POOR DOCUMENT

UNDER A SHADOW.

Continued.

Now he did not like to think of it; he could not bear the idea that Lady Eva should know Lady Carlyton—that fair, spotless young love of his—and yet how avoid it? He said nothing of Lady Eva; after that first day he never even mentioned her to his brother, lest Lord Carlyton should say anything to his wife. Now he would have the difficulty to face; if he went to town, the Bleseatons must become intimate with his brother's wife.

'Even if they do,' he reasoned, 'how can it matter? She may have done wrong; but it seems to me that no woman I ever met is more pure of heart than this one who has lost her place in the ranks of good women. I must risk it. I can trust to myself to watch.'

And there was no forboding in Lady Carlyton's mind, as she went to London, that she was going to her doom.

CHAPTER LV.

A DISCONTENTED WOMAN.

The Duchess of Charterly had made her marked in world as Lady Louisa Bleseaton. She had been more sensible and less envious than her sister. Now that she had attained the highest object of her ambition, she had wonderfully improved in appearance. The Duchess of Charterly had diamond and opera boxes. She had a palace in the country, a mansion in town. She made herself so completely agreeable to her husband, she was so complaisant, so attentive, so cheerful, that the duke, with a cynical smile, owned he was quite fond of her. She was very popular. She gave magnificent parties; her balls were the best in London. Invitations to the castle were eagerly sought, and she was supremely happy.

Lady Bleseaton would lay down the papers after reading of the gorgeous fetes given by the duchess, and thank Heaven that she had not lived quite in vain. In proportion that she was delighted with the popularity, the success and the brilliant career of the one daughter, she was disappointed in the failure of the other.

Lady Blanche did not improve as time went on; she grew plainer, more envious, more discontented. It was bad enough to know that while her sister was a duchess she was still unmarried; but when Lady Eva grew up and gave promise of such great loveliness, it was worse still.

'I am no one,' she had a fashion of saying, 'of course, mamma. You need not care about me; anything will do for me I am neither a duchess nor a beauty.'

She was a thorn in Lady Bleseaton's side, and, as the Lady Eva grew in her fair young beauty, the mother would have given half her worldly wealth to any one who would have married her daughter Blanche. Men were brave, but none were found brave enough for that.

Lady Blanche cordially hated her young sister Eva; she also cordially detested the duchess; but it was part of her policy at least to affect being on good terms with one who was able to do so much for her. So that outwardly she made great protestations of affection, bnt when it was possible to give the duchess a stab she did so. If she heard any little anecdote of a quiet dinner at Richmond with the far-famed actress, Mademoiselle Clara, she was careful to retail it, with many expressions of sympathy. But her grace of Charterly wanted no sympathy; she had made no pretense of marrying for love, and while she had all she married for, she was content. She laughed good-humoredly, and would answer:

'Ah! you see, Blanch, what husbands are—all alike. You ought to be thankful my dear, that you are not troubled with one.'

Lady Blanche found her sister's house very pleasant; at her mother's house she was overlooked—there the young sister held sway. Lady Eva was a belle and a beauty; the plain, elderly, discontented envious sister was evidently in the way; but in the house of Madame la Duchesse it was quite another thing—she received any amount of homage and attention from those who aspired to becoming friends of the duchess.

The two sisters were seated one fair May morning in the drawing-room of her grace's mansion in town, Rock House—the duchess in a sumptuous morning wrapper, reclining on the softest of couches, idly toying with some costly jewels that had been sent for her approbation; Lady Blanche looking on jealously, angry that there was no one to send jewels for her.

'I do not understand it, Louisa,' she was saying; 'I do not think it fair that there should be so great a difference between two sisters.'

'I cannot help it,' laughed the duchess; 'you must blame Providence, not me; it was not my fault that the duke fell in love with me.'

'Love!' sneered Lady Blanche; 'that is your mistake, Louisa—there was no love about the matter.'

'Well, fell in—anything you like. He might have chosen you if he would; he had the opportunity.'

'I would not have married such a man—old, and a roue.'

'Well, was the good-tempered reply, 'you would not have married him if the chance had been yours; I was frankly glad of the chance, and I did marry him.'

'I believe,' said Lady Blanche, with a burst of angry tears, 'that you hate the sight of me, Louisa!'

