

POOR DOCUMENT

UNDER A SHADOW.

Continued.

He must love me to give me such flowers, she thought; jewels meant nothing, roses meant love.

"Alison," said the colonel, one day, "will you go with me? I have some few orders for the shops. I want to call at a jeweler's."

They walked into Florence together; the morning was so fine that it seemed really useless driving. It was too early for the colonel to meet any of his English friends, or he would not have asked Alison. On the way they passed Bianchi's florist; from whom the colonel always procured his flowers. Alison saw some Cape jasmies in the window, and nothing would please her but purchasing it. He seemed unwilling to go into the shop, but yielded to her decided wish. The proprietor, Signor Bianchi, received the English maid with all possible deference. He had all kinds of beautiful flowers, and was only too happy to show them to the young lady, but when she spoke, Signor Bianchi looked keenly at the young girl. Alison understood enough of Italian to understand all that he said.

"I sent the white roses, indeed," said the little man, bowing—white roses, white carnations, and white heath. The signorina was delighted with them. She thought them most beautiful!

Alison looked up quickly, and saw a hot, angry blush on her lover's face.

"Silence!" he cried, to the astonished shopkeeper. "You are making a mistake."

The man looked up in alarm.

"You told me, indeed, to send white roses," repeated the colonel, and then the man seemed to have a glimmering idea of what was wrong.

"An indiscretion," he said to himself, "Giuseppe Bianchi, florist to the king, has committed an indiscretion. There is no pardon for such a thing."

He said no more. The colonel would have bought every flower in the shop if it would have taken that look of care from Alison's face. He cursed the stupidity of Giuseppe Bianchi—a man who has served a court with flowers to know no better than that.

"Arthur," said Alison, "have you been sending white roses to any one? That must have been a beautiful bouquet. To whom did you send it?"

"I brought one for you home with me," he replied.

"Ah, yes; but that was red—the loveliest red roses I have ever seen; there were no white ones among them. For whom were they—the white ones?"

"He was mistaken," said the colonel, angrily. "You saw that yourself, Alison. Do not vex me by repeating his mistakes."

But a certain conviction came over her that it had not been a mistake—that her lover had sent the bouquet from the florist's, and did not wish her to know anything of it. She felt quite sure of what she was thinking, but she said no more. Of what use, when her words only called forth indignant denial?

"One of the greatest pleasures Alison ever enjoyed had been going to masked balls, for which Florence is so justly famous. The colonel knew that he might safely take her thither; he was seldom recognized himself, and no one ever recognized her. Alison enjoyed it as she enjoyed all things beautiful and luxurious. There was one to be given—a grand affair—ball at the palace of the Marchese Orsini, and he resolved upon taking her there. It was a public ball, for which the marchese, who was then absent in Paris, had kindly lent her ball-room and her grounds. He could not have taken Alison had he thought that she would be recognized. No one was more careful than Colonel Montague. It seemed to him perfectly safe, and it would be good policy, he thought, to make Alison care for such things at present; she was too wrapped up in herself to care for anything else. If she would but love luxury, anything and pleasures for their own sakes, she would not feel losing him half so keenly. So he told her about the masked ball, and how much he wished her to go. She was delighted.

But her suspicions were aroused. For whom had he—the man who was to love her with an immortal love—for whom had he purchased those flowers? Some days afterward, when she was arranging his room, hanging up coats and straightening his boxes, and the neat and tidy English fashion, she came across a piece of paper, on which an address had evidently been written:

Signora Camilla D'Isio, Palazzo D'Isio, Florence.

The handwriting was her lover's. In one moment her thoughts flew to the lovely young girl she had seen at the palace. She remembered the colonel's start of admiration; she remembered, too, what struck her now as being the most suspicious circumstance of all. He was given to talking about pretty women, but of this young and pretty girl he had never spoken at all. It was to her he had sent the flowers. The conviction came home to her with such force she could no longer doubt it, and Alison fell on her knees with a bitter cry.

"My love, my love, be true to me!" she wailed. "I have lost the world for you!"

She was wise enough to say nothing to him; but she resolved to watch—to watch in brooding silence. If he were deceiving her—ah! then wait, wait and see. He asked one day to have dinner rather earlier than usual—he was going out.

"Where are you going?" was the inevitable question. "I shall be long absent, Arthur."

