

# Wild Valtie's Elopement.

IN FOUR INSTALMENTS.

## CHAPTER XIII. CONCLUSION.

That day Valtie realized that she was a prisoner in the east room, surrounded by the soughing boughs of the dense wood.

With the horrible despair flooding her being had come a fierce reaction of wild indignation against Pauline and Count Lodi, whose subtle scheming had thus brought about her capture.

They were afraid that she might betray the mystery in connection with the robbery from Colonel Woodford's safe—might let drop some word likely to reveal by whom Benson had been wounded, and the suspicious identity of the girl who had called herself Natalie Dennie.

Valtie's blue eyes were feverishly bright as she stood looking from the high windows into the density of the weird woodland.

She was no longer mute and frozen with stunned anguish and misery.

Her wild, wilful spirit was in burning revolt against the two evil conspirators by whose will she had been brought to this gloomy place.

She would find some way of escape from her captors.

There was a little gleam of moonlight without now, and she took measure of the distance she would have to climb to reach the ground.

It would be a deadly risk to attempt the descent from that dangerous height, but she did not stop to consider this.

She wrenched open the window and swung herself out to the ledge, standing erect on the narrow coping.

Step by step she climbed down the mouldering wall, clinging to the strong branches of the ivy, regardless of the peril yawning beneath—of the scratches and bruises she received in the descent.

At last she was able to leap to the ground, and crouch under some shrubs while she recovered her breath, and controlled her tremor of delight at having so far achieved her purpose.

Once out of the wood, she would be able to breathe freely, think clearly.

She bent her head, and listened for a treacherous step, but could hear no sound save the sighing of the wind in the newly-budding boughs.

She left her resting place, and crept along in the shadow.

The glint of the moonlight was scarce throwing stray shafts of silver on the moss-carpeted ground, and Valtie threaded her way through the tangled glades, keeping to the east side of the old Grange, knowing that it would lead her to the main road.

Suddenly, with a startled thrill, she stood still, looking up at one of the trees; and, as she looked, her heart seemed to stop beating with a pang of horror.

A woman's form was lashed to it.

The moonshine rested on her corpse white face and a wealth of unbound flaxen hair; and Valtie saw that it was the girl Natalie, who had scattered those ill-omened immortelles at her feet on the day of her wedding.

With a stifled cry she ran towards the tree, and the girl's closed eyelids fluttered. She opened them with a dull gaze.

"Why are you here?" Valtie said, shuddering. "What fresh enormity is this?" Faint words fell from the girl's pale lips. "This is the fate of all who incur the displeasure of our league."

"You will die!" exclaimed Valtie, her eyes flashing, as she gazed upon the fiendish work of those sinister conspirators. How can I release you?"

The girl's dull eyes blazed with a fever of eager suspense. "If you could cut the rope from my waist!" she whispered.

"I cannot!" Valtie responded, in despair. "I might untie the knot, but that would take a long time, I am afraid!"

She stood on the root of the tree, and tore at the rope, till her fingers bled.

Then she tried to loosen it with her teeth, and, to her great joy, presently succeeded.

Natalie slipped to her feet, tottering, for her limbs were numb and cramped, but vitality returned with the hope of escape from a hideous death, and she caught Valtie's hand in hers, drawing her rapidly through the depths of the dense glades to a path that brought them out within sight of the sea.

"That would have been my grave tonight!" panted Natalie, pointing towards the white crested waves faintly shimmering below the gaunt cliffs. "You saw me throwing those immortelles, did you not? I let them drift with the tide, as the man I loved, and was to have married, drifted out to the ocean! They called him traitor, and were jealous for the safety of their secret, so they bound him to the stone-tower tree, and strangled him. My fate would have been the same had you not rescued me, because the chief suspected me of being false to the cause, even while I appeared to serve him, and he was right. I meant to have revenge for the agony I suffered when I paid my last tribute to the dead—meant to betray them all. On your marriage day I made that vow, when I cast those dead flowers on to the aisle, and—"

With a shuddering scream she turned, crying—

"Run—run! At the top of the cliff there is the vicarage, where you can seek shelter."