'No,' said the duchess, coolly, 'but I find you very absurd; instead of quarreling with me because I have done well, why not try to do something for yourself? I am disposed to be very kind to you. If there should be any eligible man, any one whom you think attentive, I will invite them to the house, and do all I can. Indeed, if you were a little more just and a little less envious, you would own, Blanche, that I am always thinking of your interests.'

'I shall have no chance at all, now that Eva has come out. No one looks at me when she is by.'

'Of course a girl in the first beauty of her youth would take the precedence anywhere; but if you would have more patience, Blanche, and not spoil what remains of your good looks by your miserable discontent, everything would be better.'

'I missed my chance,' said Lady Blanche, musingly. 'I ought to have been Countess of Cardyne. That reminds me the Cardynes are in town; I met Lady Camila yesterday; she was civil. I wonder if he ever told her about me?'

'No,' laughed the duchess; 'you may be quite sure that a man of Lord Cardyne's character would never amuse his wife by a resume of his old love affairs. Do you think he was ever really in love with you, Blanche?'

The faded face flushed, into the faded face came an angry light; her love for the handsome colonel had been the leading passion of her life.

'Love me?—yes, I am sure of it; and if that odious girl, that Alison Trente, had not come between us, he would have married me.'

'Do you really believe that poor Alison was tempted to run away with the colonel, Blanche? I have always hoped that there was some mistake about it. She was, unfortunately, much too pretty. But she seemed a good girl.'

'Am I sure?' repeated Lady Blanche, scornfully. 'Do you think that, liking him as I did, I was likely to make any mistake about the matter? She did go away with him, and, had she never met him, he would have married me'

'I wonder,' said the duchess, with a regretful sigh, 'where she is now?'

'Dead, I hope,' replied Lady Blanche. 'Such creatures have no right to live. Dead, for her own sake, I trust.'

'My dearest Blanche, do not be so vehement; vehemence, to my mind, is a want of good taste. Why should she die? If death were the portion of every woman whom Lord Cardyne admired, there would be great mortality among the fairer portion of creation.'

'You can laugh, Louisa; no one came between you and the duke; yet, if I remember rightly, you were afraid of this same Alison Trente.'

'Tact, my dear, that invaluable birthright of women, saved me. I was alarmed, but I am more just than you. If the duke did admire her, it was not her fault. She could not help it if Providence chose to give her a face so fatally fair.'

'She ruined my life,' said Lady Blanche, with bitter emphasis. 'I should like to see her just once again, to crush her with her own infamy—to heap her own shame on her head. I hate her with such a deadly hatred, Louisa, that if I saw her before me starving, dying for a crust of bread, I would not give if to her to save her life.'

'Hush!' said the duchess; 'these are wicked words.'

'I mean them. If I met her again, and she had a husband who believed in her, children who loved her, I should delight in tearing the mask from her, and showing the world what she was.'

Her Grace of Charterly looked with wondering contempt at the flushed face.

'I would rather be your friend than your enemy, my dear,' she said, slowly; 'I did not know you had such powers of hate.'

'That girl marred my life, Louisa. She came between me and the man I—well, I need not be ashamed of it—the man I loved.'

'Calm yourself,' said the duchess. 'Lord Cardyne has reformed since his marriage—nothing can be said of him now; but take him at the very best, he was never worth une grande passion—he never had a heart, he never will have one.'

'I liked him,' said Lady Blanche. 'I hear that we are to have a new sensation this season in the shape of Lady Carlyton, the Italian artist whom Lord Carlyton married—you have heard of her?'

'Yes,' replied the duchess, with animation, 'certainly I have heard of her. They tell me she is the most beautiful woman in England.'

'I suppose so; you will want all your diamonds, Louisa, or she will eclipse you.'

'My dear,' said her grace, serenely, 'popularity is my attraction, not beauty. I shall make a point of knowing Lady Carlyton, and of being the first to welcome her.'

'I shall make a point of disliking her,' said Lady Blanche, vindictively.

The duchess smiled.

'You will hate every one, if you go on at this rate, Blanche; I am sure Lady Carlyton will be worth knowing. We shall have Nugent Avenham here with them, I suppose; he was very much taken with Eva.

