POOR DOCUMENT

UNDER A SHADOW.

Continued.

She was usually so calm, so self-possessed, and now a hot blush covered her face—a burning crimson flush—her dark eyes drooped until the white lids covered them. She heard the same voice again; what was it saying?—something about pleasure and honor. Alison could not even hear it for the strange, quick beating of her own heart. Then she found that he was offering to show her some beautiful gardenias.

'The duchess has quite a show of flowers,' he observed, 'and no one will be able better to appreciate them than yourself.'

He offered her his arm, and they walked together, Alison moving like one in a dream.

'I am the fortunate owner of one of your pictures, Madame Ferrari,' he said.

Then she roused herself to talk—he would think her so stupid if she made him no answer.

'One of my pictures, Lord Carlyton? Which is it, may I ask?'

'The girl by the brookside.' And do you know what struck me so much in that picture?'

'No,' she replied; 'though I remember the painting itself very well. What was it, Lord Carlyton?'

'It struck me as being so strange, that you, an Italian, should have painted an English brook, in an English wood.'

'How do you know that it is an English brook?' she asked.

'How do I know?' he replied, with a laugh; 'because it runs over pebbles that never lay on an Italian strand, and the flowers near it are English flowers, the sky above it an English sky. You have been in England before, Madame Ferrari?'

'Yes,' she replied; 'but I do not wish to talk about it. I was not an artist—that is, I had not reached any eminence then.'

There was something which compelled her to speak the truth to this man. She could not do otherwise; to have uttered one false word to him would have been an impossibility.

'I thought, when I saw the picture first, that it was by an English artist,' he said; 'afterward the wonderful beauty of the coloring grew on me, and I knew that we had no artist among us master of such tints. Still, I felt sure that you had made some studies of woodland scenery in England.'

'Yes, I have done so,' said Alison.

'The duchess spoke truly, Madame Ferrari, when she said that I was an admirer of your paintings; I think them the best I have seen.'

'You are very kind to say so; I fear that you overrate my talent,' said Alison.

'That would not be possible. I did not think that I should ever be so fortunate as to know you, Madame Ferrari. May I ask you a very impertinent question?'

'You may ask me anything you will,' she replied.

'I see that you wear no wedding-ring; why are you called 'Madame Ferrari?' '

Alison laughed.

'To tell you the truth, Lord Carlyton,' she replied, 'I have often wondered the same thing. I think it is because I live alone, in an independent kind of fashion, and am not young enough to be called 'signorina.' '

'You look young,' he said, simply. 'I have read many critiques and notices of your pictures, but I do not remember to have read any particulars ot yourself.'

'They are not very interesting,' she replied.

'Pardon me, I think the lives of all artists are interesting; I enjoy hearing of them. You speak English well, madame.'

'I have spoken it for many years,' she replied, 'and I like it very much.'

His face brightened. She saw it.

'Do you really like England?' he asked.

'Very much better than Italy,' she replied. And then she wondered why he seemed so pleased over it.

They walked on, talking eagerly and happily. Alison hardly remembered that she was talking to a stranger; it was not until they had walked for an hour or more that she remembered they had gone out in search of gardenias. She looked up at her companion with a smile.

'Gardenias?' he said. 'Ah, that is your fault, madame; you have caused me to forget them.'

That same day Lady Laura looked laughingly at Alison.

'I am puzzled,' she said. 'We have known Lord Carlyton for some time, but he has nevrr expressed the least desire to visit us until to-day; he has been telling Sir Wilton how much he should enjoy half a day with us. Are we such charming society, Asalita?'

'I think so,' she replied, wondering why she felt so happy.

'We must, indeed, be what people call 'nice,' to have attracted Lord Carlyton; he is supposed to be the most exclusive man in London.'

'I do not see anything very exclusive about him,' said Alison. And Lady Laura laughed again.

'Probably not, after wandering for so long a time in search of what you did not find. I can assure, Asalita, that I have met Lord Carlyton continually in society, but I have never seen him pay one half the attention to any lady that he has done to you to-day; every one is talking about it. You will have to remain in England after all.'

