POOR DOCUMENT

'LADY ALICE.'

Continued.

The count frowned, then he approched her.

'There, Myra, don't be a fool! We have had our sunshine, and it is gone. But we needn't quarrel, we are friends, and I, Myra; I can't do without you, I swear it!'

'George, do you mean that?'

The words had gone through the girl like an electric shot.

'Mean it? Of course I do! There, give me a kiss to mend the quarrel.'

Myra shrank back. Than thought seemed suddenly to come to her; she lifted her lips for the careless caress; but as the count turned aside for an instant, she brushed away the touch with a shudder.

'Now you are my wise Myra once more I want your help. This plate must be got to Nestley town, en route for London, in the morning. You will take it?' He glanced at her indifferently.

Myra made no outward sign as she answered, 'Well?'

"The Darrell diamonds cannot be disposed of here. I shall take them abroad. I will be gone about a week; during that time you must look after everything as you know how to. Keep your eye on Paul; he is growing sulky, I half expect him to bolt. Your mother, too, must not venture to Nestley again. She lets out too much when the liquor is in her. We must all move up to headquarters as soon as the job is done at the Grange, and I come back. You will do all I ask, Myra?'

'Yes,' Myra answered slowly, then she added. 'And she—does she stay here with me?'

Count Jura hesitated.

Yes,' he replied; then with a careless nod he went out through the curtains into the passage, to the corner in which the men slept.

Myra stood glaring after him.

"He lies to my face. Traitor! coward! villian! But though my hands are tied now and I seem helpless I shall find a way, and he shall learn what it is to break the heart of Myra Burden!"

CHAPTER XIII.

Myra crept back to the inner room. Alice was not awake, but she was murmuring in her sleep.

The other girl drew a rug over the stone floor and crouched down on it to get a little rest.

She burned with a fever of pain, jealousy, and shame in her heart, but her hands were cold as ice.

As she lay down on the rug the memory of bygone days came to her—dim visions of a tiny house and shop in a crowded city, where her mother was busy all day.

She could barely remember her father though away in the misty past she seemed to recall a tall dark man who returned but seldom to his home, and always tossed her on his shoulder and played with her.

She knew now that he had been a sailor, and that he was dead. Then years passed and she could see plainer.

Her mother left the shop they lived in —a dingey dirty locality; their lives were strange. Roused at the dead of night to admit men with bundles and packages, she learned to know them all, and as she blossomed from a bud into a lovely flower, she grew to welcome one with a flutter at her heart.

For George she had always a smile, and in return she got many stolen glimpses of happiness.

George admired her beauty. He loved to deck out her dark locks in glittering jewels, clothe her in silken robes, and let her walk about the dingey house like some beautiful star caught in prison.

Myra loved this man with all the warmth and passion she inherited from her Spanish father. Her mother cared nothing about the intimacy one way or another, except that she let Myra amuse George; it kept him in a good temper, and he was a man to be feared and fawned to

He was the most daring of the whole gang; a gentlemen by birth, of unexceptional manners, he mingled with the people whose houses he robbed.

Myra was eighteen when she first realized what her mother's calling was—the receiver of stolen goods? It did not shock her.

She had no knowledge of the sin it was. Her companions had kept her in the dark so long, merely to prevent her ...ng, and when she knew the truth ...ndifferent. George was one of ...t George did was hallow-

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... transformed her at once into a woman full of cares and thoughts of vengeance.

Alice's fair loveliness was a sight that brought the flush of agony to her dark cheek; the knowledge that George loved her was a very sword thrust into her bleeding heart, and filled her eyes with unshed tears.

'He means to take her with him!' she thought bitterly as she lay crouched on the rug. 'What right has she to come and push him from me? He did love me once, but her fair beauty blinds him to me. What if I'—she started, half raised herself on her arm—'what if I separate them forever? She sleeps—a blow with this,' touching a dagger that hung on the wall, 'and all would be ended!'

She stretched out her hand, then let it drop heavily with a shudder.

'No, no, she begged for pity; she hates and fears him. I promised I would help her, but oh, my heart is broken! Why does Heaven let such suffering come? It is too much—too much!'