'Surely, with all this wonderful beauty of hers, she will do better than that,' sneered my Lady Blanche.

'Nugent Avenham has a large fortune of his own—very large, and he is Lord Carlyton's brother. I do not see that Eva could do much better. Would you marry him yourself?' added the duchess, seriously.

'I suppose so. Louisa, I do wish that you would let me spend my time entirely with you. After all, you are my sister, and you do seem sorry for me; mamma is so disagreeable—all her thoughts, all her attentions are given to Eva. I am miserable at home; ask me to stay here.'

'You would be miserable anywhere,' said the duchess; 'you are too envious to be happy. Still I shall be much pleased to see you if you will come.'

Lady Blanche gave a sigh of relief.

'It will be so pleasant to escape for a time from that perpetual worship of Eva. I heard of nothing else from morning until night; it is all Eva—Eva; every one and everything must make way for her. Mamma has but one thought. If I want the carriage, Eva wants it; if there is anything very beautiful in the way of bouquets, Eva must have it; there is nothing to be done without her.'

'It is only what you may expect; when we were young everything had to give way to us.'

'We were never indulged as Eva is,' said the discontented woman; 'I shall be glad when she is married and settled. If mamma consents to this wedding between Eva and Mr. Avenham, we shall have a beauty for a sister-in-law.'

'That will be pleasant,' laughed the duchess. 'At least, if you are not the rose, you will have been near it. It is something to have a beauty for a sister-in-law. I am quite curious to see Lady Carlyton.'

'So am I. I should fancy Lord Carlyton is a nice man. I generally prefer the husbands to the wives; women are so vain and so envious.'

'And you are neither,' laughed her grace, as the interview terminated.

CHAPTER LVI.

HER LAST CHANCE.

The fashionable journals were in raptures with the brilliancy of the season; the weather had not for many years been so propitious, or town so full.

There had been some sensation when the Carlytons arrived; there was great curiosity to see the beautiful woman whose fame was known wherever art was loved. At first the intelligence of that marriage had been coldly received. A peer and an artist! It seemed incongruous. Then her beauty, her genius, her wealth, made it after all, more easily understood. Society determined to welcome them with open arms. The ladies knew that the beautiful Italian, with her dark eyes, would eclipse them, but they were not envious; her style was so different from theirs. Gentlemen anticipated with keen pleasure the arrival of a beauty

The Duchess of Charterly had made her plans—she was one of those wise women who always swim with the current. If society had protested against the Carlytons, she would have been the first to openly avoid them, as she was now the first to welcome them.

'I shall give a ball, Blanche,' she said to her sister, 'and it shall be one that people will remember—the best of the season. I shall ask the Carlytons, the Cardynes, and all the best people in town. Eva will be the belle, and she shall have a pleasant evening with Nugent Avenham.'

'Whom will you ask for me, Louisa?' inquired her sister.

'I was thinking yesterday,' she said, 'that it would be an excellent thing for you, Blanche, if the wealthy Sir Richard Temple would take a fancy to you.'

'Sir Richard Temple!' cried Lady Blanche, in a voice of horror. 'Why, his father was a tailor!'

'A rich one, my dear. He left his son a large fortune, which his son by his industry has increased. He is a millionaire, and he was knighted for reading very courtly an address to the queen.'

Lady Blanche grew pale with anger.

'When you suggest such a marriage to me, you forget that I am an earl's daughter,' she said.

The duchess laughed.

'I can but offer you the chance, Blanche. If you refuse it, well and good; I can have no more to say.'

The evening of the ball came, and her grace of Charterly was delighted at not having received one refusal. There was no fear of overcrowding, for her ball-room was considered the largest in London, and her reception-rooms were numerous and of great size.

Lady Blanche looked better than usual; the duchess had presented her with a superb dress of rich creamy satin, magnificently trimmed with old point lace. Yet nothing—no dress, no rouge, no powder—could restore the youthful outlines, smooth the lines that envy and discontent had marked there. So true it is that a beautiful soul always makes a beautiful face, and an ignoble one a plain face. Louisa, Duchess of Charterly, looked her best also; she was supremely happy and content; her rooms were magnificently decorated and most profusely filled with lights and flowers.

