

On the Eve of St. Valentine.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS—PART II.

'It may come in useful,' decided Elspeth, who had no scruples about using it.

The worst side of her character was uppermost just then, and she was in the mood for anything.

She knew London pretty well, having gone there frequently with her uncle and aunt; and she felt no dismay now at finding herself alone in the great city, with little more than a sovereign in her pocket.

Having telegraphed for her boxes to be sent to the cloak room at the terminus, she took a bus and had herself driven to a business house in Cheapside where a former servant of her aunt's had gone as caretaker.

This good woman, though greatly surprised to see her, made no demur about taking her in; listened to what Elspeth chose to tell her; and promised not to acquaint her relatives with her whereabouts.

In less than a week Elspeth DeWindt obtained a situation as lady's maid, thanks to Lady Chester's reference.

She had answered several advertisements, signing herself Alice Hunt; and travelled down to Yorkshire some days later as maid to the Hon. Mrs. Whitaker, of The Mount, Scarsdale.

CHAPTER IV.

Lady Wakeman had purposely kept the sisters apart during all these years.

She did not wish them to grow intimate, as they possibly might have done had they met as children, her own friendship with Mr and Mrs Leek being of a most cordial description.

Her ladyship, therefore, after spending several years abroad, settled herself at the Manor, without paying even a flying visit to the uncle and aunt of the child she had adopted.

She wrote from time to time, the girls should meet when one of them had a bus band to occupy her thoughts, and so prevent undesirable intimacy between them.

Her last letter had announced Marie's marriage to a wealthy colonial from Tasmania, who purposed taking his bride thither for their honeymoon, during which he would wind up his affairs out there, to settle afterwards in England.

Lady Wakeman was thankful that the carefully brought up Marie had run no risk of contamination from association with her unprincipled twin, when she heard of Elspeth's mis-conduct and subsequent flight—doubtless with the unknown of the fancy dress ball.

Elspeth would have been more amused than indignant had she known of what she was suspected; for her uncle and aunt shared Lady Wakeman's belief that she had gone off with the man who had deceived Midnight on St. Valentine's Eve.

The prosaic reality was a decided contrast to her supposed fate.

The Mount decidedly lacked cheerfulness as a residence; but the pay was good, and Mrs. Whitaker was not an exacting mistress.

So 'Alice Hunt' continued in her employ for the space of six months, at the end of which the poor lady died after a short illness, bequeathing her maid, much to the latter's astonishment, the sum of £100 in acknowledgment of her unflinching attention.

'Now for the hospital!' thought Elspeth, as soon as she had recovered the power to think at all. 'I have helped to nurse two people, and I like it. I'll study nursing as a profession.'

She had not forgotten 'Prince Midnight' by any means.

It was his dimly felt influence which gave her power to resist the temptation to make a slave of every man she met.

It was not her fault if the men servants at the mount admired her black eyes and lissom figure, and fell victims to the nameless fascination which seemed to her mental and moral atmosphere.

The women, as well as the men, liked her, and were quick to perceive her superiority to the ordinary run of lady's maids.

'As much of a lady as Mrs. Whitaker herself,' pronounced the house-keeper, when 'Alice Hunt' had been there a week, and no one felt inclined to contradict her.

But Elspeth was not sorry to bid them goodbye, and return to her own station in life.

At the hospital, she met several nurses who were her social equals, and with these she allowed herself to grow intimate—still as Alice Hunt.

good in the truest sense of the word—not because temptation to evil was lacking, but because, being occupied from morning till night, and sometimes all night long in the bargain, in ministering to suffering fellow creatures, she had no time, and no inclination, to do wrong.

Mrs Leek's experience of Elspeth's childish days held good now; when thoroughly busy, she never even wished to get into mischief.

Having had a generous education in hospital work, Nurse Alice petitioned for private cases.

She joined a nurses' association, and led a life of social ups and downs for twelve months, at the end of which time she was sent to nurse Lady Camperdown, of Colleton Park, through what proved to be her last illness.

Lady Camperdown was over eighty years of age; there was nothing actually the matter with her except that the sands of life were fast running out.

Like everybody else, her ladyship took a great fancy to the black-eyed, soft voiced nurse, whose cheerfulness never seemed to fail, and who was attentive and kind to an unusual degree, endearing herself not only to the old lady, but also to Lord Camperdown, who when utterly broken down at his wife's death, entreated Nurse Alice not to leave him.

She remained for several weeks longer, and then said she must go, as Lord Camperdown had really no need of a nurse.