Though she laughed at it and would not believe it, her heart beat high with a new and delicious happiness, a new emotion; she could not understand it, but she opened her heart to it. She had suffered enough, she thought—she would be happy at last.

Lord Carlyton did call, again and again. When the week of the visit ended, Lady Laura prayed her to remain a few days longer.

'You are well, and you are happy here,' she said; 'we love you, why should you go?'

'I cannot remain here always, dearest Lady Laura,' said Alison.

'Nor would I ask you. I begin to think that your ultimate destination, madame, will be Haute Hall.'

'Where is that?' asked Alison.

'Ask Lord Carlyton,' said her ladyship; and, simply enough, Alison took her at her word.

'Where is Haute Hall, Lord Carlyton?' she asked, that evening.

He looked at her with some surprise.

'Do you not know?' he replied; 'but how should you? Haute Hall is my home.'

And he wondered why Alison, from that instant, sat silent and mute.

CHAPTER XLII.

'LIKE THAT LOST FRIEND.'

The old story. It is strange to think that from the time of Adam every man and woman born into the world has lived, loved, and died; they have each of them had a love story—the affection of Alison Trente for Lord Carlyton, and his passionate devotion to her. With Alison it had almost been love at first sight. Her first glance at his true, earnest, noble face, the first sound of the true, musical voice had stolen her heart from her. In that one moment it had seemed to her that her life was completed; a certain charm, a spell had come over her. She found herself always thinking of him, always mentally comparing him with other people, always listening, as it were, to his voice. In fact, she knew she was learning to, if she did not already, love him. Alison Trente had sinned the first great sin of her life, but not in ignorance; she knew well what she was doing, and, now that the balance of her life was turning, she knew better how it was with her. She knew that, having fallen from her high estate, she was not the wife for an honorable man.

As the days passed on, and the great hope of her life seemed to grow nearer, she would have preferred to die rather than let him know the truth. As the light of love grew broader and deeper for her, she saw clearly by it the nature of her sin; she loathed it more, she hated it with a deadly hatred, she could not endure that the thought of it should intrude on her. She would fain have blotted it out of her life, as the sun melts out the snow. She looked at other women with envy—how different she was. If she were but like them, if she had no background, no life shadowed by a secret, no mystery that she was compelled to keep from every eye, no disgrace that it would have killed her to have known.

He was learning to love her. Years ago, when she was trying to expiate her sin, when she was working and praying, and doing all the good she knew how to do, it would occur to her that there was a beautiful, holy happiness which she had not attained, but which she might attain—the happiness of loving and being loved, the happiness of being the cherished wife of some man to whom she could look to as her hero, her king, her love. She had dreamed such a dream; she had seen herself with that terrible past blotted out, forgotten, buried; happy and beloved, mistress of a beautiful home, wife of a noble husband, perhaps even a mother of little innocent children, and now it seemed to her that the dream of her life was being realized. Lord Carlyton was learning to love her.

She did not stop to ask herself at times whether, even if he loved her, he would ask her to be his wife, or would he feel that the distance between them was too great. True, she was beautiful, she was gifted, she was wealthy, but she was not high-born; her fortune was of her earning; she had to work for it, she was an artist, not what the world would call a noblewoman. Would he think of it? Would it prevent him from asking her to be his wife?

He loved her—she knew it by a hundred signs. From the very first he had admired her; now he seemed unable to find rest away from her; he lost all his self-possession in her society; he seemed to forget everything, every one in the wide world except herself; he was so good, so noble, so true, there was nothing false about him; his word meant more than another man's oath. She recognized his sterling merit; she loved his simple, honest truth. The day came when she knew that Basil, Lord Carlyton loved her, and wanted her for his wife. She had gone back from Lady Laura's, and was staying at her own home. He had asked permission to visit her there, and she had granted it.

'You must submit,' she said, laughingly, 'as my other friends do, to be denied at all hours sacred to my work.'

'You told me that you were going to rest,' he said.

'I did intend to do so. I have tried. I cannot keep away from it any longer; it has this great charm for me—I love it.'

'You give the best hours of the day to it, of course,' he said, regretfully.

Alison laughed at him, light of heart.

