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'LADY ALICE.'

Continued.

'Only fifty pounds!' repeated Valerie in alarm. 'I have not half that sum about me, nor in my possession. It is impossible.'

'Twenty then.'

'I will give you fifteen pounds, and that will leave me just ten pounds to get to the end of my visit.

'The end of your visit!' laughed the man scornfully; 'why if you play your cards well you will visit here forever.'

'Leave me alone to play my cards,' Valerie exclaimed passionately. 'I wish you were separated from me by worlds—I wish we might never meet again—I wish——'

'I were dead—exactly,' sneered her brother.

'You have debased and degraded me,' went on Valerie. 'I am alone in the world but for you, and you are the very scourge of my existence.'

'Get me this fifty pounds and I will go. I will leave you forever. Curse it all, the sum is a trifle! You can get it in a second if you will.'

'You mean borrow it from Lady Darrell? I will not do it, Paul; she would be surprised, might question me, and that would never do. They do not know of your existence—they shall never know it if I can prevent it.'

'You are quite right, ma chere. Valerie Ross, beautiful, gifted patrician, would look ill-classed with Paul Ross, No. 29, Con——'

'Hush!'

There was a sound as of something put over his mouth, then Alice heard him laugh outright.

'You think these trees have ears, my sister?'

'I do not know what I think, but take care, Paul—breathe but once again your shameful disgrace, and I will never—'

'Help me again. Well, that is just what I don't want, so trot away, my dear; the secret is safe. Be quick with that money. I am due at Nestley in an hour's time.'

'Stay here, and I will bring it to you.'

Alice heard a light step pass away, and she sat on undecided what to do.

She was in a corner, hidden well from sight. Anyone peering round would scarcely have distinguished her grey dress and cloak from the tree-trunks, but she could see a little way out on to the wider pathway, and as Valerie disappeared, she heard the man laugh softly to himself, and saunter to and fro while he waited.

Alice drew herself back as she saw his figure cross the small space at the opening of her hiding-place, and as he turned and strolled back she glanced nervously at him.

He was like Valerie, but coarser and harder, and his cheek was disfigured with the scar of a wound that gave a sinister look to his face.

He was humming to himself, and did not glance up or down, and Alice drew a deep breath of relief as he passed.

Something about the man gave Lady Alice a sense of alarm, and she was glad when after some moments she heard Valerie's fleet footsteps returning, and heard her panting voice say:

'Here, Paul! And now go. There is no use in hanging about. I must return to the house.'

'Thanks, my sweet sister. Yes, I will go. That is my address should you desire to hear from me. I shall know where to find you.

'Leave me in peace for a while,' Valerie said abruptly.

'Give me fifty pounds, and I will leave you altogether-'

'I cannot, Paul. I have not the money; if I had, you——'

'Should not have it, finished the man. 'Paul, you are ungenerous; but I am a fool to do as much as I do for you!'

'You are no fool, Valerie! You don't want to have me come boldly up to the Castle, and ask for my sister—eh;'

Alice heard Valerie,s sudden exclamation, and then she heard the man kiss his sister, and leisurely depart.

She waited to let them both pass away, then, rising made her way slowly back to the Castle.

Paul Ross strolled lesiurely through the woods, nntil he came to a pathwsy that led to the village, and past the dreaded Madman's Drift.

Here he stopped and uttered a soft, low whistle.

In an instant a man had crept from beneath some bushes, and stood upright.

Paul Ross moved towards him.

'Well,' said the other man, 'how much?'

'Fifteen pounds!'

'Fifteen pounds! repeated the other. 'Your sister is not generous.'

'Valerie swears she has only ten pounds more, and I believe her.'

'She may have no more, but——'

'Have you examined the entrances well?' queried Paul Ross.

'Not all; but they are not difficult to manage.'

'Where do you sleep?'

The man laughed.

'In the guest's corridor—a most noble apartment, my friend. The earl knows how to lodge his company.'

'Much valuables about?' asked Paul Ross eagerly.