'But I shall be so lonely,' said the old gentleman.

'You have plenty of grandchildren,' was the reply. 'Why not have one of them to live with you?'

'I want you, and nobody else,' he declared. 'I know you would insist on going, sooner or later, and I made up my mind what I should do when the time came.'

'Well?' said Nurse Alice. 'What shall you do?'

'Marry you, my dear.'

'Marry me?' Lord Camperdown exclaimed. 'Why not, to all intents and purpose. I want to leave you sufficient money to make you independent for the rest of your life. This is out of gratitude to you for your tender care of my dear dead wife, and for your kindness to myself. The only way I can do this, to prevent subsequent annoyance to you, is to marry you.'

'There are some of my grandchildren who would insist on disputing the will, if I left you money without having married you on the grounds of my mental inability to make one, or they would accuse you of exercising undue influence over me. I am not at all sure that my heir would not be the first to make a fuss. I am not particularly fond of him. I only wish his scamp of a cousin was in the direct line, instead of only being connected with me by marriage.'

'But that is neither here nor there; and Adrian must inherit, in any case, after me. This question is this; Will you give in to an old man's whim, so far as to allow him to ease his mind of the burden of gratitude which—'

'I have only done my duty,' Lord Camperdown said.

'I may think otherwise, my dear. What I ask of you is simply to change from Nurse Alice into Lady Camperdown. You shall be as free in every respect as you are now. All I desire of you is your sweet companionship for the remaining short period of my stay on earth. Don't decide at once. Take a few days to think it over. If you agree to grant me this favor—and I think you will not have the heart to refuse a request so easy to comply with—we will be married quietly in some London church and go abroad for the winter.'

Having said all he had to say, Lord Camperdown walked away and left Nurse Alice to her own thoughts.

Had this strange and unlooked for proposal taken effect earlier the answer would have been the form of an immediate and decided refusal.

But all these weeks of idleness were not without their effect on the complex character of Elspeth de Windt.

She had deteriorated considerably, from a moral point of view, since Lady Camperdown's death.

Her present life of idle luxury suited the lower side of her nature as thoroughly as the hardships of nursing had satisfied the higher.

Then again the memory of 'Prince Midnight' was fading to a mere dream.

Why should she any longer dwell on the doubtful possibility of meeting him? Had his declared love been a living thing he would have found means, long ere now to have in some way evaded his promise not to seek her, or to learn who she was.

Elspeth's decision was a foregone conclusion before she had given many moments to consideration of the matter.

'Eh? Who did you say?' 'My real name is Elspeth de Windt. Lord Camperdown; only, I will ask you to keep it a secret for the present.'

'Certainly, my dear, certainly. But it is a curious coincidence that my grandson—and heir—should have married a Miss de Windt. That is a secret, by the way now I come to think of it. Lady Wakeman told me in confidence.'

That name aroused no particular memory for Elspeth; Lady Wakeman had seldom been mentioned at the vicarage of late years. What puzzled the girl was the fact of a mystery surrounding the name of the future Lord Camperdown.

'Do you mean she—your grandson's wife—does not know her own name?'

'That is the case, my dear, strangely enough. She imagines herself to be Lady Wakeman's cousin. Her ladyship adopted her in infancy, and gave her own name to the child; I believe the parental De Windt had been a bad lot. Probably you belong to another family. But we stray from our subject. You shall tell me another time, as much of your personal history as you choose to reveal. At present my chief thought is how to make sure of you before you change your mind, or lend a foolish ear to the other part of you.'

'You need not fear, Lord Camperdown. There is nothing left for Nurse Alice but the dress; I am all Elspeth de Windt now.'

'I am very glad to hear it, my dear. All the same, I shall lose no time in converting you into Elspeth, Lady Camperdown. That other de Windt girl will be Lady Camperdown some day, so I don't see why you should not have your turn first. She is not half so pretty as you are, nor yet so pleasant a companion. She thinks too much of her own convenience to have time to study that of others. I am very grateful to you, Elspeth de Windt, for humoring my little whim. You shall not regret it, child.'

'I think the gratitude should be on my side, Lord Camperdown. Just think what a change it will mean for me! To lead a life of hard work and enforced self-sacrifice, for one of perpetual leisure and luxury I only hope you may not regret it. I tell you candidly I don't altogether trust Elspeth de Windt. When she is at work she is all right; but when she is idle she is all wrong.'

'I'll risk it my dear, I'll risk it. Lord Camperdown dropped a parental kiss on her white forehead and asked her to play him to sleep.