They were already mounting the steep

track above the sea, and, with one wild, backward look, Valtie rushed onward.

But Natalie's progress was barred by the figure of Count Lodi's crafty accomplice—the stealthy Ciro.

His sinewy hand gripped her shoulder, and his glittering eyes peered menacingly into her affrighted ones.

"You cunning traitress!" he hissed. "Did you think to outwit me? Your punishment is irrevocable and as easy here as elsewhere. You can go, living, to your grave!"

Natalie felt her head reel, as she swayed at the brink of the cliff-track overhanging the surging depths of the ocean, and with fierce desperation she tried to wrench herself free.

But the man's grip tightened, and he laughed mockingly in her face.

"You will not escape again, excellenza," he said, his swarthy features set with a grim resolve. "You have broken your oath and deserted our chief. The penalty is death! Go to the doom you have sought."

She shivered in icy terror, and gazed round panic-stricken, her face blanched, her fair hair streaming in the breeze.

"Let me live, and I will keep your secret!" she panted. "I will reveal nothing! I am not fit to die with my soul stained with crime!"

"It is too late to talk of keeping faith!" he retorted, vindictive remorselessness in his gleaming eyes. "You must die as you have lived—and repent in another world!" he sneeringly added.

The girl recoiled with a shrill cry, when, roughly and abruptly, he dragged her close to the jagged edge of the precipice.

This was to be the end of her evil career. She, who had been the leading spirit of the mysterious gang, to whom she had been a clever tool of finchless daring, was to have her existence violently terminated by this hated comrade in crime!

She could hear the roar of the sea surging against the base of the cliff, and her sight grew dim, her brain giddy.

With a shuddering effort, she again attempted to break from his grasp, but in vain.

"So you were in league with the countess? A nice pair of conspirators! She will not get far in her flight; the count is on her track, and once in the wood again, she will find it hard to get out. There are bars at some of the Grange windows for fugitives."

The girl did not speak.

She was staggering at the verge of the narrow track leading to the top of the cliff, and her tormentor seemed to glory in her shrinking horror of the foaming tide.

She did not plead a second time for mercy, she knew that it was useless—that her hour had come, and there flashed across her a bitter flood of regret that her life had been so degradingly mispent.

"Are you ready, excellenza?" the Italian jeered. "The count may need assistance with that wild rebel, and delay is painful. I will now complete my distressing task."

The girl lifted her white face to the moonlight, and her ashen lips moved.

Then, with savage force, Ciro dragged her yet closer to the rugged edge.

One long, wailing cry, and Natalie went hurtling down into the gloom of the raging sea, to disappear for ever from the ken of the living!

Ciro's evil face expressed a diabolical satisfaction, as he continued to ascend the winding track.

"If the countess should vanish in the same way, we should be safer!" he muttered setting his yellow teeth. "She is dangerous. When I cross her path again, I will make it impossible for her to do mischief. Imprisonment is not enough for her; she will seek to escape at any risk, if the count trusts to such simple treatment."

The crafty eyes of the Italian shone with a baleful brilliancy in the mystic light; his merciless heart was full of deadly spite against Valtie.

She could bring ruin upon him and his confederates, and he felt it was hardly safe

to let her live.

On reaching the top of the cliff, he paused, looking down at the surf-crested billows, exultantly.

One deserter having been sent to her doom, the fugitive wife of their chief might be as readily disposed of!

His cat like tread made no sound and, suddenly he gives a spring forward, pouncing like a leopard upon a little figure crouched on the ground.

It was Valtie, her lips drawn with pain, her face death-hued in its tangled frame of red-gold curls.

She had stumbled over an inequality in the beaten track, and sprained her ankle. A scream of terror rang from her at sight of Ciro's mocking face.