'Much?' echoed the other. 'The Castle is a veritable gold-mine? By Jove, Ross, that was a good notion of yours, the trip abroad.'

'Yes; I flatter myself I am not so stupid as Valerie thinks me. She is the fool in this case.'

'You mean in not snatching the earl before the murder and the row?'

Paul nodded.

'Well. it was a mistake; she has lost her chance now.'

Paul Ross looked up suddenly.

'What is the girl like?'

'Who?'

'Why, 'my Lady Alice,' as Valerie calls her,' laughed Paul.

'Like?' repeated the other. 'She is most lovely. Paul, can it be true about her lovely birth? I have never seen a a more beautiful creature among all——'

'All the ladies of family and fortune with whom you are on such very intimate terms—eh mon garcon?'

Paul leisurely puffed away a cloud of smoke.

'Well, she is plebian for all that, merely a farm-wench; her people were bought off the estate and sent away, but my Lady Alice is part of them for all that.'

'Sent away!' repeated the other man as if he were thinking; 'then she is alone here—quite alone.'

'Except for the earl, her husband; but mind, George.' added Paul Ross, with his expression changing suddenly and darkening, 'no fooling; we are here for work not play—you understand?'

'Perfectly, my good Paul; now au revoir, I must go back—there is the gong for breakfast. The plan shall reach you tomorrow or next day, and we must meet once more before——'

Paul nodded, slouched his hat over his eyes, and walked away quickly.

The man called George dived back into the bushes, crept along for a time, then emerged into one of the avenues leading to the Castle.

Then he overtook a slight girlish form in grey, hurrying towards a side entrance.

'Good morning, Lady. Darrell,' he said softly.

Alice turned and blushed slightly.

'Good morning, Count Jura. I did not hear you coming. You have been for a walk. I, too, like the early morning best.'

'Will you not enter this way?' asked George, otherwise Count Jura.

Alice shook her head.

I always breakfast in my own apartment.'

She bowed and turned away.

''Alone' Paul said,' muttered Count Jura as he stood watching her graceful form vanish, 'alone. What a fate is hers! And how beautiful! Pshaw! Paul is right. I am here for work, not play, so now to breakfast with my friend the earl'

CHAPTER VI.

Valerie reached the Castle in time for breakfast. She ran quickly to her room, threw off her long mantle, and after a few hurried touches to her magnificent hair, swept leisurely down the wide staircase, looking as if she had but just left her bedroom fresh from her maids hands.

She met Count Jura at the door of the morning room, and smiled graciously to his courteous greetings, little thinking that as he bowed a look of amusement settled in his eyes as he recalled Paul, and her pride.

Roy hastened to meet the tall beautiful woman, his eyes speaking the truth of his love as he approached her.

Lord Radine come in while they were speaking

'I have been thinking all night, Roy, and I cannot remember who it is that I trace a resemblance to in your wife,' he said as he sat down to the table.

'Does not miladi the fair countess breakfast with us?' demanded Count Jura, as Roy made no answer.

Roy flushed, and Lady Darrell looked uncomfortable.

'The countess, or as I call her playfully, my Lady Alice, always breakfasts in her own room. She prefers it,' answered Valerie.

Count Jura bowed.

'What are our plans for to-day, my lord?' continued Valerie easily to the earl.

'I thought a ride to the old Abbey,' said Roy. 'Radine, you would like that?

'Very much,' agreed Lord Radine.

'And you, Jura?'

'I regret I have important letters to write; you will pardon me?'

'Oh, of course,' said Roy, quickly; 'I like everyone to do as they please here.'

'Why not ask your wife to join us!' proposed Valerie.

The earl looked pained. The very sight of Alice seemed to him torture, recalled the agony he had endured, and the fact that he was separated from Valerie forever.

'If you will ask her, I dare say she will come,' he replied.

Valerie rosé with a laugh.

'I shall be ready in ten minutes, and my Lady Alice also.'

Count Jura held the door open for her, and she swept out; she mounted the stairs, and turned into the corridor that led to Alice's room.

'Get on your habit and dress quickly; your husband desires you will ride with us this morning?'

