

Wild Valtie's Elopement.

IN FOUR INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER I.

A group of young girls emerged from the ivied porch of St. Clement's and sauntered down the glistening, moonlit path of the ancient church-yard, talking vivaciously while the strains of the organ throbbed through the frosty night-dusk, and manly voices continued to chant without assistance from the bright-eyed choristers now carelessly quitting the sacred edifice.

Has the queen of loadstares lost her potent charm that Basil Greame should find delight in giving the boys an extra turn, instead of allowing them to escort her homeward? Val, you have no power to conquer the knight of the solemn soul!

Wild Valtie turned with a flash in her roguish blue eyes, laughing in disdain. 'The knight of the solemn soul is not for me, Wilma,' she declared. 'He carries on his shield the formidable symbol of poverty. Love in a hut, with nothing to wear but cotton and wool, and pinching drudgery, would deteriorate and sicken me; I simply couldn't endure it. Exhilarating splendor, comfort, and dash for my portion when I marry, or I'll remain as I am!

'I want to enjoy life—to see the world, and—here her blithe, clear voice dropped mysteriously as they crowded round her in thrilled fascination—I have such a strong impression that I'm fated to make an amazingly brilliant match!

'It had better be a tolerably happy one,' put in Lalla Lind, dryly. 'You are dangerously fond of pleasure, Val, and—Not enjoyment, and not sorrow, is our destined end or way.'

'Oh, good Heavens!' groaned Valtie. 'You ought to be missionary, Lal!'

There was a ripple of mirth at this, and the 'busy brown bee,' as Lalla was usually designated, retorted with a little sting, and marched on in advance, just as a firm step came crunching over the sparkling snow, striding rapidly from the gate of the old church.

'Here comes Basil!' exclaimed Valtie, and there was a wicked look of elfish triumph on her face. 'Do you dare me to pelt him with snow?'

A mischievous assent, followed by a hurried scramble and sudden retreat behind some glittering bushes, and Valtie, her hat pushed back, so that her clustering locks shone with silky sheen in the moonlight, stood waiting alone, her attitude expressive of coy and tender shyness.

Basil Greame felt his heart leap, then hammer with great throbs.

A beautiful glamour, a sweet sorcery, seemed to have gathered round that bewitching figure.

Syren like, it drew him with a spell that was stronger than his stern will. He tried to moderate his pace, yet his feet crossed the space dividing them with swift eagerness, and, halting beside her, he said—

'Did you wait for me?'

She demurely tilted up her face.

'Yes, Basil; I positively did—to give you this!'

A snowball went whirling from her treacherous little hand, and tingled icily against his throat, lodging in fragments above his collar.

He heard curious, half-suffocated sounds—sounds suspiciously like those of smothered laughter, and he instantly took his revenge.

He caught her in a masterful clasp, and kissed her.

Gasp, in her offended astonishment, her cheeks bathed in vivid scarlet, she pantingly articulated—

'You wretch! How hatefully, odiously mean! You have known me so many years, Basil, and this—is this the way you treat me!'

'You shouldn't play with fire!' he told her, calmly, as he released her. 'Now your friends can join in your sport—under the same conditions.'

She stamped her foot passionately as the stifled signs of hilarity became more pronounced, and in transports of merriment, the conspirators fled from the bushes, leaving Valtie with blazing wrath in her eyes, her upper lip drawn from her pearly teeth in fiery scorn.

'I will never, never forgive you!' she began, fiercely, and then something in his face checked the hot torrent of mortification, and, with taunting impishness, she began to laugh.

'How ridiculous! I had forgotten that it is St. Valentine's Eve!' she exclaimed. 'Do you know that you have bound yourself to me, Basil? I shall torment you all the days of your life! You were rash to—'

'Take so sweet a revenge,' he said, and his hazel eyes gazed full into hers, as he added slowly; 'I wonder whether you will be my Valentine? I am coming to see in the morning to bring you some violets for your birthday. I wonder whether you will wear them for my sake?'

'No,' Valtie said. 'Violets only have dewdrops for gems, Basil, and they fade; I shall not care to wear them.'

'I can offer you nothing grand,' he answered. 'Valtie, do you crave so much for wealth? Is my love quite valueless in the balance with gilded mammon? I can hardly believe that you have anything sordid in your glad nature.'