'The best and the longest hours,' she said. 'Yes; and when the fever of painting is really on me, I give the whole of the day.'

'You will kill yourself if you work in that fashion.' he said.

'People seldom die of hard work in these degenerate days,' said Alison.

'But, madame,' he presisted, you must not be cruel to me; perhaps to others the sun rises and sets the same whether they see you or not.'

'I believe so" she replied.

'To me it is not all the same thing. If the day comes round on which I am to see you, for me there is no sunrise.'

'You are poetical, Lord Carlyton.

'I speak simply the truth, madame. You are the sun of my life, and on the days when I am shut out from the glad light of your presence I know no sun.'

'Then you shall not be shut out often,' said Alison.

Her face burned, her heart beat, yet she would not seem to think his words anything but playful.

'May I come to see you, perhaps not every day, but often?' he persisted.

'Yes; and you shall be admitted where no one except Lady Laura and Lady Cardyne comes, into my painting-room,' she replied.

'You have honored me, and you have made me very happy, madame,' he said; and looking at the brightness of his face, she knew that she had done so.

From that time Lord Carlyton became a daily visitor. The servants no longer called their gifted mistress from the studio. He was shown to madame's painting-room. She did not lay aside her artist's costume, and he thought her even more beautiful in that plain Holland dress than in the sheen of satin and the glimmer of pearls. She did not even interrupt her work to receive him, but painted after her usual fashion, only, stopping occasionally to raise her face to his with a smile. It became soon a matter of course that he should spend some hours every day in the studio—that he should bring the sweetest flowers—that at times, when she needed inspiration, he should read to her—that he should bring to her all the notices of her pictures—that he should be her one friend and confidant from all the world.

People did not remark much of this at first; it was known only to Lady Laura, and she had said from the first that it would be a love match. It was noticed that wherever Madame Ferrari went, Lord Carlyton was her constant shadow; he was seen with her at the opera, the balls, the fetes of the season; he was by her side whenever there was an opportunity. The London world had not much to say about it. After all, there was, perhaps, no great discrepancy. Lord Carlyton was an English nobleman, a man of wealth and honorable repute, perhaps a trifle more fastidious than other men; but madame, no matter what her birth might be—and of that the world knew nothing—was noble, through her genius, and the fame it had bought for her. Society was only at fault on one question. Would she, the brilliant, gifted artist, feel inclined to marry? Whould she be willing to resign some of her art occupations and share in the commonplace duties of commonplace life? That was the difficulty. Time would solve it.

In the interim Basil Carlyton had found that life for him was centered in the beautiful woman whose dark, dreamy eyes seemed at times to look so far beyond him. It was with all the diffidence of true affection that he spoke of her and thought of her. He never wondered what her birth might be: he never thought whether she were his equal in rank or not. All he thought was that she was a beautiful, gifted noble woman, a queen among other women, and that he was her humble suppliant, her devoted slave, content if he won one smile from her, content if she but looked kindly on him. In his idea the social inferiority was all on his side—he had no genius, no beauty—and not on hers.

Lady Laura was his friend; he knew that she wished him all success in his suit. He could never tell whether Lady Cardyne did or not.

'You must not marry an Englishman,' the impulsive young countess would say to her; 'you do not know, but I know; even when they are best, when they are kindest, they freeze you. You must choose a husband from our own sunny land, madame, not from here.'

Alison was at times inclined to think that Lord Cardyne must have some knowledge of her identity—he looked at her so keenly, with such watchful curiosity, such intent earnestness; and, when his wife laughingly challenged him as to why he looked so long at madame, he answered that it was because her face haunted him in a fashion that he could not explain. It was, he said, as though he had known her in another life.

One day, as she stood leaning against a vase in which grew scarlet flowers, he stopped short suddenly.

'I am quite sure,' he said, 'that I have seen you before, madame, just in the same attitude.'

Alison showed no emotion; she merely showed a cold, bright, frosty smile, such as she generally gave Lord Cardyne.

'You have had a great deal to try your memory,' she said. 'This time it is quite at fault.'

'It may be so, but I cannot think it. Did I never, madame, meet you in Italy?'

She turned the full light of her glorious eyes on him.

