

LOST ALICE

CHAPTER III.

We were married not long after, and for six months we dwelt in a "Fool's Paradise." When I think, that but for me, it might have lasted to our dying day, I can only sigh, and take up the burden of my life with an aching heart.

They had called Alice fickle—oh, how wrongly! No human being could be truer to another man than she was to me.

"I only wanted to find my master, Francis," she used to say, when I laughed at her about it. "I was looking for him through all those long years, and I began to think he would never come. But, from the first moment when I heard you speak, and met your eyes, I felt that he was near me. And I am glad to wear my master's chains," she added, kissing my hand.

And I am sure she was in earnest. I pleased her best when I treated her most like a child. She was no angel—a passionate, high-spirited creature. She rebelled a thousand times a day, although she delighted in my control. But it was pretty to see her, when she turned to leave the room, with fire in her eyes, and a deep flush on her cheek—it was pretty to see her with her hand upon the lock even, drop her proud head submissively, and wait when I said—"Stop. Shut the door and listen to me." Yet it was dangerous. I, who had never been loved before, what could I do but become a tyrant, when a creature so noble as this bent down before me!

She loved me. Every chord of her most sensitive heart thrilled and trembled to my touch, and gave forth sweetest music; yet I was not satisfied. I tried the minor key. Through her deep affection for me I wounded her cruelly. I can see it now. Some wise idea found its way into my head and whispered that I was making a child of my wife by my indulgent ways, and that her character would never develop its strength in so much sunshine. I acted upon that thought, forgetting how she had already been tried in the fiery furnace of affliction; and, quite unconscious, that while she was getting back all the innocent gaiety of her childish years, the deep lessons of her womanhood were still lying beneath the sparkling surface of her playful ways.

If, for a time, she had charmed me out of my graver self, I resolved to be charmed no more. I devoted myself again to my business, heart and soul, and sat poring for hours over law papers without speaking to her. Yet she did not complain. So long as she was certain that I loved her, she was content, and took up her pen again, and went on with the work our marriage had interrupted. Her writing-desk was in my study, by a window just opposite mine; and sometimes I would cease to hear the rapid movement of her pen, and, looking up, I would find her eyes fixed upon my face, while a happy smile was playing around her lips. One day the glance found me in a most unreasonable mood. The sense of her love half pained me, and I said curtly:

"It is bad taste, Alice, to look at any one in that way."

She dropped her pen, only too glad of an excuse to talk to me, and came and leaned over my chair.

"And why? when I love some one."

This was a bad beginning of the lesson. I wanted to teach her, and I turned over my papers in silence.

"Do I annoy you, Francis?"

"Not much."

Her light hand was playing with my hair, and her breath was warm on my cheek. I felt my wisdom vanishing, and tried to make up for its loss by an increased coldness of manner.

"One kiss," she said. "Just one, and I'll go away."

"What nonsense, Alice. What time have I to think of kisses now?" She stood up and looked me in the face.

"Do I tease you, Francis?"

"Very much."

over some deeds that had been long neglected, when I heard Alice singing in the balcony outside the window. It was the first time I had heard her sing since Fred's death, and I laid down my pen to listen. But hearing her coming through the hall, I took it up again, and affected to be very busy.

It was a warm, bright, beautiful day, and she seemed to bring a burst of sunlight and happiness with her when she opened the door. Her own face, too, was radiant, and she looked like the Alice of the old farm-house as she came on tiptoe and bent over my chair.

"Well, what is it?" I asked, looking up.

She held a pretty little bouquet of violets, tied with blue ribbons, before me.

"I have been in the conservatory, and have brought you the first flowers of the season, Francis. And something else, which, perhaps you may not like so well."

She bent over me as she spoke, and leaning her hand lightly on my shoulder, kissed me twice. She had been chary of her caresses, for some time; and, when she did this for her own accord, I wheeled round in my chair, and looked up at her.

"You seem very happy, to-day, Alice."

"It is somebody's birthday," she said, stationing herself upon my knee and looking into my eyes. "And I wish somebody very many happy returns."

Her voice faltered a little—and if there has been any wrong feeling, Francis for the last six months, we will bury it to-day, now and forever."

She clung to me in silence, and hid her face upon my breast. I was moved, in spite of myself, and kissed the brown hair that was scattered over my shoulder, and said I was quite willing to forget everything (as if I had anything to forget)! At which she looked up with a bright smile, and I daresay thought me very magnanimous.

"And we will make a new beginning from this day, Francis."

"If you will, my child."

She caressed me again, after a queer, little fashion of her own, which always made me smile, and which consisted of a series of kisses bestowed systematically on different parts of my face—four, I believe, being allotted to my forehead, two to each cheek, two the chin, four to my lips, and four to my eyes. She went through this ceremony with a painstaking care and then looked me in the face. All her love and tenderness seemed to come up before me in that moment and effect the past and its unhappiness. I held her closely to my heart and her arms were around my neck.

"Will any one believe? My wife had scarcely left me five moments before the fancy came to me that I had shown too plainly the power she had over me. For months I had been schooling myself into coldness and indifference, and at her very first warm kiss or smile, I was completely routed. She had vexed, and thwarted, and annoyed me much during those months; it would not do to pardon her so fully and entirely before she had even asked my forgiveness. I took a sudden resolution; and when she came back into the room was buried in my papers once more. Poor child! She had had one half-hour's sunshine at last."

"One moment," she said, taking the pen out of my hand, and holding something over my head. "I have a birthday gift for you. Do you want it?"

"If you give it to me certainly."

"Then ask me for it."

I said nothing, but took to my pen again. Her countenance fell a little.

"Would you like it?" she said, timidly.