Alice rose from her books.

'I will be ready,' she answered.

Valerie bit her lips. Again this girl foiled her. She thought to have triumphed over her ignorance in this case.

'Can you ride?' she asked insolently.

'Yes,' answered Alice quickly.

'You are a paragon of perfection indeed,' sneered the other woman as she withdrew.

Alice gazed after her sadly. She pitied Valerie now from her heart, and thought she knew what made her so bitter.

The interview in the grounds had shown Alice that Valerie had a trouble that was indeed very heavy, especially to a nature so proud as hers.

She called Davis and put on her habit. Ever since she could remember Alice had ridden, the only difference being that she had sat her steed without a saddle, and unencumbered by a long skirt, and now she was checked by society garments and ways.

She took her gauntlets and whip, and gathering her habit in hand, opened the door.

To her astonishment, in the corridor she came upon Count Jura walking slowly up it.

He turned with an exclamation as he perceived her, and Alice thought she saw him put a paper hastily into his pocket.

'I crave pardon, miladi; I mistake my way. Is this not the corridor to the guests wing?'

'No, you are quite wrong; this leads only to my apartments.'

Alice spoke coldly, indeed she felt annoyed.

'I am indeed distressed, countess,' he observed courteously, 'but I will take my departure at once.,

He bowed again and turned towards a door which led into another chamber.

'Still you are wrong,' said Alice, smiling and pointing with her whip. 'Go straight along, and you will reach the big staircase, then you will soon find your way. That door leads to the empty part of the Castle—the 'treasure rooms,' as the servants call them. Yes, now you are right.'

'Au revoir, miladi!'

Count Jura strode down the corridor.

'Treasure rooms!' he repeated to himself. Paul was right, and yet among all the treasures of the castle she is to me the rarest.'

Alice made her way slowly down the staircase to the central hall. She felt excited and almost happy. She always had that strange flutter at her heart when near her husband.

Valerie, looking like a goddess in her perfectly-cut habit, was standing in the doorway, beyond which the horses were waiting. A man's form was beside her, and Alice noticed with a cold sickening sensation how low he was whispering and how eager was his look. She came slowly up to them, and caught a few words:

'When I think of it Valerie, I am nearly mad to know what I have lost. My life is a misery to me tied as I am to a—'

Valerie heard Alice's footsteps, and she drew her hand away from his.

'It is getting late, we had better start,' she said quietly, giving him a look full of sympathy, and glancing another of triumph at Alice as she hurriedly went down the steps.

Lord Radine now joined them.

'May I put you up, countess?' he asked eagerly.

He was a young man, and Alice's loveliness had won his warmest admiration.

'If you please,' she answered slowly.

She was still hearing her husband's voice, passion-laden, breathing his love and misery into Valerie's ear.

The earl assisted Valerie to mount, and then the four rode slowly away.

'We dont want grooms, Roy,' said Valerie authoratively.

So the earl waved the attendants back.

Lord Radine glanced every now and then at his companion's face.

'Who was it said Darrell had married a farm-girl?' he mused. 'What a cruel scandal!. This woman is peerless! Countess,' he said aloud, 'are you any way connected with the Arnolds—you know who I mean; they are a very old family—the head is always called the Master of Arnold?'

Alice had blushed, but now she was pale.

'I have no aristocratic connections Lord Radine,' she answered quietly; 'I am only a farmer's niece.'

'But you have their face. The Arnolds are a strangely lovely family—forgive me for paying you so gauche a compliment, but you are fairer than was the Lady Enid Arnold, whose portrait hangs in my mother's room, and who died years ago, and she was supposed to have been the greatest beauty of her time.'

'I have no family,' repeated Alice. 'I was only a farm girl. You will have heard how I came—to—marry the earl; before then I was neglected, ill-used, and miserable. I even taught myself—at least, the village schoolmaster helped me for some time, but he died two years ago, and then I had no one to assist me.'

'I do not care what you were,' cried Lord Radine fervently, reaching for her small hand and carrying it to his lips; 'but to me you are the embod ment of everything that is perfection.'

