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(Continued.)

At the top of the great staircase Alice felt that someone was near her, and, turning, saw Count Jura, his eyes burning with the passion she had inspired in his heart.

"You are divine—superb!" he murmured. "These old halls have seen no one to compare with you, my Lady Darrell."

Alice smiled faintly. She did not understand the true meaning of his eyes, yet she had a nervous dread of this man, and felt he was dangerous.

"You are flattering me, Count Jura," she answered a little coldly.

"Flatter you! Ah, Lady Darrell, you judge me harshly. I have never seen life or happiness till I beheld you."

He scarcely knew what he said, so enthralled were his senses by his passion and her beauty.

"You are attracted by the diamonds, not me," Alice said hurriedly, feeling a greater dread than ever steal over her.

The hall was quite deserted; she lingered for a glimpse of a servant, but no one was about, and she could not pass down, for Count Jura stood right in her path.

"Diamonds!" he repeated with a start. For the first time he noticed her jewels; they had escaped him; it was her radiant beauty as a whole that had seized his eye. "So," he said slowly, "you wear the celebrated Darrell gems to-night, countess; you would be good booty for a robber."

Alice laughed nervously, but she was thankful that the passion had died out of his eyes, and she said lightly:

"Yes, but I am afraid of no robbers."

"Women are always brave," the count observed, glancing now at the sparkling gems with a keen, curious look; "but I don't mind confessing that, man as I am, I should not care to sleep in a room with these world famous jewels. I should expect to have very unsettled slumbers."

"I have never tried it!" Alice answered, still lightly, though she longed to get away from this man; "but I shall do so to-night for the first time. I will let you know to-morrow whether my slumbers were disturbed; I don't think I am very much afraid. And now count, it is getting late; will you pardon me—I must go."

The count bowed and stood aside, then leaned over the oak balustrade, and watched the dainty figure glide down.

"To-night!" he muttered; "to-night, she said. It's well. Paul shall not accuse me of playing and not working. And yet how fair, how beautiful she is! What are diamonds to such loveliness as hers? If she were but free, if I could but clasp her in my arms, and press my lips to hers! Pshaw! I am waving—it can never be! George, old fellow, wake up, remember you have work to do to-night."

Alice passed on to the great salon. The room was empty as she entered it; she was early, but her courage, instead of sinking, rose higher and higher as she walked through the brilliantly lighted apartment, and caught the reflection of her beautiful form in the many mirrors.

She was standing by the fireplace when the earl came in; her back was turned, and seeing only a slender, graceful form, he hurried up to it. He carried a lovely bouquet of flowers in his hand.

"Valerie," he said, in low, passionate tones, "I have kept my promise; here are your flowers, Lady Darrell, you!" he exclaimed, as Alice turned slowly and faced him. Then almost involuntarily he murmured, "How beautiful you are! Let me congratulate you! You will indeed win all hearts to-night!"

"Thank you," Alice answered quite composedly, though her own heart was beating wildly. What a change had come into his voice. The first words had been love-laden, but the next breathed only compliments.

"I trust I am to your satisfaction. You wish to find Miss Ross—she is not yet come down."

The earl flushed again, that strange fascination that Alice seemed to exercise over him came into his mind once more. "I brought her some flowers," he observed confusedly; "she always likes them."

"Flowers such as those are worth liking," returned the young countess, seeing his confusion, and pitying him. "I never saw so many beautiful plants till I came here."

"Our hothouses are considered very fine—we must go over them together," cried Roy, forgetting all about Valerie and the bouquet, and gazing at his lovely young wife with a new sensation in his breast.

Alice's eyes drooped, she did not wish him to notice her agitation.

"I am afraid it would be too much trouble, my lord," she said, turning from him, and forcing herself to speak coldly.

"Trouble—oh, no! Tell me what hour you will be free to-morrow and I am at your service."

Alice felt a thrill of astonishment that melted into a moment of perfect bliss.

"I am free all day," she murmured. "Then we can—"

The earl got no farther, for two people entered the room at this instant. They were Count Jura and Valerie, gorgeous in crimson satin and her rubies and diamonds.

Roy watched his wife approach Count Jura with graceful ease, and as he saw the flash of passionate love in the other man's eyes he felt a sudden sensation at his heart of anger—so great it almost pained him.

What was it? Could it be that Roy, Earl of Darrell, was growing jealous of his low-born wife?

Alice saw nothing of his expression, but she saw Valerie standing near him, the bouquet in her hands.

"I have been trying to console my husband, Miss Ross," she said, in her clear, sweet voice, "but he would not be consoled. You were late to claim your promised gift of flowers."

The earl bit his lip and walked away. A sudden wish came to him that Valerie and her flowers were far distant. A veil seemed to be falling from his eyes. He glanced from Valerie's handsome face, with its hard, passionate look, to Alice's sweet, lovely countenance lit with womanly tenderness and gentleness, and his wife's pleased him the most. Her bearing, too, astonished yet gratified his pride, and unconsciously his heart swelled as he pictured her triumph.

Valerie, quick to read his clear, honest face, read these thoughts, and she was maddened almost to frenzy. The girl's appearance, her coolness, were poisoned darts to Valerie's blighted heart, and she vowed to be revenged and to abase the low-born wife of Roy Darrell.

CHAPTER VIII.

The crowd of guests streaming in kept the earl well occupied.

He stood at the head of the salon, the slight form in white satin and diamonds beside him.

To all and each Alice gave her sweet smile and gentle word; no trace of fear or awkwardness was in her demeanor. Everyone was amazed.

They had come filled with a wild curiosity to see the farm-girl who had so suddenly and strangely become a countess, and instead of beholding a series of terrible social blunders performed by a sturdy dairy-maid, they saw nothing but a lovely patrician girl, whose charms and wondrous beauty eclipsed even Miss Valerie Ross, long considered the goddess of all loveliness by the folk around the Castle.

From her chair, Lady Darrell noticed their astonishment; and felt that she sympathized with it. Her heart woke from the bitter disappointment that had lived in it ever since the day she learnt of her son's marriage, to admire most genuinely the fair young wife.

"Where does she get her manner?" she mused to herself. "She is patrician from head to foot. Roy has no need of shame to-night; his wife has achieved a success."

Then she sighed a little as her eyes wandered to a tall, stately form, on whose red-brown hair the rubies and diamonds quivered like jewelled dew-drops.

"Poor Valerie!" she said to herself. "If it only could have been! I am sure

she loves Roy now whatever her feelings were before Eustace died. She, too, would have made a proud countess to-night. Yet this girl holds her own."

At last all the guests were assembled the testimonial was handed to the earl, and dinner was announced.

Alice found herself led by Sir Robert Carlyle, and smiled once or twice to observe as she read the admiration and amazement on his face.

The dinner proved long and tedious to her, though not to the majority, for they ate heartily.

Alice had more pleasure in looking at all the wonderful gold and silver ornaments, cups, goblets, dishes and vases that stood on the table.

It was a glimpse of fairyland to her, and the earl, glancing from his seat at the far end of the room, watched her bright look of admiration, and felt again that new sensation which was growing stronger and stronger in his heart.

Dinner over, the ladies withdrew, and Alice found her time occupied in chatting with all the great dames, whose faces she recollected from seeing them in their carriages dashing along to Nestley town.

Valerie had said little all the evening, but she was thinking the more. Her hate for Alice had grown to-night to a passion; the truth that Roy was gradually becoming interested—nay, attracted by his wife, lashed her to madness. It was indeed woman against woman.

(To be Continued.)

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