'You look well to-night, Blanche,' said the duchess. 'I am glad Sir Richard Temple is coming; he inquired from the duke very affectionately after you.'

'He will hardly have time to see me,' was the discontented reply, 'amongst so many beauties.'

But, in spite of her ungracious words' Lady Blanche had a slight hope.

The rooms soon filled. Lord Cardyne came early, and his eyes rested with an amused smile on Lady Blanche; her warm esteem for himself had always been a source of great amusement to him. He did not notice that even now her face grew pale and her lips quivered at the sight of him. 'His absurd little wife,' as Lady Blanche always called the Countess of Cardyne, was looking very beautiful. Nugent Avenhnm was there early; he came in attendance on Lady Eva; and more than once the duchess smiled as her eyes rested on him. It was most certainly a conquest. 'And, after all,' thought her grace, 'though he has no title, Eva has; he is enormously rich; it would be better for her to accept him than do as Blanche did—wait so long for an extraordinary good catch that she may lose all.'

Then, a little later on, when the rooms were all filled, the Carlyton's entered—a stately, noble-looking man, with a woman beautiful as a dream on his arm. The entrance of Lady Carlyton made a marked sensation—other beauties paled before her as stars before the sun. The lovely face of Camila, Countess of Cardyne, the fresh; fair loveliness of the Lady Eva, were as nothing to the magnificent and imperial beauty of the royal woman whose genius crowned her queen. She wore a dress of white shining silk that seemed by some wondrous art to have the glow of rose-leaves upon it. She wore roses in her hair and in her white breast; a coronet of diamonds crowned her graceful, regal head. She looked like a woman to inspire a poet and bewilder an artist. The serene calm and grandeur of the noble face, the perfect grace and harmony of every movement were wonderful to see.

People whispered to each other, 'The beautiful Lady Carlyton!' Half a score of the most susceptible men fell in love with her on the spot, and among them was Sir Richard Temple.

'That is a woman!' he said, slowly. 'Now I understand what the Greeks meant by worshipping loveliness, and calling it divine.'

The Duchess of Charterly hastened to receive her guests. Lady Blanche was in the inner drawing-room, and so had been mercifully spared the triumphant entry of the beautiful Lady Carlyton. She was waiting for Sir Richard, who had engaged her for the next dance. She sat there most patiently, listening, as the first note of the waltz sounded, but her anger gained strength as the time passed on and he did not come. At length he appeared, looking very flushed and confused. She tried her best to keep down her discontent, her anger, and annoyance, by saying to herself, over and over again, that it was her last chance.

'You are late, Sir Richard,' she said, with what she meant to be a smile.

'I really beg your pardon; I am so sorry, Lady Blanche; but you were not in the ball room—you did not see Lady Carlyton. I was so charmed that I assure you I forgot all in watching her; then your kind sister, the duchess, seeing how very much struck I was with her, introduced me.'

Sir Richard did not understand how painful praise of one woman is at times to another. Lady Blanche looked at him with contempt, wondering how any man could be so little of a courtier.

'So,' she said, slowly, 'you admire Lady Carlyton?'

'I should say,' was the enthusiastic reply, 'that she is, without exception, the loveliest woman in the whole wide world. I have never seen such a face, such eyes, such hair. I am not a clever man you, know, Lady Blanche, but I could really imagine that some grand picture had come to life and descended from its frame.'

She was bitterly annoyed. This was her last chance—this little old baronet, sprung from the people, and even he was already worshiping at the beauty's shrine.

'I knew,' she thought to herself, 'that I should dislike this Lady Carlyton; what chance is there for women like me, when men run wild after a fair face.'

In her mind she decided that if ever it should be in her power to annoy Lady Carlyton she would do so; some one should suffer for this. In the meantime she controlled her temper, and turned with an air of raillery to her whilom admirer.

'You are an admirer of beauty, Sir Richard,' she said.

By that time it had begun to dawn upon him that perhaps after all, the best way to please one lady did not consist in praising another; he contrived to make his peace with Lady Blanche, who was more inclined to favor his intentions since there seemed some chance of their being withdrawn. Suddenly Sir Richard started again, and looking at him, she saw his face beaming with rapture.

'Of all the absurd men,' said my Lady Blanche to herself, 'he is, I think, the most ridiculous. What pleases you, Sir Richard?' she asked, with an air of affected interest.

