

# POOR DOCUMENT

## 'LADY ALICE.'

Continued.

'Lord Roy said something about new harness for your ponies,' observed Miss Ross, pouring some chocolate into a priceless china cup.

'Ah, smiled Lady Darrell, 'then I see what it is. Roy has made that an excuse for cementing the friendship afresh. He thinks no one knows anything about horses but Eustace.'

'Are you not jealous of this great affection asked Valeris suddenly.

Lady Darrell's face grew grave.

'Roy is so precious to me, you know Valerie, I might be jealous, dear, if I did not love him so much; to see to know he is happy is to me the height of all earthly bliss.'

'Oh, that I had had you for my mother!' cried the girl, involuntarily her pale beautiful head was bent.

Lady Darrell rose softly and kissed the young face.

'Look on me as such, dear Valerie,' she whispered, 'who know, perhaps—'

Her sentence was not finished for the door was opened, and the butler advanced into the room.

'My lady, there's a park-keeper in the servant's hall begging to see you. We've told him it is impossible; but he will not go.'

Lady Darrell seated herself at the table again.

'A park-keeper, Chelnic? she repeated. 'What can he want?'

'I don't know, your ladyship; but he'll tell me of anything—only asks to see you, my lady.'

Miss Ross looked at her hostess, who smiled.

'Some begging petition, I suppose. Well, Chelnic; I will break through my rules for once, and see the man. Perhaps, continued Lady Darrell as the butler withdrew, 'poor fellow, he has got into trouble of some sort.'

'He evidently knows where to apply for consolation,' remarked Miss Ross.

'It is a few seconds the butler returned, and entered in a man dressed in the ordinary fustian worn by keepers, a look of trouble on his honest comely face.'

'Ah, Miles, so you want to see me? Well, speak out, I am quite ready.'

The man hesitated.

'I beg pardon, my lady, but if I can speak to you alone—'

'Valeris rose.

'I will go into the next room,' she said, and swept away.

'Now, Miles, said Lady Darrell quietly, though a vague sense of coming ill seemed to have fallen on her.

'My lady, I have had news to tell you. I came straight to you, for I thought it best.'

'Go on, said the lady quickly, as he hesitated.

'My lady, this morning on my way through the woods, I found—'

CHAPTER III.

'Answer me at once—at once, do you hear? To me, my son, my son!'

'Let her be, Martha! grumbled Farmer Brown, who was trying to spell through the newspaper, after reading a heavy mid-day meal.

'I shall not let her be! retorted the angry woman. 'She shall know who's mistress here, I can tell her. Taking advantage of my being wanted at Mrs. Dixon's farm last night, she must needs go tramping about till my hour. I don't believe she went near the castle. Answer me! What kept you so late, and what took you to the town this morning, speaking out when we were fast asleep?'

'I cannot tell you, Aunt Martha, the girl answered quietly, not so loudly, but firmly.

'Cannot tell me, indeed, you lousy! Well, we'll see whether I can make you. Do you think me and your uncle have got nothing to do but keep you in shoe-leather—a great deal of good-for-nothing girl that eats us out of house and home?'

'Alice was silent while her uncle stirred uneasily in his chair.

'There, Martha—that'll do.'

'No, it won't. I mean to make her tell me all. Were were you last night and this morning, where is the basket, and what message did Mrs. Grey send?'

'I cannot answer,' said Alice, again very quietly.

'Then I'll make you!' cried Mrs. Brown furiously, taking up a farmer's whip that hung on a nail, she must needs whip the girl.

'Martha!' exclaimed her husband. 'Let her strike me, said the girl with flashing eyes. 'If she does I will appeal to the Castle for protection.'

'Something in Alice's look checked the angry woman. She dropped her hand.

'The Castle,' she muttered sullenly. 'A fine thing!'

A loud knocking at the door interrupted her words. She stared for an instant, while Alice grew cold and still. She knew the summons was come for her.

Mrs. Brown flung open the door, then hurriedly wrote down what she said.

'Thank you,' he murmured as she finished. 'Now please sign this.'

Alice took the pen, hesitated a moment, then wrote her name, 'Margaret Darrell, my poor friend,' went on Sir Robert, touching Lord Roy on the shoulder, 'cannot remember this man?'

