valtie said nothing more. She suddenly bent down her face to Ciro's brawny hand, and dug her sharp little teeth into his wrist.

He writhed in pain and fury, completely taken off his guard by her frantic ruse, and his grasp upon her arm relaxed.

Now came her chance. Like a dart she sprang away from him, running round to the other side of the mill, and, as the great sail nearest to her reared itself above her head, she caught at the rough framework, and was lifted with it.

Ciro, livid with rage, had not seen that daring exploit of Valtie's.

He looked round, his yellow teeth snarlingly displayed.

Where was she hiding? Was he to be duped and foiled by the mutinous little vixen, with all his cunning?

She had it in her power to bring destruction to the whole gang of lawless desperadoes, whose guilty secret she possessed, and he would have flung her into the foaming weir rather than let her live to reveal their infamy.

But the huge mill sail entirely screened the clinging figure, and the Italian had, after fruitless search, to recross the little bridge leading to the hilly side of the river, and returned, in the most evil of repressed tempers, to Pauline.

Valtie, revolving in mid-air, horribly giddy and frightened, realized that death was imminent were she to be carried beyond a certain height—were she not to make a quick leap to reach the ledge of the loft close to which she was being raised.

Policy terror almost petrified her heart. The suspense was agonising, and it was getting so dark, with the tempestuous darkness preparatory to a rainy night, that soon the scene would be swallowed up in a confusing shroud of mist and shadow.

The grind of the machinery grated on Valtie's ears like the discordant dirge of something ghoulish.

What a dreadful stratagem she had plunged into, not counting the risk!

Would she miss that one haven of safety awaiting her?

It was not the time for the slightest hesitancy.

She was opposite that opening in the loft and she sprang, with bated breath, towards it, reaching the ledge, and kneeling there perfectly bewildered, everything round her reeling.

But the overwhelming giddiness passed away after a moment or two.

She stood up, then, bending her head, managed to creep through the narrow opening to the musty interior of the mill.

In the dim, declining light, she groped her way to a spiral flight of steps, descended them, and found a door of exit, just as she was beginning to despair.

A drizzle of rain was falling from black clouds when Valtie stood once more outside the mill.

She gazed round mistrustfully, half expecting that Ciro would spring out of the dusk to mock her with his insufferable pretence of courtesy, and frustrate her feverish effort to escape that impending fate of cruel imprisonment in the hated Grange.

She listened, motionless, heard nothing, save the swish of the water running between the banks and felt reassured.

Suddenly it struck her that she could not be at any great distance from Brookvale. If she could only find her way to the dear old village!

A glow of hope thrilled her heart she began to walk fast, taking the path instinct suggested must be the right one.

She went along a lonely road, heedless of the darkness and rain, buoyed up with the certainty of eventually reaching her native valley.

Now and then she passed a country mansion, lights gleaming from the rain blurred windows; and she was approaching one more elaborately illuminated than the rest, when a shadow darkened the path beneath the glimmer shed by the lamps of the massive gates.

Valtie recoiled, with a sharp intuition of danger.

At the same instant someone barred her passage—someone, whose tall figure, muffled in a long coat, seemed curiously familiar.

She looked up in trembling dismay, and then, with a frozen pallor on her face, cried—

'Marc!'

It was unmistakably Count Lodi whose stern eyes encountered hers from the shade of a slouching felt hat. In silence he took his wife by the shoulders, drawing her closer to the light.

Wid Valtie had never looked so deplorable as at this crisis, traces of dust and mud on her damp clothes, her ruddy hair in a tangle; and this encounter with the man from whom she had been running away seemed to have stupefied her.

She stood stock still shivering, her heart beating with a sort of dull and muffled irregularity.

'May I ask what brings you here?' the count said, with ominous quietude. 'I did not anticipate the joy of meeting you so soon.'

There was little need to put a similar question to him.

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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