'I was looking at your sister, the young Lady Eva. She is very lovely.'

Following the direction of his glance, Lady Blanch saw her beautiful young sister talking with an air of great animation to Nugent Avenham. Something like black, bitter jealousy entered the elder sister's heart; it was almost unendurable to see other women so beautiful and men so attentive.

'This is what I call a pretty picture,' said Sir Richard. 'After all there is nothing like youth; a young face is better than a beautiful one.'

He stopped again abruptly, remembering that he was talking to a lady lacking the attraction of youth. She could not help a withering touch of satire.

'You are fortunate in the subject you choose for conversation,' she said. 'I cannot refrain from admiring your taste. For my part, I do not share it; beauty is very well—I say nothing against it—but I adore intellect. I have seen dolls far more beautiful than living women.'

'Ah, yes—intellect, of course! You are quite right, Lady Blanche—intellect is—is a very great thing,' stammered Sir Richard, more conscious than ever that he was fast failing in his attempts at wooing Lady Bleseaton's daughter. He did not particularly admire her; he knew that she was plain, no longer young, not especially good-tempered; but he wanted prestige, and he fancied she could give it to him. He wanted rank—he had money in abundance; it seemed to him that his title would be cemented if he could marry an earl's daughter. He did not know—he was not worldly wise enough to understand—that in exchange for his riches he might have asked the hand of some of the fairest daughters of the noblest in the land. He said to himself that he had wealth in abundance, and that if he could only succeed in allying himself with the real old aristocracy, he would have nothing left to wish for.

Lady Blanche seemed to him the most likely person. She was the daughter of an earl—she was sister to a duchess; he would have a duke for his brother-in-law and a duchess for his sister-in-law; he could imagine nothing more enviable. True, the lady herself was not very fascinating; thin cold lips looked more accustomed to sneers than smiles; the cold, proud, angry face never softened in tenderness or warmed into love; but Sir Richard was a philosopher—he could not expect everything, and he wanted to belong to that charmed circle on the outside of which he had been kept so long. If Lady Blanche could admit him, why, such trifles as beauty, love, or tenderness would not in the least matter. Remembering all this, Sir Richard looked at the lady with regret.

'Lady Blanche,' he said, 'I hardly dare ask you for another dance. Would you favor me?'

And Lady Blanche, remembering with regret that it was indeed her last chance, placed the tips of her fingers on his arm.

'I owe something to my Lady Carlyton,' she said, 'and if ever I know her, I will repay her.'

So she walked with her plebeian lover into the ball-room, hating with intense hatred every one who was more beautiful, more fortunate, and more prosperous than herself.

CHAPTER LVII.

'YOU ARE A FIEND!'

As she entered the ball-room Lady Blanche saw a picture that struck her with most unpleasant force! She saw a tall, slender, magnificent figure, clad in a dress that reminded her of rose-leaves and snow, a grandly beautiful face—noble, tender, impassioned: a queenly head, that was crowned like those of the olden goddesses, in roses; a neck and throat white as marble, perfect as those of the Venus de Milo; white rounded arms. A royal woman, royally dressed, and receiving the homage offered to her with the dignity and grace of a queen.

Lady Blanche glanced angrily at that marvelous face as she passed into the ball-room; her dress touched that of the imperial-looking woman, and the noble, beautiful face was raised to hers. Their eyes met for one moment; then, in silence, Lady Carlyton bent her head again to listen to her companions, and in silence Lady Blanche passed on. Her instincts were sharpened by hate.

'I have seen that face before,' she said to herself, 'or I have seen something very like it.'

All the time she was dancing, while Sir Richard was talking to her and flattering himself that he was making great progress, she was thinking where she had seen that face; there was something familiar in the upward glance of those dark, dreamy, beautiful eyes—where had she seen them before?

People talk of the instinct of love—the instinct of hate is ten thousand times stronger.

Lady Blanche was restless—she wanted to look at that face again, she wanted to think it over, to remember where she had seen it, her latent suspicions were aroused over it. Something, she hardly knew what, was at work in her busy mind—in her heart and brain.

When the dance was ended she walked back to that part of the room where Lady Carlyton was.

To be continued.

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