She burst into a heavy fit of tears, then buried her face in the cushions, and worn out with excitement and fatigue, sobbed herself to sleep at last.

She was awakened early by her mother. The faint morning light streamed in through a slit in the wall, but the old woman held a candle.

'Be sharp, put on your thick coat and hat. George is waiting for you.'

Myra staggered to her feet; she passed her hands over her eyes swollen from the bitter tears she had shed.

'All right—I will come,' she muttered. 'What is the time?'

'Six and after. Sam is going to drive you—look sharp.'

Dame Burden turned away and bent over Alice. There was a flush on the lilly-white skin, the lips were brown and parched.

'She's in a high fever,' muttered the old woman.

Myra woke from her dream. She strode up to the couch, and a thrill of joy swept through her.

'He can't take her away to-day—it would kill her to be moved,' was the rapid thought that flashed through her brain.

She turned, and pouring some water into a great basin, plunged her face into it. Then, when thus refreshed, she divested horself of her weird garments, donned a thick ulster, and an every-day kind of hat, and with her hair tucked safely away, looked a quiet demure girl with splendid flashing eyes.

Dame Burden was busy spreading a board with some food as her daughter, having tenderly drawn the coverlet carefully over the sleeping form, and placed a cup water near, entered the outer vault.

'There, eat that, Myra, and be quick about it,' she exclaimed.

'Where is George?' asked the girl, ignoring the command; 'what are my orders?'

'He is putting the plate into the sack. Sam is going to drive you to Nestly town; he'll put you into the train for London. Bill will meet you at the other end with the cart. Come girl, eat some food, or you'll faint before the day's out.'

Myra took the cup of coffee, drank a little, and ate a few mouthfulls of bread She looked pale and strangely resolute.

'Mother,' she said suddenly, speaking in a low voice, 'look to her; she is ill—very ill. Keep her here till I come back. If—if George offers to get her away, don't help him. Do you hear? I shall be back by nightfall. Keep her here; promise me.'

'I promise,' answered the old woman at once. 'Where would George take her to? Don't fill your head with jealous nonsense, Myra; she's here to please some spite; he has nothing else——'

'She's here because he loves her,' the girl said bitterly; 'do you think I am blind? He never looked at me as he had looked at her. At moments I feel as if I could kill her, and then—then I remember she pleaded to me, and I pity her. Mother, you swear to keep her here?'

'Yes—yes, I swear!' Dame Burden replied hurriedly.

Myra glanced at her; her heart was full of misgivings.

'Am I her child?' she asked herself; 'she will swear one moment and break her word the next. Well, I can but trust she will be too ill. I must save her.'

She turned at the thought and a slight flush mounted to her face.

Count Jura had just passed through the curtains.

'Ah, Myra, you are ready? You are a treasure! Here is the key of the house. Bill will be at the station. Empty the sack, carefully lock all away—you know where. Go to Moses, tell him all is ready for his brazier, then come back straight. I want to see you before I start abroad with the diamonds.'

'Is that safe?' demanded Myra suddenly, pointing to the glittering ring on the dirty hand of the old woman.

Dame Burden looked up angrily, but Count Jura simply shrugged his shoulders.

'It's all right here, it pleases her to wear it; there is no one to see it; when she goes from here it will be different. But Myra is wise; be careful, Dame Burden—be careful!'

'It's not me you need warn,' muttered the old woman angrily, glaring at her daughter. 'I am to be trusted.'

'Of course,' rejoined the count. 'Now, Myra, it is time to start; remember all you have to do. You are always safe, my girl—always safe.'

'George,' Myra turned, 'do not go away to-day.'

The count frowned, then his face cleared.

'To-day. Why, Myra, how could I go, with the Grange plant on to-morrow night—you are forgetting that.'

'I forgot that. Good-bye George.'

'Good-bye Myra; take care of yourself and be careful.'

Myra left the vault, went along the passage, and reached the fragment of steps that led to the opening through which the robbers effected their entrance and exit.

She pushed the qualms of fear and pain from her; work had to be done—work from which many a man would have shrunk, entailing as it did so much anxiety, care and dread of discovery.

In Myra's savage, honest breast dwelt no knowledge that the errand on which she bound was a sin; she only remembered what lay before her to do—her trust to her companions, her loyalty to them all—and for a time her wounded love was banished.