She went to the piano at once; but it was some time before the old gentleman's eyes closed.

He was watching her with a humorous twinkle in them and an odd smile playing round his mouth, and his mental soliloquy was as odd as his smile.

'Grandmother and granddaughter! They shall meet as soon as I can contrive it, and Lady Wakeman ought to be present. Black sheep and favorite pet bas-lamb. Well, I'll back my black sheep against her bas-lamb any day. Time will show—time will show!'

CHAPTER V.

'At last! Where, in Heaven's name have you hidden yourself all these years?' The well remembered voice sent a thrill through every nerve; but young Lady Camperdown looked the speaker calmly in the face as she said: 'Pardon m'sieu! and passed on to her carriage, as though she had not understood.'

He watched her a moment, noting the elegant richness of her dress and the well-appointed vehicle with its thoroughbred horses.

Then his eyes wandered to the footman, who was closing the door on his mistress, and a glimpse of a very familiar face in the far corner of the carriage kept the man rooted to the spot for seconds in supreme bewilderment, even after the equipage was out of sight.

'I'll swear it was Elspeth! And yet, how can it possibly have come to pass that she is the adventuress we have been denouncing so heartily of late? I must go and hurry Marie; or shall I call without her?'

Lord and Lady Camperdown, after wintering in Rome, were lingering a few days in Paris on their way home.

The old gentleman was feeble, requiring in very truth, the constant care Elspeth lavished on him as a slave to her conscience for what she had done.

She did not feel by any means satisfied that she had done right in consenting to go through the marriage ceremony for the sake of enriching herself.

Of course it is done every day, but that is no reason why it should be a right thing for any self-respecting girl to do.

When they returned from their drive that morning they found a letter from Lord Camperdown which had arrived while they were out.

He read it languidly, but quickly became interested.

'My dear he said in some excitement, 'my grandson's wife was in Paris, and proposes to call on us this afternoon with her husbands cousin, who also happens to be staying here.'

'Yes?' 'Elspeth felt a little nervous. She had looked forward with some dread to the inevitable meeting with her new connections, who, she knew, must regard her as more or less of an adventuress.

But there was no trace of nervousness about her when she entered the room an hour later, dressed quietly, but tastefully, to receive her guests.

'You don't look much like a grandmother,' said Lord Camperdown, with the ghost of his old humorous smile playing round his mouth. 'I shall be interested to see how you play the character.'

'Please, don't!' she pleaded. 'I feel terribly afraid of your grand-daughter.'

'You must be friends, you two girls; you look near of an age.'

These words of Lord Camperdown's recalled his young wife to herself.

With an imperceptible start she turned to glance at Marie, who was regarding her curiously.

'I am sure I'm older than Mrs Conroy,' she said hurriedly.

'In present company I have no objection to giving my age away,' said Marie, laughing; 'but it must not go out of the family, Lady Camperdown. I was twenty-two on the third of October last.'

'So was I,' said Elspeth; and then she fell to wondering if they were by any possibility related.

Her heart went out strangely to this pretty piece of humanised Dresden china.

Was it only because she had been told that Marie Conroy had been Marie de Windt?

But the liking appeared to be mutual. Adrian Conroy's wife was saying, to herself at the moment—

'I don't dislike her as much as I expected to. In fact, I don't dislike her at all. I only hope Anselie will not admire her too much, for then I shall feel in duty bound to hate her, and that will not be easy.'

Anselie Clayton, however, gave no sign of what he thought of his grand uncle's wife.

He was too much concerned to learn how it had come about that she had married Lord Camperdown to appear interested in anything else.

Of course, everybody knew that the old gentleman had married his nurse; but Clayton had never heard that 'Miss White, whom he had, with very little trouble, been able to identify as Elspeth de Windt, niece to the Vicar Loughton, near Rocklea—had taken to nursing.'

It was generally rumoured at Rocklea that she had eloped with a man whom he recognized as himself, and right heartily did he reproach himself himself for having acted towards the girl in a manner likely to have given ground for such a suspicion.

Later, when he again made inquiries in Rocklea, he was told she had been recommended by Madame Robier to some London house, and, going on this clue, he had sought her at all the principal customer's establishments in London and Paris.

'When is Adrian coming home?' Lord Camperdown's question, directed more to Anselie Clayton than to Adrian's wife served to arouse the man at last.

'Next month, I believe, uncle. Marie heard from him yesterday.'

'Tasmanian affairs not wound up yet? They've been a long time about. If I were Marie I should protest against Adrian's frequent absences.'