'I am desperately mercenary,' she confessed, callous of the pain she gave, and may as well tell the truth. I have made

up my mind to marry someone who will lift me above my present surroundings—someone with whom I can shine in a very different circle to this of slow, dull Brookvale. I want to have a glorious existence of change and gaiety, and something convinces me that I shall attain my ambition.'

He shrank from her words as though lacerated by them, and she began to walk restlessly, a look of strange feverishness coming into her eyes as they neared a large, well lighted mansion.

They were about to pass the massively-porticoed entrance, when the door opened and a dark, distinguished-looking man came down the wide flight of steps.

Valtie's pulse was in a tremor.

She kept beside Basil, assailed by a burning wish that he would leave her, and when they reached her home, she did not ask him to enter.

'Heaven guard you, dear,' he said, in a troubled, shaken way, as he held out his hand. 'Good night, and forgive me.'

Not waiting for her to respond, he went away, and she glided back to the road to meet the distinguished-looking pedestrian.

There was a jealous gleam in his southern eyes, and he caught her hand, asking—

'Are you prepared to say "good-bye" to me, Valtie? I leave Basil Hurst to night.'

A chill shivered through her slight frame.

She looked up into the splendidly handsome visage bent above her, with a sharp agony of disappointment, and he saw her face pale to the whiteness of the untrodden snow.

'You cannot say it,' he averred. 'I shall not go without you, Valtie; you will be my wife!'

She gazed at him in dazed infatuation, thought of his title and the grandeur of the tempting future awaiting her as Countess Lodi.

Her singular disposition was stirred to ecstasy when she contemplated the rose strewn path of perpetual bliss to which union with the Italian would lead, and the bewitching picture he drew made her so giddy with tremendous rapture, that she could only listen in dazzled silence to his plans.

'There is a conveyance waiting for me at the Grey Eagle,' he insidiously explained. 'Have you the courage to join your fate with mine? Will you come now—this instant?'

'Have I the courage?' Valtie repeated, quivering emotion in her voice. 'Yes; take me! I love you—trust you, and could never be happy again at Brookvale were you to leave me.'

Alas! in her innocent recklessness, she little knew to what a horrible destiny she was blindly binding herself.

CHAPTER II.

The fatal step had been taken.

Valtie, by the side of her affianced husband of whom she knew really nothing, was being whirled through the stillness of the night to a place called Blackwood.

'We can be married from the Grange by special license,' Count Lodi told her, 'and my sister in law shall take you under her wing. After our wedding we go to Paris.'

She was delighted at the prospect of visiting that gay city, and, in her rapt, enchanted state of mind, was untroubled by the faintest misgiving.

The horses clattered over lonely country roads, past a snow mantled landscape that presently became gaunt and rugged.

On one side the sea dashed upon a swampy strand.

From the opposite window Valtie could see the massed timber of a dense wood, and into this the carriage suddenly plunged.

Then, a little startled, she realized that the Grange was in the midst of this dark thicket, and exclaimed—

'What a gloomy place! I shall not like staying here at all, Marc.'

'And I have no intention of hiding my pretty wife in the mazes of the wood,' he assured her. 'In a few days we shall have started on our way to the Continent.'

The horses drew up at the entrance to a barn like looking building, and Valtie saw a great door open, and the form of a woman emerge from the dim obscurity of an ill lighted hall.

Then for the first time since she had so rashly consented to elope with Marco Lodi a vague sensation of uneasiness contracted her heart.

She had felt curiously unwilling to cross the threshold of the Grange.

'Are you afraid, after all, my dearest?' the count asked, and he looked searchingly into her blue eyes as she wavered at the foot of the steps of the ivy mantled portico.

She flung back her head with a defiant 'No!' adding: 'You are beside me, Marc.'

His dark eyes glowed, and he led her up the steps, saying to the woman who waited to welcome them—

'This is my bride-elect, Pauline.'

Again a strange dread overwhelmed Valtie; but, with a forced little smile on her lips, she glanced up into the glistening eyes fixed upon her, and fancied that she read something menacing in them.

'You should have prepared me for this surprise,' was the haughty comment. 'I only expected you, count, and—'

The woman paused, with a stony inscrutability of expression on her hard, severely classical face; and Valtie had difficulty in repressing a shudder.