He did not know; but, accidentally catching sight of the opera glass, Alison knew that he was going to the opera. She resolved to try him.

"Arthur," she said, "there is a new singer to-night at the opera; I should like to go."

"You should have gone with pleasure," he replied, "if you had mentioned your wishes a little earlier. I cannot break my engagement to-night; but I will take you to-morrow."

Then you are not going to the opera yourself to-night?" she said.

He looked up angrily.

"I tell you that I have an engagement," he repeated; and Alison said no more.

She made up her mind to one thing, though. She would watch him. As soon as he left the villa she would walk to the opera-house; she knew where it was. She would stand with her veil drawn over her face, just as she had seen other stand, and see if he did really go there.

It was no sooner decided than done. When Colonel Montague was quite out of sight she dressed herself very plainly, she covered her beautiful face with a veil, and walked quickly to the opera-house.

There was always a little crowd of spectators to see the ladies in their magnificent dresses. She stood among those. After waiting a length of time her patience was rewarded. A carriage drove up, in which was seated an elderly lady conspicuous for her rouge and diamonds, a young girl conspicuous for her fair and dainty loveliness; two gentlemen were with them, and one was Colonel Montague. In the lovely young girl she recognized the one she had seen at the palace. She heard spectators say to each other:

"The Prince D'Isio, madame, his mother; the young one is his niece."

No one remarked that from out of the crowd a woman passed with a veiled face—a woman who flung out her hands as though she were blind and groping her way. No one heard the gasping sigh, the deep, bitter sob, the despairing cry, as the iron entered that erring, yet noble soul.

"Why should I be so anxious to play myself?" she thought. "If he has ceased to love me, and I know it, it will be certain death to me. Still she could not keep away. She never mentioned the fete to him again, and he fancied that she had forgotten it. If he had opened a certain locked wardrobe in Alison's room, he would have seen therein a superb domino of purple and gold, in the graceful folds of which lingered a sweet, subtle perfume, with a mark that was an effeminate disguise; but the gay colonel was quite unconscious—"Women had no deep feelings," he was accustomed to say; "they forget on the morrow that for which they were ready to die to-day."

The night came—a warm, luminous night, when the stars shone in the sky, and the glow-worms twinkled each other, a superb Italian night—calm, deep, silent, save for his own music and Alison saw Colonel Montague depart for the ball. He was to dine at the palace and dress there, so that she did not see his countenance, but she had not forgotten it.

Then, when he was gone, she began her own preparation. She dressed herself in the superb domino, and it suited her tall, graceful figure to perfection—the dark lustrous eyes looked even more lovely with the plumed mask. Alison, in the midst of her distress, was delighted with herself, as she could not fall to be her artistic taste was gratified. She stood before her mirror with the gold and purple folds falling around her, holding her mask in her hand; and she said to herself: "I shall look like a figure from one of the grand old Florentine pictures."

Then she entered the hired carriage and drove off. Was she doing a wise thing? She laughed and gave it up. "Am I like the woman that courted the poison that killed her? Am I like one who sharpens the dagger that is to enter her own heart?" she asked.

"You are a stream of carriage before the grand entrance of the Orsini Palace—here mingled with them. When she resembled she joined the party immediately preceding her, and it seemed to the servants who attended to the reception of the guests that she was one of them.

"It was not a new scene to Alison; she had been to several masked balls with the colonel, though she had never seen one on quite so grand a scale as this. There were all the usual characters—kingdoms, peasants, priests—but she was looking for a doublet of blue velvet and white satin. She saw no trace of it.

"She grew time at being there alone. Several masks spoke to her, but it was in the low, liquid Italian that she barely comprehended. She was almost nervous at being alone in the crowd. Her whole soul was crowded! Her beauty and the scene, the magical combinations of color, the glowing lights, the constant changing and mixing of the most picturesque groups, it seemed to her that she should be far less conspicuous in sitting than standing, with all that glory of purple and gold about her. She saw wondering glances bent on her.

"Who is it?" asked one French nobleman of another, and the answer was: "One of the royal duchesses, I should fancy, by her stately grace."

Alison smiled bitterly to herself. A royal duchess indeed! Then her heart gave one great bound; she heard whispering of admiration—murmurs soft and silver as the lowest breath of the summer wind.

"How graceful! How beautiful!"

Then she heard an English voice near her say:

"That is an Englishman, I am sure!"