Valerie turned at this instant, and the earl, looking back, also saw the young man's act of courtesy and admiration.

My Lady Alice progresses,' remarked Valerie with a sneer. 'Roy, you must look after your wife.'

Lord Darrell did not answer; he unconsciously tightened his hold on his reins, and his brows met in a frown.

Something in the sight he had just seen vexed him, and for the first time since his return he beheld Alice's beauty in all its power.

Valerie saw the frown and her heart leaped.

'He is angry with her,' she said to herself.

She checked her horse and the earl did so also.

'What is it?' asked Lord Radine quick-lp.

'I forget the exact path,' said Valerie, 'and Roy knows absolutely nothing about it.'

'I will go and enquire,' said the earl, hurriedly.

'No, Darrell; let me;' and Lord Radine rode rapidly down the path to the right.

Alice whose cheeks were still flushed from modesty at Lord Radine's outspoken admiration, reined in her horse a few paces away.

Valerie chatted on, taking no notice of the young countess; but, strange to say, the earl was watching his wife with a feeling akin to amazement and admiration.

How well she sat her horse! How golden and beautiful was her hair! What dark long lashes framed her eyes!

Last night he could see nothing but Valerie, the woman he loved; now his whole attention was turned on the woman he had married.

Alice was unconscious of his gaze, and when he moved his horse near to her, and rectified some fault in her reins, she woke from her dreams with a start, and turned pale and cold.

Valerie noticed Roy's changed expression, and jealousy burned in her breast.

'Come, Roy, Lord Radine is waving to us,' she exclaimed, and, he moving to her side, they put their horses to the trot down the lane.

Alice felt a choking sensation in her throat. Without another thought, she wheeled her horse round and cantered wildly in the opposite direction.

She had lost all control of her feelings: sobs burst from her lips.

The poor young wife was utterly, terribly unhappy.

She knew not what to do or where to go, but she felt that something must end the torture she was enduring, or she must die.

She cantered on, unheeding and plunged in her thoughts till the trembling of of her horse caused her to think of him, and as she came to a sort of thicket, she loosened her rein and let him stand.

She must have ridden some distance, for even to her, who knew the country well for miles around, having walked it in the bygone days, this place was strange.

She looked round at first in surprise; then, a little alarmed, she began to feel weary from her agitation and exercise, when the sound of a cheery whistle was born to her ears, and the next minute a footstep rustled over the dying leaves, and a tall well-built young man came towards her.

He stopped amazed as he saw the lovely girl on horseback, her golden curls floating from their rough contact with the wind in picturesque confusion round her face and neck.

'I beg your pardon, can I help you?' he said suddenly, lifting his hat.

Alice hesitated, then meeting his frank boyish face, she answered:

'If you will, please. I have lost my way.'

'You are in the Abbey Woods; we are close to the old Abbey—the ruins are just beyond those trees.'

'The Abbey!' exclaimed Alice in surprise. 'I thought I was quite in the opposite direction—they have taken the wrong path.'

'You have become separated from your friends?' asked the young man, glancing again and again at her.

'Yes.'

'Well, perhaps I can assist you Do you want to find the Abbey?'

'I think I had better go there, as they will in all probability make their way to it,' replied Alice.

'Let me lead your horse. May I introduce myself?' I am Frank Meredith at your service.'

'And I—call me Alice,' said the young countess quietly.

Miss Alice! what a pretty quaint name—so oldfashioned! Do you like this part of the country? I am staying down here with friends. I have been shooting as you see, though the sport is not good. Nothing seems to live round the old Abbey—even the birds and insects desert it. It is dead, indeed.'

Alice listened to Frank Meredith's easy chatter quietly She agreed with him in his estimate of the spot. Never had she seen so weird and strange a place, and as they came in full sight of the ruins she could not repress a shudder which the young man noticed.

'Yes, is it not dismal?' It looks like a great grey ghost. I really don't think I should care to venture into its gloomy vaults, even in broad daylight.'

'Who owns it? asked Alice suddenly.'