Count Jura peered after the girl's retreating figure till it disappeared.

'She's gone, thank Heaven!' he exclaimed in accents of relief. 'Myra is becoming a nuisance. Dame Burden; you must keep her in check, or look out for another berth.

'She's only a bit foolish, George, quickly answered the old woman. I'll speak to her, and tell her you ain't pleased with her. Lor', she ain't a bit like—she takes after her father.'

'Well, I can't be worried with her foolishness,' returned the count, 'and that's an end of it. She's handsome, and would please many a man—in fact Moses wants to marry her. I expect he'll say as much to her when he sees her. I have given Sam a letter to give her just when she starts—it is to Moses, telling him to keep her in town till the day after to-morrow.'

'But can he do it?' asked Dame Burden eagerly; 'you know what Myra is.'

'I think he'll succeed. Now go look after her,' nodding his head towards the inner chamber; 'I am going to have breakfast, and—here, perhaps you'd better band me back that ring—it may be safer?'

'Who's to see it here, George?' the old woman exclaimed. 'Don't take it from me! I've worked hard and well for you, and I don't ask much payment; these dingy old vaults can split on us.'

'All right,' said the count; 'you'll be leaving the dingy vaults in two or three days, and then you can sport your ring to your friends at—you know where.'

'And right glad I shall be,' grumbled Dame Burden, busying herself with his breakfast; 'these ruins ain't to my fancy: I've a horror we shall be trapped in them like rats, one of these days!'

'Don't be a fool,' exclaimed the man angrily, turning a shade paler. 'These ruins, as you know, are supposed to be haunted; none of the villagers would come near to save their lives, and as to the big folk, there is nothing to bring them except now and again on a very rare occasion—there's no one to invite them, Dame Burden; you forget we are not hospitable.'

The old woman laughed.

'But who does own them, George?' she asked.

'I did hear, but I've forgotten—some old man who is travelling abroad; we've nothing to do with him, and he isn't likely to come here, as he hates the whole country and the very name of the ruins. Now go to her; she may be awake; take her some of those shawls, and look after her well. You understand?' and Count Jura turned away.

Dame Burden nodded her head and shuffled to-wards the inner room where Alice lay, glancing ever and anon at her dirty hand, with its glittering jewel shining in the gloom like a glorious star.

Alice moved restlessly as she stood near her. The old woman moistened her lips with water and smoothed back the masses of hair from the flushed face; then, not understanding the indistinct murmurings that fell from the girl's lips, she sat down beside the couch and watched her diamond with a greedy look on her sinister face.

From this she fell into a doze, then into a sound slumber, which lasted for many minutes; while Alice tossed and moaned in the burning delirium that had seized her for the time.

She had no knowledge of where she was, she had no clearness of recollection; her brain was occupied with strange and horrible fancies, that racked her mind and filled her with a sense of vague and unfathomable terror.

Count Jura was too much occupied at first to notice the silence; he was talking quickly and earnestly to Paul Ross.

The latter was pale and gloomy.

'I did not think you a coward, Paul,' the count said with a sneer, after listening to the other speaking for a time.

'Nor am I,' answered Paul with an ugly look passing over his face. 'I am careful—that is all.'

'Careful!'

'Yes, George; something warns me we ought to cry off this Grange affair. You don't know Geoffrey Armistead—I do. He is a cat that smells out the mice when least expected. I dread him; besides, what have to get from there? Armistead's home is not Darrell Castle, remember. We have enough plate to stock a ship.'

'We can't have too much,' returned the count! My mind is made up, Paul; we have everything arranged. I shall go on.'

'Then go yourself!' exclaimed Paul Ross roughly, 'for I will not be in it!'

'I think you will, Paul.'

Count Jura rose and put his hand on the other's shoulder, while a cold glitter came into his eyes.

Paul shifted the hand from his shoulder.

'I will not,' he answered sullenly.

'Then I shall inform Dan Lowry when I go up to town that the man he is seeking, the man who ruined and murdered his wife, is none other than P——'

'Hush—for God's sake, hush!' I will go, curse you! May you never be in such a push yourself! Let the plant go on, and if the worst does come, Master George, I give you fair warning, you shall stand in the dock with me—I swear it!'

