

POOR DOCUMENT

LADY ALICE.

Two months' she murmured; it seems like two years! Am I the same flesh and blood as the girl who two months ago was in rags and scolded on the farm like the ploughboy? It seems like a dream! Perhaps I shall wake some day and find myself back in the farm—day and night, and my mother's voice must be, and hear Aunt Martha's voice scolding me as she used to do.

She moved from the fire, and walked up and down the room softly.

"I wonder if I should be happier if I were to find it all a dream—to be back once more in the old life. No, no, I could not do it. And yet—she stopped—"It is terribly lonely here. All is so grand; but I grow oppressed with it. If only his mother would speak to me kindly! She is always so cold and courteous. But I know she scorns me in her heart; she loves Valerie Ross. She should have been his wife not a farm-girl, lowly born like me, Alice—my Lady Alice, the name condemns me; it will cling to me forever. And he, what does he think of me now? All danger is gone, and he only remembers he is tied to me forever—tied to a low-born girl whose very presence drives him from his home."

She passed an instant, her lips compressed as if with pain, then, with a sigh she drew up a chair to the table and took up a book.

She was pondering over the words thoughtfully, when a tap came to the door.

"Come in," she said absently.

The door opened, and a woman advanced into the room, a tall elegant figure in robes of trailing black satin, cut low round the beautiful snowy shoulders. On the masses of red-brown hair gleamed stars of rubies and diamonds; a slender chain supported a glowing star of the same jewels round the swan-like throat.

It was Valerie Ross. She came in, drawing on her long tan gloves slowly. Her face was pale, but her eyes flashed dark and glorious, and there was a strange half-conscious smile on her lips.

"My Lady Alice," she observed playfully, "still buried in your books? What a sort of learning is it in that pretty golden head when your lord returns?"

Alice flushed slightly.

"I was not studying. I was reading for amusement," she answered.

Valerie walked to the window with her swift graceful carriage. The curtains were still undrawn, and out in the darkness the trees seemed like moving phantoms.

"Amusement?" repeated Valerie with half a shudder. "Indeed you want some! I wonder you are not dead of ennui and melancholia already!"

"I am quite content," said Alice slowly; then suddenly remembering her duties, "But will you not sit by the fire, Miss Ross? This chair is most comfortable."

"Thanks."

She turned indifferently toward the fire. She did not take the chair, but stood buttoning her gloves, with one slender foot on the fender.

"You don't seem surprised to see me," she observed after a moment's silence.

"No," answered Alice.

She did not add that she had grown used to Valerie's strange erratic visits during the last two months, and had ceased to wonder at them.

"Have you heard from those worthy people your aunt and uncle since they left the village?" next queried Miss Ross very lightly.

"No," said Alice again, this time with a crimson flush on her cheeks.

There was a something in Valerie's tones that always made her wretched—brought her low origin in glaring unfairness before her eyes.

"They are not considered for their niece's welfare," observed Miss Ross.

Her gloves were buttoned; she let her hands drop, and gazed at the young troubled face before her indifferently.

Alice rounded herself, she tried to smile. "Aunt Martha is only too glad to get rid of me. She always looked on me as a burden, and—"

"And was glad to see you happily and well married," finished the other, of course that was natural, was it not?"

Alice's face was white now, her hands clasped together, were cold with the humiliation she was enduring.

She knew how cruel was the woman opposite, and how powerless she was to fight her. The shame which sometimes overcame her fell on her heart now like a heavy weight.

She saw herself as Valerie thought her—a vulgar, common girl, the relative of people who were bought out of the village, out of the home they had lived in for years, so that their presence should not shock the eyes of the castle, nor recall how low its master had sunk in mating with one of their number.

None knew—none could ever know—what an agony of pain and shame lived in the young heart of Roy Darrell's wife. She was utterly—completely alone!

The man for whose sake she had parted her freedom left his home two days after the funeral of his murdered friend.