Then she saw one of the most beautiful groups in the room—Colonel Montague in his superb costume, which set off his magnificent figure to the greatest advantage, looking like a crowned king with his plumed cap; and with him the golden-haired, graceful signorina in her dress of white and silver. They were both clothed in masks, but she said, a hundred masks would not disguise her.

What was he saying to her that the plumed cap seemed to be always bending over the golden head? She never knew to them, and then she wished lightly that she had chosen a less conspicuous dress; it seemed to her that all the lights in the room were concentrated in the gleaming folds of purple and gold.

"Who is that?" she heard continually, and the answer was always the name of some noble woman.

"What grace! What a glorious figure!"

carefully folded the paper just as he had left it; she saw and read it the same evening by post to the court customer.

One morning she called at the modiste's to enquire about her domino, and overheard an order given for the dress of the signorina D'Isio—a white and silver, a tulle of small silver stars, a ball of white silk, covered with silver net.

"I shall know her," thought Alison, "even if she wears a hundred masks."

Then there was nothing to do but wait with patience until the evening of the masked ball. There were times when she was quite her own self—when he bent his handsome head to caress her as he left the house; when he brought her beautiful flowers; when he carefully fastened a costly jewel on her neck or arm; when he was so solicitous that the heat or the sun should not touch her, and nothing should harm her, when he laughed with her in the carriages and on the open tides. Then she would throw off the cloud of doubt—she would not listen to the jealous suggestions she would look at him, believe him, and in her heart renew every loving thought, every loving allegiance to him.

Then again, when he was coldly indifferent, when he would leave her for long hours alone, when he forgot to caress her, and called her Alison in that brief, cold manner—then the hot, burning jealousy took fire again. There were times, to when she was divided between the two ideas—when her heart was filled with passionate love, and yet her whole soul was with a passion of death; then she would hesitate as to whether she were doing a wise thing in going to the ball.

"Why should I be so anxious to play myself?" she thought. "If he has ceased to love me, and I know it, it will be certain death to me. Still she could not keep away. She never mentioned the fete to him again, and he fancied that she had forgotten it. If he had opened a certain locked wardrobe in Alison's room, he would have seen therein a superb domino of purple and gold, in the graceful folds of which lingered a sweet, subtle perfume, with a mark that was an effeminate disguise; but the gay colonel was quite unconscious—"Women had no deep feelings," he was accustomed to say; "they forget on the morrow that for which they were ready to die to-day."

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"Who is that?" she heard continually, and the answer was always the name of some noble woman.

"What grace! What a glorious figure!"

And Alison, beneath her mask, smiled bitterly.

"If any one knew—if they only knew!"

So she drew nearer, but she did not bear one word. The music of a lovely, dreamy waltz began, and she saw the colonel near one round the slender figure of the girl, the next minute they were in the whirl of the waltzers. Alison sat down.

"There are many English people here to-night," she heard a lady's voice saying in English. "I have just been talking to Colonel Montague; he tells me that he never remembers to have seen so many English ladies at a ball in Florence before."

"Who are they?" asked the listener.

"I do not remember names. Lady Monkton with her two daughters; the countess of Lornhaven with her daughter; a tall, stately brunette—I have been told that she wears a domino of purple and gold; then there is a pretty Mrs. Madermont, and two or three English dememoiselles."

"Is that Miss Lornhaven in the purple and gold sitting near me?"

Then the voices died away in the distance, and Alison was left alone, watching, with her heart in her eyes, watching, with her whole soul on her face. Suddenly an idea occurred to her. If every one who saw her believed her to be Miss Lornhaven, Colonel Montague, in all probability, shared the belief; therefore she might with safety, speak to him.

Every one says so. It is strange that she does not dance. The Lornhaves are taking the lead in Paris just now."

He did not answer. Alison saw him standing near the door, watching, with her heart in her eyes, watching, with her whole soul on her face. Suddenly an idea occurred to her. If every one who saw her believed her to be Miss Lornhaven, Colonel Montague, in all probability, shared the belief; therefore she might with safety, speak to him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MASKED BALL.

The music for another waltz—one by Strauss. She recognized the melody; she had danced it with him. Then, coming from the almost trees, she saw the rich lover, with the young girl on his arm. They passed her on the way to the ball-room; and, as he passed, the colonel's blue velvet tulle touched her dress. She bowed in apology. Alison bent her head in mute acknowledgment; and, after a few minutes, followed them. She saw that they danced together again. Then the couple led the young girl to a stately elderly lady, seated at the upper end of the room, with whom he left her.