She tried to rise, but dropped back to her former position with a moan of agony and despair. She had a far greater horror of this man than of Count Lodi even.

She knew that he hated her—would kill her without remorse.

The boom of the breakers confused her ears, seeming to threaten her, and she saw nothing but the menacing eyes that glared at her in the moonshine.

"So, excellenza, I find you! This is good fortune, though I see you in distress."

She shuddered, shrinking from his cynical tone, her heart in a palpitation of affright.

"Let me assist you," he went on. "You cannot rise? Permit me to lift you."

She, with a wild effort, scrambled up and attempted to run.

But it cost her cruel suffering, and she could not drag herself beyond a dozen steps.

"You go in the wrong direction," he said keeping pace with her. "The count will expect me to escort you safely back to the Grange."

"I refuse to go!" cried Valtie, quivering, cold with terror. "I know your guilty secret. You are allied with an infamous gang who prosper through crime! I would rather die than live the rest of my life with criminals!"

"It is well to choose the inevitable!" he hissed.

And, as she was about to fall in helpless agony caused by the pain that shot through her injured foot, he caught her up in his arms, and went down the cliff path.

Then Valtie knew that he meant to throw her into the swirling sea, and a sense of frozen helplessness rendered her mute and numb.

She was being hurried to the dangerous height from which she would be cast into the deep darkness of the ocean.

Bnt, as Ciro was about to hurl his panic-stricken burden from the cliff, a powerful hand seized him, and the voice of Count Lodi said, hoarse with passion—

## CHAPTER XIV.

Ciro looked cowed when he let Valtie slip from his grasp, and met the glitter of Count Lodi's malignant eye.

It only he had had time to consign the countess to the waves—to have ensured the certainty of her eternal silence in connection with their mysterious craft of murder and theft!

"The countess has had an accident," he said, half fainting, Valtie crouched on the ground, overwhelmed with hopelessness and pain, and then he stood awaiting his chief's commands with servile docility.

"Bring the carriage to Dell Bay," the latter said, harshly. "I will meet you there."

Valtie heard this arrangement with dull dismay. She was to be taken to the wood—to be retained in fresh captivity.

If she could have moved, she would have defied her husband once again, but her injured ankle rendered her absolutely powerless.

Ciro went quickly down the steep declivity, and Count Lodi looked strangely at his wife, his face livid.

"So you still mean to defy my authority?" he said, his tone jarring with the fury that consumed him. "Do you forget the legal claim I have upon you? Have you ceased to remember that you are bound to me by ties that only death can sever?"

Valtie gazed up at him, her blue eyes misty and dilated, her throat parched with mortal dread.

Was the dreary gloom of the Grange to be her prison for the remainder of her life?

Was solitary incarceration to be her fate?

"The tie is hateful now," she articulated. "I had faith, as well as love when I consented to marry you, Marc. I thought you were true—not a false adventurer, whose life is a perpetual fraud."

"I am true in one thing, Valtie," he averred, softness coming into his voice, "I never loved any woman but you, and, as Heaven is my judge, I will keep my allegiance at all hazards! Your vows and mine are not to be sundered at your whim, and—my poor child! you are in great pain, I fear!"

He knelt at her side, and would have supported her with his arm; but, shivering she tried once more to rise.

"The pain is horrible!" she moaned. "I can hardly bear it, but it is not so dreadful as the horror I have of you and your confederates!"

His brow clouded, and he sprang erect, grinding his teeth.

"You will find time to forget all about that unfortunate revelation, my dear Valtie," he said mockingly in his tone. "Come! I expect Ciro will be waiting at the bay. You must allow me to carry you down the cliff, as you cannot possibly walk."

A little wailing sound broke from her.

She felt her courage giving way and there was a buzzing noise in her head, a whirling motion of sky and sea before her sight.

Then she knew that she was being lifted from the chalky earth and soon found herself again in the ill-omened east room, surrounded by the soughing trees of the wood.