'My friends did tell me, but I have forgotten. I will ask them again when I go home. Now. Miss Alice, shall I leave you here alone, or will my presence annoy you if I remain?'

'Oh, stay, please,' cried Alice, her nerves unstrung still by the terrible strain put on them at the time of Eustace Rivers' murder; 'perhaps they will not be long.'

'I wonder if I shall see you again,' said Frank Meredith after a pause, while he stroked the horse's neck; 'I am staying here another fortnight.'

'You may, perhaps,' answered Alice, she was drawn towards the young man by his frank ways.

He seemed little more than a boy to her, though he numbered over twenty years.

'It seems a strange thing to say,' went on the young man quickly, 'but if ever you want me to do anything for you, if I can I will.'

Alice blushed a little, then paled.

'Why do you say this?' she asked hurriedly.

'I cannot say. I only know I would give all I possess to be your friend. You don't look happy. I should like to help you.'

Alice hesitated, then held out her hand.

'You shall,' she said simply; 'I have not one friend in the whole world. You shall be the first.'

'Oh, thank you!' he cried. 'If you want me, write to me there or here; be sure if I can I will always come,' handing her two cards.

Alice took them quietly. Some curious intitnition seemed to come over her that she should need his aid, but she said nothing, and the next instant the sound of voices came to their ears, and the earl, Valerie, and Lord Radine appeared before them.

'What a fright you have given us, Lady Darrell!' exclaimed the latter as he rode quickly up.

Frank Meredith drew back.

Lady Darrell! This young lovely girl who had just accepted his friendship! Could it be true? he thought.

'We thought you were lost, my Lady Alice,' observed Valerie with a drawal, glancing at her young rival with an expression that said: 'We wished it too.'

'How did you miss us?' asked Roy coldly of his wife. 'You have come much the longest way round.'

'I enjoyed my ride,' Alice replied, quietly and coldly too.

'I am so sorry you did not see me beckon,' continued Lord Radine. 'But now let us explore the ruins.'

'By all means,' cried Valerie. Then in a lower tone: 'Who is this gentleman?,

'This is Mr. Meredith, who was kind enough to show me my way, Lord Darrell!' exclaimed Alice quietly.

The earl spoke a few cold words of thanks to the young man; then, with an expressive glance at Alice, Frank Meredith bowed and took his leave, still plunged in amazement, yet strangely pleased to think he was her friend.

'A very pretty boy!' exclaimed Valerie. 'Don't you think so, my Lady Alice.'

'He looks good and honest,' Alice replied, speaking her thoughts.

Lord Radine looked sulky, and Valerie observed once more, in alarm, that Roy was gazing at his wife with an expression of strange interest.

Could it be possible he was beginning to admire her, after all?

She must work this away, at all hazards.

'Now for the ruins! Roy give me your hand.'

The earl was beside her instantly, and she jumped to the ground. Lord Radine put up his hand to help Alice.'

'I don't think I will come,' she said drawing back.

'What, Lady Alice afraid!' observed Valerie with a sneer.

'If you are nervous, remain out in the air by all means,' said Roy almost contemptuously.

When he was not looking at Alice, he forgot her charms, and only remembered her as the blot on his life.

'I will stay with you,' whispered Lord Radine.

'No, I will go,' Alice said firmly, her face growing white beneath Valerie's sneers. 'I am only tired not frightened.'

She slipped from her horse, and gathering her habit in her hand, hurried after the others.

Lork Radine tied the reins of the four horses to a stont branch and followed her.

At first Alice could see nothing at all as she crept through the damp mouldy ruins of what had once been noble halls but the forms of those two on ahead so lost in one another's presence, but as they penetrated into the gloomy vaults, her strange sense of fear returned, and she shuddered again and again. But for her pride she would have turned back and fled into the open air; but Valerie's taunting voice came to her ears.

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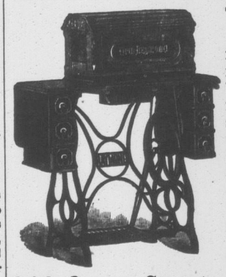

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