'Ciro can arrange all that is necessary,' the count said, somewhat curtly, as he led the way into one of the lower apartments. 'I did not wish to disturb you, Pauline. Valtie can have the north room.'

'I think not,' his sister-in-law quietly contradicted. 'You have forgotten your guest now occupying that apartment. He will be gone to-morrow, however—'

Count Lodi looked annoyed, exclaiming as he drew a chair near the blazing fire for Valtie—

'Not gone yet?'

'Not yet,' was the slow response, and the harsh note in the low voice jarred on Valtie—a flood of icy apprehension welled to her heart.

She sank tremblingly into the seat placed ready for her, her face white as death.

Now that she was under this unfamiliar roof, a terrible misgiving was growing in her brain.

The mystery of some evil import seemed diffused in the stately presence of Pauline Delvont.

What was it?

Valtie glanced round the ugly room with a frightened mistrust, alarmed at the wildness of her wilful act, in spite of the great love inspired by the man whose hidden fortunes she had so leisurely chosen to follow.

She drew a deep breath when Madame Delvont glided softly away, and, almost unconsciously, her hands went out as though seeking strength, clasping Count Lodi's convulsively as he tenderly assisted in removing her hat.

'Marc, forgive me if I am too frank, but I cannot say that I like your country home in the least,' she told him, and she tried to laugh with her usual buoyancy.

'We shall not remain here, he replied, and he pressed his lips to her shining tangle of curls.

Her hands still clung to his, and lifting her face, she whispered—

'And I like your sister-in-law as little as I like the Grange. Are you vexed at that dear Marc?'

He laughed, lifting her small white hands to his breast.

'Pauline is a lady of marvellous wit and ingenuity, my sweet; but you are not compelled to like her. After this week you see her but seldom.'

'That is a comfort!' commented Valtie, and then she blushed to find that Madame had returned, and must have heard her unflattering remark.

How wildly the wind surged and moaned through the bare trees of the woodland that night!

Valtie, lying cold and wakeful in the shrouded, funeral bed, tried in vain not to listen to the uncanny sounds with which the old Grange seemed haunted—tried to keep her tired eyes from staring at the ghostly rafters visible in the ways of moon light; but sleep would not come to ease her throbbing brain.

She thought of those she had left at Brookvale—of her strange journey, and the odd impression Pauline Delvont had caused, while round her the night seemed fraught with calamity.

Would that dirge-like murmur never cease?

The little pale face on the pillow began to wear a scared, wan look; the tumbled curls framing it were moist and heavy on the girl's white brow, and she tossed in weary unrest, recalling the dream-like events of that fateful day.

The naughty woman, with the stern face that had so repelled her, seemed to have broken the charm of her romantic elopement; a presentiment of danger now lay on her heart with the dull weight of lead.

When her burning eyes closed at last, she was tortured by hideous dreams, saw shadowy shapes, and heard hissing voices—heard words that seemed to echo warningly in her ears.

'You are free still, and your marriage will chain you to a terrible doom of suffering and guilt,' she thought one of the shadows said. 'Escape—leave this dwelling unlettered if you value your salvation. Do not link your life with that of one branded with crime and cruelty. Rise, and save yourself while you have the chance!'

Was it but a nightmare?

She passed from that eerie vision to another; saw crimson roses growing on a fair bank; but when she would have gathered some, behold! the petals were scattered to dust, and her bleeding hands grasped bare, jagged rock!

With a cry of pain she awoke.

Dawn was creeping into the ghostly room, and she gazed round in breathless bewilderment, then rose dizzily, and crept to the window.

A thin mist drifted over the leafless trees; fresh snow had fallen, and the scene was still and white.

All at once a frozen fright held her paralyzed, spellbound.

She might have been a stone image standing there, her blue eyes wildly dilated.

What had petrified the life in her veins, filling her with mortal terror?

'The form of a man out there in the mist and snow, lashed to one of the ancient trees.'

The drooping head hung with the limpness of death.

What could it mean?

A SURE SIGN THAT PACKARD'S DRESSING HAS BEEN USED

IS A HEALTHY, WELL PREPARED AND GLOSSY SHOE.

ALL COLORS: BLACK, TAN, BROWN, ETC.