Pauline, stonily calm, haughtily imperious, came and examined her injured ankle.

"I can do all that is necessary for this sprain," she calmly declared.

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Valtie winced, but had to submit to Madame Delvont's decree.

No doctor would be called to ease her suffering, and she was helpless while unable to use her foot.

Pauline skillfully attended the sprain, binding the ankle with steady hands that firmly completed their task, in spite of Valtie's little cries of protest.

"You must wish that you had stopped to consider twice before agreeing to that wild elopement," the former remarked her grey eyes full of malice, "It is best to look before we leap, is it not?"

Valtie's white face quivered.

"How could I imagine that Marc was an impostor?" she exclaimed. "I looked for a happy life with him—for a position of which I might be proud, and no idea of evil and mystery occurred to me. When I first came here I felt strangely reluctant to enter the Grange, and on St. Valentine's morning, I was terribly startled—"

"You were overwrought and fanciful," Pauline calmly interrupted. "Some say that the wood is haunted, but I have never seen a ghost wandering about the Grange."

Valtie looked full at Madame Delvont.

"The ghost of crime haunts this place," she said, slowly. "To keep your wicked secret safe, you stop at nothing—not even murder!"

She recoiled from the gleam that flashed from Pauline's lustrous eyes.

"Keep your suspicions to yourself," she hissed. "You have played the spy, and those who look for evil will find it—in their own minds. You have been dreaming dark dreams, my dear Valtie; and, really as you chose to marry the count in wayward ignorance of his history, you must bear the consequence."

Valtie flinched as though stung, exclaiming, passionately—

"How could I foretell anything so monstrous as the discovery I have made? You mock me when you talk of dreams. Was it in a dream that I saw Marc walking in his sleep, that sharp weapon in his hand? Was it in a nightmare that those stolen jewels blazed before my eyes? On passing through the wood to night, did I not rescue that poor girl from martyrdom? Oh, my eyes are open now, and I know all that you would hide from me!"

"You are rash to persist in open defiance," Pauline breathed. "Your fate may be the same as Nathalie's."

"I would rather die, than continue to live with thieves and assassins!" retorted Valtie, roused to indignant defiance. "I will not stay here, though you do your utmost to hold me captive. I will find a way to escape."

"You see the window is barred," scoffed Pauline. "You did not notice the iron grating which slips from the wall, filling up the window frame. It is never used unless absolutely necessary."

Valtie felt baffled.

She was caged in complete isolation, without hope of rescue.

If she lifted her voice in a plea for help, only the waving trees would catch up the appeal in dreary echo, and she might linger in a living tomb for years, undiscovered—might die in the shadow of the dense woodland.

When Pauline left her, she lay back on the dingy couch, her face colorless and wan, her curls damp about her cold forehead.

What could she do to escape from the snare into which she had been trapped?

She felt powerless to cope with her dangerous enemies.

Neither Stoney Madame Delvont nor the subtle Ciro would hesitate to kill her at any moment, and the man she had married was capable of consigning her to a dreadful doom of perpetual seclusion.

But for the accident that had befallen her, she would have found refuge in the vicarage of which Natalie had spoken.

Into what a hideous tragedy of existence had her hasty marriage brought her!

Why had she not been content with the sweet, free life of innocent gladness at Brookvale?

How merry she had been with her young companions that fatal St. Valentine's Eve, when she had pelted Basil with snow, to the delight of her bright-eyed comrades!

Her brilliant match had been a hollow fraud, and she was the wife of a degraded felon!

All love for the count had withered in her heart, leaving bitter regret that she had ever met him.

For days Valtie was unable to walk across the room which held her captive.

But her ankle grew strong by degrees, and she limped to and fro, trying to form some scheme by which exit might be gain-

ed from the Grange.

The spring was advancing, robbing the bare trees with budding leafage, when, at the close of a tedious, hopeless day, Valtie noticed a curious glimmer of red on the tangled density of the wood.

