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(Continued.)

It was a problem too difficult for the young girl to solve; she stood before her dressing-table and read the cards Frank Meredith had given her, mentally determining to keep them safe, for once again that strange sensation came over her that she might need him.

Then his offer of friendship, sudden and unorthodox as it was, had been like a ray of sunshine on her dark life.

She was so terribly alone—no relations or kinsmen near to hold out their hands to her, a wife hated by her husband, a girl loathed by her husband's love, Valerie Ross.

She took off her habit, and putting on a loose, flowing gown of soft white material, sat down by her fire to rest and think, holding the cards in her hand.

Her head ached with the multitude of sorrows and vague troubles she had to bear, so taking out the pins, she let the great masses of golden hair slip from their knots and fall in glorious waves over her shoulders almost to her feet.

She was trying to make some plans for her future life. She was so young—as yet but eighteen years had passed over her head, but she was brave. She saw what her lot must be in this great Castle—a countess, yet an outcast, and she determined to leave it to seek the world—to be lost to Roy Darrell for ever, and thus free him from his hateful bondage. She had no one to whom she could go. Farmer Brown and his wife had left England for America, sent by the earl's gold, and Alice had known no other family but them.

But despite the difficulties she was determined; life in a garret would be better than this state of gilded contempt and ill-disguised hatred.

While she was sitting musing she heard steps come along the corridor and pause at the door of her boudoir. In another moment a tap came to the bedroom door, and in answer to her summons the handle was turned, and someone came in.

"Is that you, Davis?" said Alice, wearily waking from her miserable thoughts. "I do not want you. I shall not dress to-night. I am too tired."

There was a strange silence; then rising, and looking round, Alice perceived a man's form behind her—the man of whom she had been thinking—her husband, the earl.

She blushed, and uttered a slight exclamation; while she slipped the cards unconsciously into her pocket.

Roy was gazing at her in speechless admiration, even though his heart was bitter towards her. Never had he seen a more lovely vision than the shrinking girlish form in the white gown and cloud of golden hair.

"I must apologise," he said hastily, breaking the silence, "for my intrusion, but I wished to speak to you very particularly."

"Yes," answered Alice, growing more composed and calling her pride to her help.

"I found on my return from our ride that the people around have determined to present an address of condolence and congratulation to me to-night. My mother, in my absence, took upon herself the duties of the countess, and organized at once a large dinner, to which the principal people will be invited. It was necessary to do so, but she entrusted me with her apologies to you for

taking your duties on her responsibility, as I present them to you now."

Alice's head dropped; to her sensitive ear this speech ran with bitter sarcasm. She answered very low and coldly, after a moment's pause:

"Lady Darrell need not have offered me any apology. She must know how much she is in this house, and how little I am—"

Roy interrupted her angrily: "Do you wish me to send my mother away that you say such things?"

"Send your mother away!" repeated Alice quickly. "You misunderstand me, quite; if anyone leaves the Castle it should be I."

"You are my wife," the earl said frigidly, thinking in his heart that Alice was about to reproach him; "do not forget that."

"I do not," the girl replied proudly and coldly. "Have you anything further you wish to say?"

"Only that I desire you to be present at this dinner. You must now take upon yourself the duties of the Countess of Darrell. This dinner is the beginning. Many of the people, I dare say, you may have seen when—" he stopped and bit his lip as he recalled her humble origin—"before you were my wife. Treat them easily and courteously. If there is anything you wish to know, let me advise you to consult Miss Ross. She will be able to—"

"I refuse to consult Miss Ross."

The earl gazed at his young wife in stern amazement; her lovely face was set and cold, her figure was drawn up to its full height, defiance was in every graceful line of it.

"I do not understand you. I suggest this, not only for the sake of yourself, but for the sake of my name and my family."

"He fears I shall disgrace him, and he despises me," thought Alice to herself; aloud she said slowly: "I will remember, my lord; your name and family shall be respected as of old. Have no fear."

Roy could not repress a feeling of genuine admiration at her proud courage; but the next instant it died down, and he only remembered her as the bar to his happiness.

"Please meet me in the large drawing-room at seven this evening," he said coldly. "We must stand together and receive the people."

Then with a low bow he turned away, and Alice was alone once more.

Her face burned with shame and pain. Would he never treat her with aught but contempt?

His presence brought her such an agony of humiliation as almost to banish the thrill of gladness that, do what she could, would steal into her heart when near him.

Yes, now more than ever she was determined it must end.

She would seek another life, and, perhaps, in the future have contentment and peace, if not happiness.

Davis came in after a while, and was full of the grand preparations for the dinner that were in progress.

"All the grand folk for miles round are coming, my lady," she declared. "Lady Darrell sent messengers on horseback to all the houses, and they were delighted to come. You see there's been so much excitement about the Castle lately first poor Captain Rivers being murdered, and then the earl marrying, and of course all the folk want to see what his bride is like, as of course—"

"I understand, Davis," Alice said gently, as the woman stopped, covered with confusion. "they want to see how Farmer Brown's niece plays the countess. It is natural."

"Oh, my lady, forgive me, but I can't help it. You ain't anything but a countess, I'll swear. There must be some mistake about it. You ain't like farmer-folks are; you are a lady born—I am sure on it—we all say so."

Alice's face flushed. "A lady born!" she said to herself. "Oh, if that could only be true—that I might be his equal, what happiness it would be! No, Davis," she answered aloud; "it is but too true. I am the countess now, but I was Farmer Brown's niece, and people won't forget it."

"They'll call you a queen when they see you to-night," Davis cried enthusiastically.

She was draping the dinner-gown as she spoke. Alice for once determined to shine. She chose a most beautiful robe of gleaming white satin; in this, fitting her graceful rounded form to perfection, she scarcely knew herself as she glanced in the mirror.

Her glorious golden hair was gathered in one great knot at the back of her head, her delicate throat and neck rose from the soft lace-like marble in their purity. She drew on a pair of long white gloves, and then prepared to descend, when a tap came to the door and a footman stood disclosed, bearing a case and a message from the Dowager Lady Darrell, begging her son's wife to don the Darrell diamonds to-night, and to keep them in the future.

Alice waited till the man had gone, then hesitated.

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## W. D. MCKAY

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What right had she, the low-born girl, to put them on—jewels that a race of patrician woman had worn for years?

Davis unlocked the case, and drew out the glittering ornaments with slight shrieks of admiration.

"Oh, my lady, you must put them on!" she cried excitedly.

Alice hesitated no longer. She was the earl's wife, and true mistress of all he owned.

A something thrilled through her as the maid clasped the magnificent necklace round her throat—a feeling that the maid's words had been true—that she had the right to wear old honored jewels, not as his wife only, but through her birth.

Davis placed the diadem on the wavy, golden locks, clasped the gleaming bracelets on the rounded arms, then stood and looked at her mistress in silence.

She could find no words to express her admiration, and, after a brief glance at her own reflection, Alice dismissed the good-natured woman and remained alone.

She stood for many minutes gathering up all her courage, for she felt she should need it; then, slowly opening her door, she walked down the corridor, looking in her trailing white robes and glistening jewels, indeed a very queen of majesty and beauty.

(To be Continued.)

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