L. H. PACKARD & CO. MONTREAL.

Valtie broke from her dumb panic with a stifled scream. Then, in a curiously foreboding flash of remembrance, she realized that it was St. Valentine's morning—her birthday.

And, instead of Basil's fragrant violets, she had seen this spectral horror!

CHAPTER III.

How she managed to dress, she never knew.

She avoided the window in shuddering loathing, and, with shaking hands, dragged on her garments, then rushed down the dim staircase as though possessed.

Someone else had risen early, and, with noiseless tread, suddenly appeared before her, making a low bow.

A short, swarthy-faced man, from whose glittering, crafty eyes the frightened girl instinctively shrank.

'You will wish to have the warmth from the fire, excellenza?' he said, and he threw open the door of the room she would have passed.

Daylight had barely chased the night's gloom from the sky; but, as she perceived with mingled wonder and relief, Count Lodi was already up.

He started when, pale and agitated she sprang towards him.

'Oh, Marc! Do you know what has happened? There is a man lashed to one of the trees in the wood, and I am afraid that he is dead!'

He put his arm round her, and felt her shiver in his clasp.

His face clouded.

But he merely said, with grave decision—

'Nonsense, Valtie! You ought to have remained in your room to rest. What do you mean by disturbing people before you have had time to shake off your dreams?'

'Don't jest, Marc; it is there,' she persisted.

He almost lifted her to the window.

'Where?' he questioned.

She compelled herself to look once more at the scene from which she had recoiled in fearsome repugnance.

The awful form was no longer there!

'You were mistaken, you see,' the count quietly observed, as Valtie's perplexed glance wandered from the white, deserted scene to his dark face. 'How you shiver, my dearest! You mustn't let your imagination play you such alarming tricks. Sit down by the fire, and I shall bring breakfast.'

She sank into the chair he wheeled forward, the image of that appalling apparition, seen in the grey gloom of the wood, firmly engrained in her mind.

She did not believe in ghosts, and yet it seemed as though one haunted the Grange.

It struck her as a little strange that Count Lodi and his repulsive looking servant should have risen before day break, and her pale face expressed her wonderment. She asked, suddenly—

'What disturbed you, Marc? You look as though you had not slept at all.'

He came to her side, resting his white hand on her slight shoulder.

'I have important business to attend to, Valtie. Shall you mind being left with Pauline until to-morrow? When I return, all will be ready for our marriage, and we can then start for Paris. You will be glad to leave Blackwood, will you not?'

'Oh! delighted,' she replied. 'I hate Blackwood, Marc. Being left with Madame Delvont is a decided infliction; but you will hurry back?—it will be horrible here without you.'

She looked at him, the tenderness of boundless love in her shining eyes that were so lately blue as hare-bells, and he bent his face to hers, kissing her with singular fervour.

'I have something for you, sweet,' he said, and he drew a little case from his waistcoat pocket. 'I had meant to go away without seeing my Valentine this morning, leaving this as a message. Do you like it, Valtie?'

She uttered a cry of startled rapture to find that he was putting on her left hand a most exquisite ring, the flashing gems of which fairly dazzled her.

'Marc! What lovely diamonds! How they dance and flame! It is a very costly Valentine, and—she gave a buoyant laugh her eyes sparkling in a mischievous way—'I might only have had a poor little bunch of violets.'

For the moment she had forgotten the spectre on which her eyes had rested, in the vapoury opening of the February dawn.

A gleam came into Count Lodi's southern eyes; he knew what she meant.

The memory of the organist of St. Clement's was an annoyance to his arrogant temper, and he said, with passion in his thrilling voice—

'Never try to rouse my jealousy, Valtie; there is danger in such amusement!'

He ate a light repast with his bride elect and then left the Grange, going in the carriage in which they had driven to Blackwood the previous night.

A creepy sense of desolation oppressed Valtie after he had gone; and, with his cat-like tread, came into the room, re-setting the table, piling more fuel on to the tiled hearth, creating in the young girl a feeling of intense aversion that steadily increased.

His movements were so furtively noiseless that they irritated her, and, rising with a stifled yawn, she went to the window and again looked out.

The mists had cleared; struggling sunshine gave a glow of pink to the wintry sky; Valtie fancied that she could hear the sea beating on the beach, and was seized with a great longing to feel the salt breeze on her face—to watch the fierce surging of the mighty breakers.