She went closer to the window, peering out through the iron grating, and saw the lurid shimmer increase.

Suddenly the truth flashed upon her, filling her with startled dismay.

The old building was on fire!

For an instant Valtie stood shuddering, a panic of horror assailing her.

Would they leave her to perish in the fierce flames that were leaping round the Grange?

If Count Lodi had left the wood, she was in the malicious clutches of Pauline and Ciro.

Instinct told her that they would simply ignore the fact of her peril, and neglect to release her.

She gazed, with sinking heart, at the flickering glow upon the trees, until the dark mass of the wood seemed all aglare.

She went to the door, trying to rattle the handle, and found the lock fixed; there was no way in which she could avoid the terrible fire-fend menacing the solitary dwelling.

Nobody would come to her aid, she could not help herself, she would die, it seemed like an imprisoned bird.

Returning to the window she uttered a faint cry of despair.

Clouds of smoke writhed about the glades of the woodland and Valtie could hear the roar of flame—could see the deadly havoc wrought by the spreading demon.

Another moment or two of shivering suspense, and a loud crash shook the Grange, a stifling vapour began to fill her throat and sting her eyes.

"They mean to leave me here," she thought, sick with dread. "Marc is away, and I am purposely abandoned. With my death their secret will sink out of knowledge; they fear betrayal and the punishment they deserve."

She gave a quivering start when the thunderous sound of more debris collapsing smote her ears.

Soon the east room would be in jeopardy.

Valtie was gasping for fresh air, choked by the seething vapor, her whole figure irradiated by the eerie light that flooded the wood, and cast molten glintings on her beautiful hair.

How long would the fiery fiend take to complete the work of devastation, and would suffocation mercifully prevent the agony of burning?

She looked round, with horror in her blue eyes, when darts of flame began to lick the floor.

It had come and she was a helpless prey in the clutch of the devouring destroyer.

She shrank close to the grating, trying with all her strength to dislodge it, and suddenly the wild tumult surrounding her became a leaping, raging furnace; the walls seemed to open and go crashing down.

There was no barrier of stone and iron in her way now; she could have sprung downward, but it would have been to certain death.

She grew strangely bewildered, standing on the ghastly pyre, her hands clasped to her breast in dazed resignation.

She had not the slightest vestige of hope of release from the awful fate that threatened her.

But somebody was climbing up the scorched ivy of the portion of the Grange that still remained erect, and a voice presently said, hoarsely—

Valtie, I am coming to save you, my poor darling!"

It was Count Lodi who, through the blinding chaos and glare, was coming to her aid.

He leapt to her side, and catching her in his strong arms, began to descend.

It was a hazardous ordeal, fraught with risk at every step.

The count's handsome features were set and ashen hued, his eyes gleamed with indomitable determination to carry Valtie unscathed from the dreadful doom in which she would have perished.

They reached the ground at last, the count reeling with his burden, and Valtie, as she sank down gasping for breath, said with a shudder—

"Have you seen Madame Delvont, Marc? Was she in the building?"

"Heaven knows!" he replied. "I only thought of you, Valtie, when I saw the condition of the Grange, on returning from town. If Pauline has not already escaped, I must see what can be done. You cannot walk far, so will not have time to run away again without being overtaken."

He left her, anxious to save the woman with whom he had schemed so recklessly, and, with wildly-beating heart, his young wife rose, running lamely through the thicket, taking that near path leading in the direction of the sea.

On and on she went, with every nerve tinging, and a dreadful fear that she would drop, in helpless exhaustion, to the ground before she could reach the end of the woodland.

That would mean surrender to the fate she was seeking to elude.

But she had not escaped the giddy peril of the mill—the writhing flames seething round the Grange—to succumb without a struggle.

She would live to reach Brookvale, the village of her childhood, which she, in ignorant folly, had disdained—would live to see again those dear to her.

How gladly they would give her welcome!

If only she could have explained to Basil

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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