'I have heard that your attention was so constantly engaged during your stay in Italy, that, even had you seen me, I would not have expected that you would remember me.'

'How can you have heard that?' he asked, with a brightened color, and a very uneasy smile.

Alison looked all simplicity as she replied:

'Was if not in Italy you first saw Lady Cardyne? Had you any thought, any attention for any one except her?'

The earl looked surprised.

'No, certainly not; but I went very much in two picture-galleries of Florence and Verona; I may have seen you there.'

'It is possible—so possible and so probable that I will not contradict it, Lord Cardyne."

'And you are so like—so like that lost friend of mine.'

'I thought it was lost love,' said Alison, mockingly.

'You make me afraid to utter the word love in your presence, madame,' replied the earl. 'You are so like her; you have the same dark eyes, the same hair and the same lips, only that you are Italian and she was English.'

'She is dead, I think you said?'

He thought of the river and the fair young face floating on the water.

'She is dead,' he replied.

'There is certainly one thing in which I do not resemble this lost fancy of yours,' said madame, with proud, serene calm, 'and that is her appreciation for you.'

'She loved me,' said the earl, impulsively.

'Yes,' replied Alison, with a bright, cold smile; 'and that, my lord, would be a thing I should find it impossible to do.'

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE WORLD'S VERDICT.

There came a beautiful day, when the sun, shining so brightly that it seemed to warm and gladden the whole world, made one anxious to seek the light and the fragrance; the rooms of the house seemed dull in comparison, no matter how bright in reality they might be, and Lord Carlyton went over expressly to beg Alison to go with him to Hampton Court.

'You have promised me, madame, so often,' he said; 'and now, to-day, there can be no excuse. Lady Laura is going with a young niece of hers, and I need not say from the country; and, among all other places of interest, it appears that the young lady prefers Hampton Court. Will you not make me very happy, madame, this glorious day, and go with us?'

Alison consented. To see the pictures at Hampton Court had long been the one great desire of her life. Lord Carlyton was delighted. No schoolboy was ever more pleased with a holiday.

'I knew that this glorious sunshine had not come for nothing,' he said.

And a very beautiful day they had—one that Alison never forgot. The young niece, tired of the pictures, had gone to feed the swans; and Lady Laura, Alison, and Lord Carlyton were standing alone before a beautiful painting of one of the frail beauties of King Charles' court.

'Such a lovely face!' Lady Laura was saying; 'there is something so good about it—an expression of peace and innocence that could not be real.'

'Why not?' asked Alison, quickly.

Lady Laura looked up at her in surprise.

'Surely, madame, the answer is obvious. What could there be of peace and innocence in one who had forfeited both?'

'But,' persisted Alison, 'was she not something like Louise de la Valerie—did she not repent very bitterly, and, retiring from the court, spend the remainder of her days in all kinds of good works? Did she not do this?'

'Then why,' persisted Alison, 'do you rank her with sinners, and wonder at the peace in her face? The peace was, perhaps, hardly won by penitence, by tears, by prayers. Why do you class her with sinners still?'

Lady Laura's fair face grew grave and scornful.

'It is the world's verdict," she said—the sentence that all society, from all time, has passed on her sin. A woman, once fallen from her high estate of purity and innocence, can never regain it; she may try to wash out all stains of sin in tears of blood, she may spend whole fortunes in trying to obliterate it, she may fill her whole life with good and great deeds, yet her sin, in a thousand forms and a thousand shapes, will rise against her, and her place will know her no more.'

'But that seems terribly hard,' said Alison.

'It is none the less terribly true,' replied Lady Laura. What a strange subject for us to discuss!'

'The world is unjust!' cried Alison.

'I do not know,' said Lady Laura; 'when you once lower the standard of womanly purity and goodness, the world will be much the worse for it. I myself should be very sorry to see the day when a woman who had once lost her character would be received by society with open arms, and considered none the worse.'

'But it is terribly hard,' said Alison.

'I do not think so; I am not hard hearted, but I rather believe in the savage law of old, that branded such women with a scarlet letter.'