The count simply shrugged his shoulders.

'Don't let your anger carry away all your wisdom, mon ami,' he said with a smile, as he lit a cigar, 'the plant will not fail. And even if it does,' he thought hurriedly, 'I shall not be near at hand;'

'Now for the diamonds,' observed Paul after a long Pause; 'what is to become of them?'

'They are mine,' Count Jura returned quietly; 'I thought that was settled last night. The plate, or the greater part of it, is yours. Myra has gone with it to Moses already; before night I expect it will be melted down.'

'And the other treasure?' asked Paul with a sneer; 'is she yours too?'

'She is,' answered the count with knit brows; 'pray, have you any objections on that point?'

Paul made no reply but rose to his feet.

'Do you come with us to-night?' he asked sullenly.

'Of course,' returned the other carelessly; then as Paul slouched out between the curtains, he glanced after him with a black frown.

'To-night!' he muttered; 'to-night will see us separated for good and all, my friend. I'm growing sick of your sulky ways; I leave you all. It seems like a dream of bliss, the vision of a sunny land—after all these gloomy vaults, sunshine, flowers and love!'

He threw away the cigar he was smoking; a flush was on his face.

'She has wound herself round my heart like strings of iron, yet with a golden touch. I never thought the woman lived that could move me so. She shuns me now, but once away, alone, in my power, and all will go well. We shall then reign in a heaven of love and happiness.'

He moved towards the inner room and whistled softly.

Dame Burden awoke with a start.

'Get everything ready, put my baggage together,' he said swiftly; 'we start to-night.'

The old woman rubbed her eyes. Myra's commands came back to her.

'She is not able to move, George,' she whispered; 'she is in a fever.'

The count's face grew dark.

'Curse it! We must go—delay is dangerous; but how is it to be managed?'

He thought to himself for a few moments, then said:

'She is only temporarily ill from the effects of the chloroform—it will not hurt her to be moved.'

'But will she go?' asked Dame Burden cunningly.

'I have a plan. Listen.'

He spoke a few words to her in a quick low voice; then with a gesture of command left her.

CHAPTER XIV.

The afternoon was growing dark when Lady Alice woke to consciousness.

She was weak and trembling; her hands were burning, her throat parched.

She saw the cup which Myra had placed beside her, and grasping it, drank eagerly of the water.

Then she lay down, and let her eyes wander round.

Again her fear began to grow.

She peered into the gloom and uttered a faint shriek as the curtain was lifted and Dame Burden appeared.

'Ah, you've waked up, dearie,' said the old woman soothingly. 'That's right.'

'Where am I?' gasped Alice clasping her hands together. 'What place is this? What has happened to me?'

'You are with friends,' whispered the old woman.

'Friends!' The girl started up, and gradually got on her feet, weak and trembling, 'Friends! Ah, I remember that man's face—that girl, too. Where is she? She looked at me kindly. She would help me.'

'I will help you, dearie, soothed Dame Burden, putting down a small tray on the couch; 'but first you must eat this food, or you will die.'

Alice stared at it blankly—the horror and fear of what had befallen her seemed to have stupified her.

Wherever she glanced she seemed to see Count Jura's dark face before her.

'Oh, help me to get away!' she murmured imploringly.

'Eat this, and we will talk about it.'

The weakness she was suffering forced Alice to turn to the food. She swallowed a few mouthfuls with difficulty. The coffee seemed to do her good.

'Now I have eaten,' she said, standing erect, 'help me—help me!'

'You want to get away?'

'Yes—yes.'

'To go back to your friends?'

Alice started. She had no friends to go back to.

Valerie Ross hated her, Lady Darrell tolerated her, and Roy—her love, her husband—would perhaps rejoice that she was gone.

Then the memory of his last kind words floated to her like a delicious vision.

A thrill shot through her of brief happiness, then it faded again into her agony of fear.

She could not go to him; but let her only be free again, she would be content.

'I have no friends,' she said slowly; 'but for the love of God help me to escape! Something here frightens me. I feel like a caged bird. How long have I been here? It seems years since; but all is one hideous dream. I can remember nothing distinctly.'

