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Woman AGAINST Woman

BY MRS. MARY E. HOLMES.

Author of "A Woman's Love," "The Wife's Secret," "A Heartless Woman," "Her Fatal Sin," "A Wife's Peril," "A Desperate Woman."

(Continued.)

"You shall sue to me yet," he murmured. "You shall be in my power—I swear it!"

Alice stood watching his retreating form; her hand was clenched on her arm where his lips had touched it. She felt sick and ill, and was trembling in every limb; she put out her hand wildly; pride had lent her strength, but now when she was alone, her strength went quickly, and scarce knowing where she was, she sank on to the couch, white and almost insensible.

Her eyes were closed; she did not see a man's figure enter the doorway and approach. She dimly heard a sudden exclamation, and knew no more till she felt herself gently lifted and clasped in a pair of arms.

Then she opened her eyes and her glance fell on the fair, handsome face of Roy Darrell.

"You are ill," he said, hastily. "What is it? What has happened?"

She drew her hand across her eyes, then with a shudder remembered all, her lips opened to speak of the count's perfidy and insult, but she suddenly recollected that he was the earl's guest, and checked herself.

"I am tired," she murmured; "the ride was long, and the evening has tired me."

"Yes, yes, you are quite fatigued; why not retire to your room, my mother will relieve you of the rest of your duties."

Roy was gazing at her, unconscious of the glow of tenderness that shone in his face.

Alice felt it, and it thrilled her strangely; she stood upright and put aside his hands.

"No, no," she said hurriedly; "I must remain; it will not last much longer. Thank you for your kindness. Had we not better go to the salon again?"

"Yes, if you wish it," the earl answered gently. "But where is the count—he came out with you?"

"He left me a few minutes ago."

Roy noticed the sudden flush on the fair face, and again that pang of jealousy came.

"You like the count?" he asked abruptly.

Alice hesitated a moment, then looked at him full as she replied:

"No; I dislike him."

Roy felt his heart rise.

"He will not remain much longer now. Let me lead you back; we may be missed."

Alice put her hand on his arm, and together they moved towards the doorway. As they reached it Roy stopped.

"Remember you have promised to come with me to see the flowers to-morrow," he said hurriedly.

"Yes, I remember," faltered Alice, her eyes sinking beneath his gaze.

They went on to the salon, both their hearts filled with a strange and beautiful dream, which they knew not was love.

As they passed out, Valerie Ross stole from behind a statue; her face was bloodless, her lips compressed; she glared after the girlish form with a tempest of rage and hatred in her face, unconscious that she herself was being watched.

"Valerie hates her," pondered Count Jura from a dark corner. "I must enlist her sympathies; she will rejoice to be rid of her rival, and I shall get the

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girl into my hands. I will speak now; there is no time to be lost."

He approached Valerie, softly whispering her name. She turned after a few words, the expression of her face changed to fear and surprise, then, as he went on, to hatred, and lastly, as he finished, to a glow of unrestrained joy and triumph.

CHAPTER IX.

The guests were all departed, the lights extinguished, the great castle was as silent as death.

In the young countess' bedroom, however, the lamp still burned.

Davis very sleepily was engaged in putting away the gleaming satin her young mistress had worn, and, that done, approached the table to replace the magnificent Darrell jewels in their case.

Alice who had been standing lost in a delirious reverie, woke from her dream.

She had donned the long white peignoir, and her masses of golden hair hung unbound over her shoulders.

"You are tired out, Davis. Go to bed," she said kindly. "Leave me to put away the diamonds; I am not the least sleepy."

Davis looked up gratefully.

"Are you sure you are not too tired, my lady?" she demanded.

"Quite," answered Alice. "Go at once—it is very late."

"I was thinking perhaps it would be better to take the diamonds to the butler's room. He always has the plate with him after one of these festivals, and he sleeps with his revolver near at hand, in case of robbers."

"Robbers!" laughed Alice, though a slight fear crossed her mind. "Why, who would dare attack the Castle, Davis? I am not afraid."

"Then, good-night, my lady, and many thanks."

Alice waited till the maid withdrew, then locked the door.

She was not nervous, although she slept in a wing away from the rest of the castle.

She returned to the table and took up the diamonds.

She gazed at each with a tender look as she replaced them on their velvet beds.

"His jewels!" she murmured. "His hand has touched them."

She lifted a bracelet to her lips as she spoke, then, blushing at the action, hurriedly put it in its case, replaced the leather-covered case in the small iron safe standing on the table, and locked it.

She put down the key, and walked to the window.

It was a dark night, no moon shone; yet to Alice it seemed as if she was gazing on the fairest picture.

"Why am I so happy?" she murmured, wandering slowly up and down. "Why does my heart thrill? He spoke kindly; but it may be gone to-morrow—or perhaps I only dreamed he was so kind!"

She passed her hand over her eyes, then a smile of gladness came to her face.

"No, no; it was real—it is real; he has asked me to meet him to-morrow. Oh, how long it seems till then! Something tells me that his contempt and scorn are dead—that he no longer wishes me away. If—if it could be that he is beginning to like me? But that is too great a happiness. All has gone well to-night. His mother kissed me, and gave me her blessing; everyone was kind—all except Valerie and Count Jura," she shuddered. "How I dread that man! If only I dared have told Roy what he had said! But it was too soon. I must be brave; and should he dare insult me again, I will appeal to Lady Darrell for protection. Valerie, too—why does she hate me? She could have married Roy in the bygone days. I heard her say so with her own lips to her brother, and now, when he is my—my husband, she is jealous and hates me. I do not like her. But I am stronger now—now I know he is kind and does not despise me. I will kneel and thank God for all His great goodness to me."

She sank beside her dainty bed, and buried her face in her hands.

All was silent save for the moaning of the trees in the gentle autumn breeze, when, to break the silence, came a decided tap at the door.

Alice rose surprised, but not frightened; her prayers always soothed her.

She opened the door, and was amazed to see Valerie Ross in the corridor.

"I am sorry to disturb you," said Valerie gently, and smiling kindly, "but I am rather distressed. I have dropped one of my ruby and diamond stars, and I grieve to lose any of that set; it belonged to my mother."

"Can I help you look for it?" exclaimed Alice in genuine sympathy.

She remembered now, in that conversation with her brother Valerie had mentioned she had no valuables left but these jewels.

"Oh, thank you! My maid and I

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have searched everywhere; and then she suddenly remembered that she heard Davis say she had picked up an ornament belonging to someone, and I thought she might have brought it here."

"Let us look; it may be in the room."

Alice at once lit an extra candle, and Valerie, who was attired in a long, loose peignoir of crimson silk, stood gazing at the girlish figure as it moved from her with an expression of deepest malignity.

"I am sure it is not with the Darrell diamonds, for I put them away myself," Alice said, shaking back her masses of hair and preparing to search the room.

"How beautiful they are, and how well they became you! You were charming!"

Valerie uttered the words in her sweetest manner, smiling pleasantly.

Alice glanced up, and, at the kind expression on the other's face, all her feelings of dislike disappeared.

"Thank you very much," she said quickly. "I appreciate your words more than I can say, for I feared you did not like me."

(To be Continued.)

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