His mother still inhabited her rooms in the castle, but there was a chasm between her and her son's wife.

She treated the girl with ceremony and courtesy, her wishes were consulted in every way, but the older woman—the proud descendant of an ancient race—refused to eat or be familiar with a girl who, a few days before, had consorted with farm-help and laborers.

Occasionally the two Lady Darrells met, and the older woman would always drop a deep courtesy to the shrinking timid form of the younger, but they exchanged no word.

Valerie Ross alone appeared to notice the girl thrown so suddenly into this strange life, but through the world her creature of friendship seemed the essence of kindness and good nature. Alice knew to the contrary, and always suffered to torture during the visits she received from the beautiful woman.

About a month after Roy's departure, news reached the Castle that the Earl of Darrell, his elder brother, a man who had been a wanderer from his home for many years, was dead, leaving no heir, and Roy Darrell succeeded to the title and the estates.

The tidings were communicated to Alice in the most ceremonious manner, but the fact that now she was a countess, and moreover, entire mistress of the Castle, did not appear to touch her.

She was growing day by day more wretched as she saw how great a mistake it had all been, and how wrecked her life must be, henceforth passed in the gloomy solitude that appeared to be her lot.

Valerie Ross, standing by the fire, watched her face blanch with pain, and the smile on her lips deepened.

It was almost a pleasure to her to make this young heart suffer. She had gone through such tortures herself when her faithless lover died, that it seemed to have killed all the tenderness and womanliness in her.

Alice rounded herself at last.

"Have you anything particular to tell me?" she asked hurriedly, turning to open her book with trembling hands.

"I bring an invitation from the Dowager Lady Darrell, to Margaret, Countess of Darrell—an invitation to dine in the Blue Chamber. You will refuse, of course my Lady Alice. An invitation like you, never dine out, you know."

Alice met the merciless glance of those golden-brown eyes.

"I accept with pleasure," she replied quietly. "Pray convey my thanks to Lady Darrell. At what hour does she dine?"

Valerie drew herself up and frowned. She had come to torment and trouble this low-born girl, and now found herself treated with almost as much ha-tar and indifference as she herself could assume.

Where did this girl get her manners and ways of speech? queried Valerie angrily. She was no ordinary common creature, but here she sat with a grace and ease that might well have become a queen.

"There will be guests," she observed coldly, smoothing an imaginary wrinkle in her glove. "And you will pardon me, perhaps, but Lady Darrell is very particular about one's garments, so if I—"

"Thank you," answered the young countess quietly; "I have my maid, David; she will assist me. I could not think of giving you so much trouble on my behalf."

Valerie's brows met again. It was the first time Alice had shown her spirit of determination, and Miss Ross resented it now most bitterly.

Hitherto she had looked upon Alice as a plaything, an amusement, an object on which she could pour out the overflowing bitterness of her heart; but now she saw before her a woman, so beautiful as herself, and every whit as proud.

"As you like," she observed indifferently; "I thought I might have been able to give you some hints. The dinner-hour is eight, it is usually half-past seven, but Lady Darrell has it later to-night, at the countess's arrival. I forgot what time he is to come by; but of course he wrote to tell you."

Valerie's right hand grasped a chair for support; it still clouded her eyes. One thought was alone in her mind—the earl was coming—the earl, her husband. All Valerie was forgotten; Valerie, her name, her long lonely months—all but the one thought, she should see once more that handsome face, hear that deep manly voice, clap that strong hand. It was the first time since she had parted from him that she had felt the want of his presence.

Alice's eyes were fixed on her with a look that she had never seen before. "You seem to come to her so swift and sudden that it illuminated her countenance as with glorious sunshine. Valerie saw before her a woman, so beautiful as herself, and every whit as proud.

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Valerie Ross was alone, she was walking to and fro the whole length of the room, her long train trailing on the carpet, her rubies and diamonds gleaming on her neck and hair like fireflies in their brilliancy.

She had a frown on her brow, and her beautiful mouth was set and hard.