'What will you give me if I help you to escape?' asked Mrs. Burden greedily.

Alice looked at her sadly.

'I can give you nothing now but my thanks. Only help me, and in the future I will work like a slave to repay you.'

The old woman's face darkened. She hoped the victim was in some way gilded, and that she might have reaped a small harvest on her own account.

'That will do,' she answered; 'I will help you. Listen. It is now growing dusk, in another hour it will be dark. You are now in the Abbey ruins. I will return to you by that time. In the meantime plait up your hair, take off that white robe, put on this dress—it belongs to my daughter; your own cloak will do. You will find water in that ewer. Be very quiet in your movements. I will give out you are asleep;—you understand? Then we will creep out together to the back of the ruins, and you must walk alone to either Nestly or the town on the other side of Moreton.'

Alice seized the old woman's hand and pressed her lips to it.

'God bless you!' she said brokenly; 'I can never thank you enough. Only let me get away from the horrible place and I shall breath once more.'

The old woman drew away her hand, and slouched away chuckling.

Alice, left alone, fell on her knees and uttered a brief prayer of thankfulness. As yet she scarcely realized the full meaning of her position, but the glimpse of Count Jura's face had filled her mind with horror and dread that grew and grew until it became almost a mania.

Her brain was clearing now. She recalled the night before the dinner, Roy's admiration and words, her success, the count's villainy, and then Valerie's visit to her room.

After that try as she would, she could not recollect what had happened.

I must have been carried away in my sleep, and yet I should have awakened during the journey. This is in the Abbey ruins; it is a long distance. Ah, I remember—her handkerchief—the strange overpowering smell. They drugged me!'

She cowered down in horror and shivered. Then she thought of Dame Burden, and her coming deliverance roused her.

She hastily set about her preparations with beating heart. She coiled up her mass of golden hair, plunged her face into the refreshing cold water, and cast off her wrapper of white silk for the dingy brown gown.

As she did this she suddenly remembered Frank Meredith and the two cards he had given her.

She searched the pockets, and her heart fell—they were not there.

Who had taken them? What was she to do once she was free? To whom could she go?

To return to the castle was impossible, for she felt with a pang of agony that disgrace must have touched her name.

She drew her cloak on, and pulled the hood over her head, then sat down to think till the old woman came back, as the moments drew nearer to the hour of her escape, her excitement and agony of fear banished all other feelings.

What did it matter once she was free of these horrible dark vaults?

Would the woman keep her promise?

She grew pale with dread. If not, she would try to creep out alone, or else she would die of fright.

But even as she was thinking this, Dame Burden came back. She was covered with a cloak too, and held out her hand.

'Now dearie,' she said in a hoarse whisper, 'I'm ready; the coast is clear.'

'Oh, thank you—thank you. Why are you so good to me?' Alice murmured faintly.

'Because I've got a daughter myself!' the old woman replied hypocritically. 'Now, come on. Stay, here's a sovereign, you have no money with you, I know; hold it tight. There, you needn't thank me; I ain't done anything to shout about.'

'Nothing!' whispered the girl, you are saving me from worse than death!'

She slipped a thin white hand into the old woman's one, and glancing fearfully round, was led out of the vault into the outer one.

All was still as death; to Alice the whole place was terrible. She could hear the beating of her own heart; it sounded strangely in her ears.

Dame Burden lifted her hand to pull aside the curtains, and Alice saw for the first time the glittering ring on her thick brown finger; a feeling that she recognized it came over her, even in her fear, but she could not remember rightly.

They passed through the curtains into the stone passage; the dim light vanished, they were in utter darkness; save for the touch of the old woman's hand, the sound of her heavy breathing, Alice could have imagined it was some hideous dream.

At last they stopped, a gust of fresh air greeted them from round a corner, and as Dame Burden moved on again, Alice saw, to her intense joy, the branches of trees waving to and fro in the nightwind.

In another moment they had mounted the steps, and Alice was free.

To be continued.

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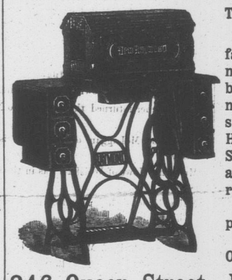

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