'Do you not believe, then, that long years of penitence, of industry, of honor, of charity—years filled with deeds that would ennoble any woman—do you not really believe that such years as those would obliterate all trace of a sin committed as much through ignorance as the desire of wrong?'

'No,' replied Lady Laura; 'yet there are sometimes extenuating circumstances. No one has more intense, more tender pity than I have myself for any young girl who has been led astray; at the same time I am quite conscious that nothing could, socially or morally speaking, make her my equal again.'

'Yet you are so kind, so tender of heart,' murmured Alison.

'I am; but Asalita—you told me I might call you so—just imagine this. Suppose that now you gathered one of these beautiful white lilies—so white, so pure, so stainless—and that you dragged it through the black, heavy mud. You might wash the leaves clean, you might even paint them, but you could never restore their radiant whiteness—could you?'

'No,' replied Alison, mournfully; 'I could not.'

'So it is with the whiteness of a woman's soul; once dragged through the mud of sin, you can never restore it to its original purity. But we will not discuss so sad a subject; we will leave the pictures for a time, and see if the swans have had plenty of biscuits.'

They walked together down to the water's edge, where lady Laura's pretty niece had gathered the white swans around her.

'That is a pretty picture,' said Lady Laura; but the brightness of the day was gone for Alison. She was thinking deeply of what she had heard. Was this really the world's verdict? Once lost, ever lost; never to be restored. Was it the verdict, too, of Heaven? She remembered a divine parable, ending with the words, 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." There was pardon and forgiveness in heaven; why not then on earth? and the answer came to her in the fragrant wind that swayed the boughs. The laws of God and man could not be broken with impunity, and those who brake them must always pay the penalty.

Lord Carlyton saw how unusually grave and serious she looked.

'You are very thoughtful, madame,' he said. 'I hope no gloomy thoughts have come to you on such a day as this.'

Lady Laura had gone on with her niece; they had crossed the greensward, and Lord Carlyton found a beautiful, shady nook under the foliage of a spreading tree. He made a pretty and very comfortable seat for Alison.

'Now tell me,' he said, as he lay down on the greensward at her feet—'tell me what you are thinking of?'

'I cannot quite do that,' she replied; 'but I will ask you a question. Suppose that a man or a woman in the very outset of life, commits some grevious sin, some crimes against the laws of God and of man——'

'Yes,' he said, gravely.

'Then suppose that after a time they wake up to a full sense of what they have done, and say to themselves that they are most bitterly sorry for it; suppose that resolving, as it were, to live it down, they repent most truly, most earnestly, and spend the remainder of their lives in doing good—do you not believe that the sin is forgiven then?'

'Forgiven?' said Lord Carlyton; 'most certainly. I believe, in common with most people, that a sin is always forgiven where it is repented of.'

'Then, if it is forgiven,' said Alison, 'why must the stigma of it remain until the end of life?'

'That is quite another question,' said Lord Carlyton. 'Suppose that you broke a delicately beautiful and valuable vase; you might mend it perfectly, yet the mark of the breakage could never be effaced.'

'No, never,' said Alison.

'I suppose it is in this way,' said Lord Carlyton, 'that though the sin may be forgiven, yet it is not quite possible to do away with the human consequences. I have known two sad instances of it. I knew a young man; he was clever, and brave, and bright; he was honest, too, but he was terribly tempted. He wanted some money in a great emergency, and he forged his cousin's name; he repented of it, he was ashamed to death of it, he repaid the money by the utmost self-denial. He afterward joined the army, and became a perfect hero—his name was but another word for courage; the men looked up to him as a demi-god; but unfortunately, his evidence was required in a court of justice to support a case in which the honor of his dearest friend was concerned, but in which he himself had no interest; and here, where a stainless reputation was everything, the sin of his youth was visited upon him; it was raked up by the opposing counsel, he could not deny it, and the honest soldier in the Queen's army stood before the world as a forger. He sold out and died somewhere abroad—died, they said, of a broken heart.'

To be continued.

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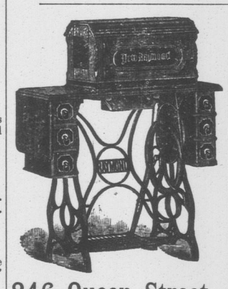

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