"Who is that?" thought Alison; but long before she could reach him he had offered his arm to a lady dressed as Marie Antoinette; they danced together. She saw her lover was all apris, all animation; he was admired evidently, and sought after by all the ladies; perhaps it was whispered from one to another that he was the most beautiful man in the room. He was not a fine man, but a striking figure in the room than his. He left Marie Antoinette for a Norman peasant girl, whose dark eyes had been looking intently at him; then he danced with a graceful vivandiere with whom he seemed to laugh heartily. Alison looked at him almost in wonder.

"How completely he had forgotten me," she thought. "If I had left him at home I could not have enjoyed myself; both music and dancing would have been hateful to me; I should have thought of him the whole time. I wonder if during this evening he has thought of me once?"

It was well for her that she did not know that every time the colonel's thoughts wandered to her, it had been to remember that he had an innumerable in his life and to wonder how he was getting off. In no other way did the man who had sworn to love her with an eternal love remember her.

He was alone; she saw her opportunity. He was looking round the ball-room as though he had lost his partner. Alison walked up to him. She saw an admiring flash from his eyes as they dwelt on her magnificent figure. Gently enough she touched his hand with her face.

"A gay knight all alone," she whispered.

"Alone no longer," he replied gallantly.

Without another word she placed the tips of her fingers on his arm, still whispering:

"I am tired of this warm room; let us go out into the orange trees."

He bowed politely, and they crossed the terrace together.

They were alone, yet not alone, for the light of the many colored lamps showed quiet and graceful figures coming and going among the trees.

"You are an English lady," said the colonel. "I know it by your accent—by your pure English speech."

"I am English, and I know you," she replied.

She found that it was not needless to whisper; the mask so completely changed the tone of the voice it was with difficulty she distinguished his, and he would never, she felt sure, recognize hers.

"You know me?" he replied, gallantly. "Then I am indeed a happy man."

"Have you never been happy before?" she asked.

There were so many degrees of happiness, and I enjoy each degree in so many fashions," he replied. "But to which of my fair countrywomen have I the pleasure of speaking?"

"One who can keep her own secret; but one who knows you. You should wear a butterfly on your shield, sir knight."

"How cruel! Tell me why?"

"Because you are a very butterfly in your love. You swear allegiance to dark eyes one day, to blue eyes the next; you wear a dark tress of hair next to your heart one day; the next a tress of pale gold. Do you know what rumor says?" she drew her breath with a fierce, hard gasp as she spoke—do you know what rumor says?"

"It says so many things," he replied, laughingly. "What is the particular report?"

"That the pale gold will triumph after all. Long has never meant to last, he replied; it is but the caprice of an hour, from the bright flash of an eye, or from sweet laughter on lovely lips. Love is not stern sterner and ruler posts point."

"What is love to you?" she asked.

"A fancy, passing like a sunbeam, light as the breath of the wind, dazzling as the light of a gem, but almost as soon as it is born." She drew her arm from his.

"You are a traitor," she whispered; and there was something in the low, intense voice that startled him.

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"It says so many things," he replied, laughingly. "What is the particular report?"

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"One who can keep her own secret; but one who knows you. You should wear a butterfly on your shield, sir knight."

"How cruel! Tell me why?"

"Because you are a very butterfly in your love. You swear allegiance to dark eyes one day, to blue eyes the next; you wear a dark tress of hair next to your heart one day; the next a tress of pale gold. Do you know what rumor says?" she drew her breath with a fierce, hard gasp as she spoke—do you know what rumor says?"

"It says so many things," he replied, laughingly. "What is the particular report?"

"That the pale gold will triumph after all. Long has never meant to last, he replied; it is but the caprice of an hour, from the bright flash of an eye, or from sweet laughter on lovely lips. Love is not stern sterner and ruler posts point."

"What is love to you?" she asked.

"A fancy, passing like a sunbeam, light as the breath of the wind, dazzling as the light of a gem, but almost as soon as it is born." She drew her arm from his.

"You are a traitor," she whispered; and there was something in the low, intense voice that startled him.

To be continued.

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The contest will close Aug. 30th, 1891. In case of a tie the first sender will be entitled to the prize. Send your list in early.

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