She was thinking of Alice, and the thought brought vexation.

"But for her," she muttered, "how changed it would be. How blind I was. But Estace would the veil round my eyes. Fool that I was to believe him and lose my chance with Roy. Roy did love me, but does he still? Two months are not a lifetime. We shall see. And this young creature shall yet learn the extent of my power."

The dowager came in slowly while she was still musing. Valerie smoothed the frown from her face as she advanced to meet the older woman.

"I have not heard the wheels on the gravel," said Roy's mother as she sank into her chair; "it is getting late—nearly eight, and he has not come."

"You are over-anxious, dear," replied Valerie. "Does Roy bring anyone with him? I fancy I heard you mention something about guests."

"Yes, he will be accompanied by two gentlemen—one, Lord Radline. I think you know the other—a man he met in Italy, a Count Jura—from Roy's letters, a most delightful companion. I am glad, Valerie, he has brought guests otherwise the life here at first might prove too trying."

Valerie turned at the last words.

The doors had opened, and a soft rustle told that someone had entered. It was the young countess. She had heard the last sentence from her husband's mother's lips, and her face whitened a little as she set her own construction on it.

Lady Darrell had been thinking of Captain Rivers, his terrible death, and the maddening anxiety that had come to Roy, when she spoke. She rose from her chair, and bent low before the girlish figure.

"Welcome, countess," she said laughingly and coldly.

Alice coursed low, while Valerie coldly, smoothing an imaginary wrinkle in her glove, before her departure, had given his wife to understand that she was expected to comply to society's laws, and the maddening anxiety that had come to Roy, when she spoke. She rose from her chair, and bent low before the girlish figure.

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Roy uttered no word to Alice. After his bow he turned from her to his mother and began to converse about his journey. The other guest joined in the chat, but while he talked his dark glowing eyes were fixed on the girlish figure in the rich black dress, standing so lone and deserted.

He turned to Roy.

"I beg pardon, that I may have the honor of presentation to your beautiful countess."

The earl started, his face flushed.

"I beg your pardon; of course. Countess, permit me to introduce to you the Countess of Jura."

Alice bowed again, and scarcely glanced at the man before her. She was suffering an agony of shame and pain. "He wishes me dead," said her heart over and over again; "dead, so that she may be free. Oh, why did I come! Why can I not leave it all? It is too much for me. Their scorn and cold contempt will kill me!"

Count Jura watched her expression deepen into sadness with a strange interest in his dark eyes.

"So this is the young wife, he mused. But how is she so beautiful! And he has no eyes for anyone save Valerie—how dangerous she looks, her eyes flash like daggers! Poor Lady Alice! She is young, handsome, and—faded! Jealous woman is Valerie Ross. Beware!"

So ran his thoughts as he spoke to the girl and led her into dinner.

Roy followed with Valerie, and a sigh reached Alice's ear, telling plain that words how bitter was his sorrow, and how glad his heart was to see his life and happiness.

CHAPTER V.

Alice awoke early the next morning. She had not slept but little. Her wounded pride and aching heart proved veritable thorns in her pillow.

She was haunted by the vision of Roy's handsome face bending over Valerie's head, gazing into her eyes with an intensity of love.

She did not like Valerie, yet she was just—

"It is I who keep them apart. What can I do—what can I do? To this she could find no answer.

She rose and took her bath, then robed herself in her simple grey gown, and wrapping a mantle round her, for the morning was chilly, she left her apartment and strolled through the silent corridors to the gardens and grounds.

The two months that had elapsed since the strange and terrible episode that had changed her whole life, the girl lived entirely alone.

She gave herself up to study, and books and for recreation walked a while in the park, till she knew every nook and corner by heart.

No thought of pride or joy that she was part owner of this proud estate came to her mind as she passed through the beautiful walks of the park, standing like a grey sentinel in the background. Instead, she wished now, day and night, for something that should free her from her husband, and take away the shame that hung over her.

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