'If you were Marie, grandfather,' said she of that name, with a chilly little laugh, 'you would know that it is more than possible to have too much of a good thing—as represented by Adrian's constant presence. Don't look shocked, Lady Camperdown. It is only that Adrian and I have quite outlived the rapture of early wedded life.'

Elspeth began to feel sorry for this blue-eyed girl, whose husband, apparently, left her much alone.

But what was Lord Camperdown asking now?

'And where was Lady Wakeman when you last heard from her?'

'Staying with some very old friends called Leek—I forget the name of the place, in Buckinghamshire somewhere.'

'Loughton Vicarage, near Rocklea,' supplied Clayton, his eyes on Elspeth.

She started visibly this time, and appeared on the point of speaking, but changed her mind.

When leaving, he found opportunity, amidst the farewells, to murmur in her ear—

'You see I have not forgotten; and neither have you, though you would have me think you had.'

She flushed and paled, and flushed again. Truly, Fate was fond of playing frolicsome tricks in bringing them together in such curious fashion after long years of waiting!

gave her a chance of choosing between them. He would be more likely to admire you—as I trust he will do to some purpose some day.'

'Don't!' said Elspeth sharply. 'Where had you meet him before, my dear? You did not meet as strangers.'

For a moment she was to confused to speak.

Then, with the honest courage that was one of the best things about her, she told Lord Camperdown the story of her girlish folly on that particular St. Valentine's Eve.

He only smiled indulgently, and patted her approvingly on the shoulder.

'He was more to blame than you, my dear. Anselie was always a bit of a scamp; but he's thoroughbred, for all that. You have no need to be ashamed of your foolishness; girls have wild oats to sow as well as boys. Prudes are as objectionable as prigs, every bit. And you have neither of you forgotten that night. Come, come, that looks promising for my plans for your future. It sets my mind at rest, too, about Adrian's wife. She is quite ready—for all her careful bringing up—to make a fool of herself over that handsome rascal, Anselie; and men are but human. But, if he is in love with you, she will be safe.'

'I have no wish that he should be in love with me, Lord Camperdown.'

'Not even if it saves your sister? There, the murder is out! Lady Wakeman will never forgive me for anticipating her.'

'My sister! Elspeth had heard nothing after that magical word, 'sister.'

'Your twin-sister, my dear, born the same day, of the same parents, and very wrongly separated in infancy. Lady Wakeman ought to have taken the pair of you, or have left both alone.'

'My sister!' said Elspeth again. 'My twin-sister! No wonder I felt drawn to her. I must go to her at once, Lord Camperdown. She ought to know the truth before she gets into the habit of disliking me.'

He made no attempt to hinder her, setting himself for a well-earned hour or two of repose when she had gone, quite satisfied that he had done right in making the sisters known to each other.

Not in vain had he studied the two characters.

Marie was weak at her moral backbone, with no strength to resist temptation should it come to her in a pleasant form, as it generally does.

Elspeth might, through idleness, drift into folly, just for the sake of something to use up a little of her superabundant energy; but she would never sin through weakness.

Her influence would be good for Marie, who would of necessity yield to the fascination Elspeth exercised on all with whom she came in contact.

Her strength would balance her sister's weakness; and the result would be beneficial to both.

CHAPTER VI.

'You!' exclaimed Elspeth, as Anselie Clayton rose to greet her, in the room where she had expected to find her sister.

'Even I. And why not?' he asked, smiling.

'Why not, of course!' she answered hurriedly. 'It was only that I expected to find my—to find Marie here alone.'

'Your grand daughter, were you about to say? I am glad you changed your mind. The next thing would be that I should hear you calling my unlucky self your grand-nephew. I don't think I could stand that, Elspeth.'

'I prefer to be called Lady Camperdown Mr. Clayton.'

'Naturally—most girls would. Thank you for the reminder. I had forgotten the rise in your social status.'

'Do you know where Marie is?'

Elspeth ignored the nasty retort with a calmness that made him ashamed of having given utterance to it.

'I do not. We parted at the door of an enticing millinery establishment. I came here for a quiet smoke, on the understanding that Marie might, or might not, turn up in an hour or so.'

'Does she permit her gentleman friends to smoke in her drawing room? I presume this apartment is equivalent to her drawing room at home.'

'My cousin's wife permits me to do whatsoever I please in her drawing room. Lady Camperdown I am allowed the licence my cousin would claim as a right were he here—where he ought to be—instead of in Tasmania, where he ought not to be, perhaps.'