She turned impetuously when a soft rustling told her that Madame Delvont had entered the room.

'Marc has gone,' she exclaimed. 'How shall I manage to exist till he returns? The day shall be fine I think; I shall be able to see the ocean in all its glory.'

Pauline Delvont's grey eyes scanned the girlish figure with a sort of subdued antagonism.

'You must not venture to leave the Grange while the count is away,' she said, with dictatorial hauteur. 'He has left you in my care, and—'

'But not as your prisoner,' was the quick interruption. 'I certainly shall go out. Marc did not impose any absurd restriction upon my movements, and I couldn't stay in this house all day; it is a dreadfully depressing place!'

'Take my advice, and put up with it with as much contentment as you possess,' Pauline responded. 'Marc had no idea of allowing you to wander about Blackwood.'

Wild Valtie's blue eyes had lost their azure softness, and were darkly mutinous.

Her curls seemed to bristle in defiance about her brow, and to the stately woman she looked a crude little vixen whose challenged self will would be hard to thwart.

'I never take advice,' was Valtie's retort. 'Why should I when I can consult my own reason? It is a senseless thing to ask me—to remain in captivity when I pine to rush away from the awful monotony of this hideous wood!'

Madame Delvont looked at Valtie as though trying to pierce her utmost thoughts.

'You follow your own caprice as a rule I conclude,' she commented, mockingly. 'Your rash elopement is an example of what may be expected of you. Marc was determined to have a shrewd and daring helpmate when he choose you for a wife!'

'A shrewd and daring helpmate!' repeated Valtie. 'He chose me because he loved me! How prosaic you must be not to have seen that!'

A queer expression glittered in Pauline's sinister eyes. But she checked the retort that uttered, would have filled Valtie with terror and dismay.

Instead, she smiled cruelly, and the indignant girl, flinging back her head, lightly crossed the room, and ran upstairs.

Her heart was beating in fierce resentment when she, having donned her outdoor attire, rapidly left the Grange, and made her way down to the sea, glimpses of which she caught through the tangled glades of the dense wood.

Towering cliffs rose in view when she had reached the end of the thicket.

She went down to the dull stretch of sand on which the waves beat with savage force, and stood close to the surly, wild spirit in unison with the roar and tumult of the mighty ocean.

It was such a relief to have escaped Madame Delvont's presence, and the espionage of the wily-eyed Ciro!

Some distance from the land was a huge rock, and close to the base of this something dark drifted—drifted slowly with the now ebbing tide.

Valtie walked on, glancing curiously now and then at the rigid, sack-like object floating beyond the frowning crag, and presently she saw the figure of a young girl kneeling on the sand, and, approaching her, was amazed to find that she was scattering some white flowers into the spray that lashed the strand.

They were pallid immortelles that fell on to the water's heaving surface.

But, on seeing that she was no longer alone, the girl turned in panting alarm, and Valtie shrank from the horror and misery in the wild eyes that met hers.

It was a young face, stamped with a frenzy of grief and terror.

The wind had carried her hat away, and loosened the coils of her flaxen hair.

Her black dress had become dank and sand clogged.

Valtie slowly went nearer to her, but, with a scream, the girl retreated, and went bounding along a rough track up the cliff.

What was the mystery connected with those pallid immortelles?

If she had known, Valtie's heart would have turned in frozen revolting from the man she loved, and her steps would have unhesitatingly sought the road back to Brookvale.

CHAPTER IV.

Valtie's marriage took place in the quaint old church of Blackwood as soon as Count Lodi returned.

Nothing could have been sweeter than the fair picture of the youthful bride, robed in glistening satin as white as snow, the rich brightness of her bewitching elf locks

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

The safest and surest cure known for BILIOUSNESS and SICK HEADACHES and for Constipation, all Liver and Bowel Complaints, is

Parson's Pills

ONE PILL IS A DOSE

They make new, rich blood, prevent and cure Skin Eruptions and Rheumatism. Enclosed in glass vials.

Postpaid:—25 cents a bottle; \$1.00 for six.

L.S. JOHNSON & COMPANY, Boston, Mass.

CANCER

And Tumors cured to stay cured, at home; no knife, plaster or pain. For Canadian testimonials & 130-page book—free, write Dept. 11, MASON MEDICINE Co., 5