'I can remember nothing clearly. Captain Rivers and I were arguing [we had quarrelled two days ago], when suddenly I seemed to struggle; and yet I have a sense of feeling it was not with him that I struggled; then I must have fainted. I only remember recovering and seeing that poor child standing before me nearly dead with fright.'

'Then you cannot recollect striking the blow with this dagger?' asked Sir Robert.

'I can remember nothing. I never saw that dagger before. Where was it found?'

'Away from the body, through the bushes.'

'I know nothing of it. If only my brain would clear!'

Sir Robert looked at him sadly.

was betrayed in face or limb.

As the butler entered, Lady Darrell in brief quiet words told of the discovery of Captain Rivers' dead body, and the supposed murder; then as the old servant withdrew in fear and horror, she wrote a few lines on a card, and handed it to Miles.

'To the police-station, Nestley; go at once.'

Miles bowed and withdrew; as he went the door of the inner room opened, and Valerie Ross came out. Her hair was pushed from her brows, her face ghastly white, a fixed look of anguish in her gloomy eyes.

Lady Darrell advanced to meet her.

'You have heard—you have heard all!'

'Ah!' repeated Valerie blankly. 'Is it true? she asked after a moment's pause. 'Is it true? Is he dead—murdered?'

'He is dead,' answered the older woman almost mechanically. 'Yes.'

'And you can stand there so calm! Oh, Eustace—Eustace, my—'

'Valerie thrust her hands up to her face, away to and fro for an instant, then she lay stretched prostrate on the floor.

With the same set face, Lady Darrell bent over the inanimate girl, and pressed her cold lips to the senseless one; then fringing the bell again, she directed the servants to carry the still form to her room.

'Leave me alone, she said as they went through the door—'quite alone!'

She sat silent at the small cotage disappeared, then her calmness went.

Lady Darrell flung herself down on her knees and gave way to her feelings.

'They went away together, she whispered, a crimson wave of color dyed her gentle face—together in anger, now Eustace lies dead, and Roy, my angel, my prince, my son! No, Oh, God, keep the thought from my mind, or I shall go mad! Let me think clearly. They were angry; they may have parted friends. Eustace may have met his death alone. Oh, God, pray that it may be so! Roy, my darling, up to her knees, away to and fro for an instant, then she lay stretched prostrate on the floor.

'A few seconds after the door was opened, a figure entered. In two strides Roy Darrell was beside his mother, had lifted her to her feet, and clasped her to his heart.'

'Roy?' she gasped feebly. 'Thank God! And yet, my son, my son!'

'Mother,' said the young man, 'you know all. Hear me now, though I may never prove it. I know, I feel, I swear I am innocent of this crime!'

'Answer me at once—at once, do you hear? To me, my son, my son!'

'Let her be, Martha! grumbled Farmer Brown, who was trying to spell through the newspaper, after reading a heavy mid-day meal.

'I shall not let her be! retorted the angry woman. 'She shall know who's mistress here, I can tell her. Taking advantage of my being wanted at Mrs. Dixon's farm last night, she must needs go tramping about till my hour. I don't believe she went near the castle. Answer me! What kept you so late, and what took you to the town this morning, speaking out when we were fast asleep?'

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Sir Robert looked at him sadly.

'Your life is saved,' he said gently but—'

'But dishonor remains,' added Lord Roy bitterly. 'Yes, I see. I know now what you mean.'

The door opened at this instant, and Lady Darrell appeared leaning on Valerie Ross's arm. Roy's mother looked suddenly and with a gasp at the two women who were after all but vicious that would float away in mist.

She had had a great strain put on her young mind during the last few hours, but she was stronger, firmer to herself, knowing that she had done all she could, that a man's life had been in her hands, and she had saved him.

She had Roy Darrell's image always before her, careworn, haggard, his handsome face lined with agony; she could still see the look of gratitude that lived in his eyes as they separated this morning in the early sunshine, man and wife.

A strange sense of gladness was creeping into her heart amid all the horror and fear that had nearly driven her to a sense of hopeless despair. It is to be noted that this man, that she had served him well.

The girl sat back in her corner very quiet and calm, as she was bowed along the wide country lane that led by the longest route to the Castle.

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