"There was a saint in old times," I said, quietly going on with my papers, "a namesake of mine, by the way—Saint Francis of Sales—who was accustomed to say, that one should never ask or refuse anything."

"Well! But I'm not talking to Saint Francis; I am talking to you. Will you have my little gift? Say yes—just to please me—just to make my happy day still happier."

"Don't be a child, Alice."

"It is childish, I know; but indulge me this once. It is such a little thing and it will make me very happy."

"I shall not refuse whatever you choose to give me. Only don't delay me long, for I want to go on with these papers."

The next moment she threw the toy (a pretty little bronze inkstand made like a Cupid, with his quiver full of pens) at my feet and turned away, grieved and angry. I stooped to pick up the figure—it was broken in two.

"Oh, you can condescend to lift it from the ground!" she said sarcastically.

"Upon my word, Alice you are the most unreasonable of beings. However, the little god of love can be easily mended."

"Yes."

She placed the fragments one upon the other and looked at me.

"It can be mended, but the accident must leave its trace, like all others. Oh, Francis!" she added, throwing herself down by my chair, and lifting my hand to her lips. "Why do you try me so? Do you really love me?"

"Alice," I said, impatiently "do get up. You tire me."

She rose and turned very pale.

"I will go then. But first answer my question. Do you love me, Francis?"

I felt anger and obstinacy in my heart—nothing else. Was she threatening me?

"Did you love me when you married me, Francis?"

"I did. But—"

"But you do not love me now?"

"Since you will have it," I said. "Go on!"

"I do not love you—not as you mean."

There was a dead silence in the room as the lying words left my lips, and she grew so white, and gave me such a look of anguish that I repented of my cruelty, and forgot my anger.

"I did not mean that, Alice," I cried. "You look ill and pale. Believe me, I am happy in being with you, Frank—happy in thinking that the same roof shelters us, and that we shall not part till one of us dies."

"We are older and wiser than we were, and sadder, too, dear Frank," she said with a smile. "Yet who knows? It may be that all the love has not left us yet."

And thus that chapter of our life is ended.

We have never touched upon the subject since; but I have waited calmly for years, and the same quiet light shines always in the eyes of Alice; the same deep, sad tones thrill my heart when I hear her speaking or singing. An angel could scarcely be gentler or kinder than she who was once so impetuous and full of fire. She was unreasoning and exacting and ardent and imperious in those days, I know, and my slower nature was always on the strain to keep pace with hers; but what a bright, joyous, happy creature she was!

It would have been different, but for me. O you, who read this little tale, remember in time that a kind word and a loving look cost little, although they do such great work; and that there is no wrong so deep as wrong done to a loving heart.

(The End.)

LOVE AMONG THE LOWLY.

(An Incident of London Street Life.)

She was a thin slip of a girl, with pale, sallow cheeks, and a figure as fragile as the flowers she carried in her basket.

It was her eyes and her hands which marked her off from the common herd. Had these been of regulation pattern, there was nothing to distinguish her from any dozen of her companions. But her eyes, which were brown in color, were large and lustrous, and had a provoking habit of drooping the lashes when she looked at one. Whether calculated coquetry or native-born man was "fetching" few men would have puzzled an expert to decide. That it was "fetching" few women would have ventured to deny. Her hand, small and well-shaped, boasted the taper fingers and filbert nails generally associated with birth and breeding.

She sold flowers in Cheapside. Her station was the steps of the Peel statue; and every morning, week in and week out, as the clocks of the city were striking ten she would deposit her basket at the foot of the column and prepare for the business of the day.

From ten to six she plied her wares diligently, pushing the sale with all the tact which a life's experience had taught her and all the wiles which a woman's wit could suggest. But each evening when the weary city was fast emptying, and the bells of the great cathedral were still echoing overhead, her eyes would dwell the long length of crowded asphalt with searching glances; and as she scanned the teeming multitudes pouring westward a spot of crimson would suddenly show in the wan, white cheeks, and the dark brown orbs would flash and kindle with a curious, mystic light.

He always contrived to be in Cheapside between six and half-past. It was their custom to walk together down Queen Victoria street to Blackfriars Bridge. At this point they separated—she crossing to the Surrey side, he taking a "turn" through Fleet street and the Strand before following in the same direction. They had commenced the practice in midwinter, and now they had reached midsummer.

From afar she could distinguish his barrow among the throng of vehicles which filled the thoroughfare. When he had "doubled" the corner and got into the comparative "slack water" of the churchyard she crossed over and joined him. A nod that was almost imperceptible, answered by a smile that was bright and sunny, was all the recognition that passed between them. The girl's glance wandered involuntarily to the barrow. It was the season for cherries, and she noticed the long array of empty baskets.

"Been 'avin' a good day, Joe, ain't yer?"

"Middlin' like."

"Why yain't on'y one 'molly' left?"

"P'raps I been givin' 'em away."

The tone was unmistakably surly. For the next thirty yards they walked on in silence, the girl watching the man furtively, the man pushing the barrow languidly, and staring strenuously at nothing.

"Ha' yer thought on wot I tole yer?" he said presently, as the girl stepped off the pavement to avoid collision with a parrel boy.

The light that had lighted them died out of her eyes, the color which had come into her cheeks forsook them, her mouth grew hard, and her face lost at once its youth and animation.

The man continued to stare into vacancy and walk mechanically after his barrow.

"I can't do ut, Joe. I can't do ut, I ain't got no rest these two nights—but I can't do ut."

The words came with difficulty, and the voice palpitated with emotion.

The man shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"Wot's the good uv 'im, eh? A dodderin' ole lunatic. Wot's the use uv 'im ter anybody? He orter been dead years ago."

"He's me father, Joe," she murmured, reproachfully.

"Father be blowed. He's dun a lot fer you, ain't he? Y'ort ter feel proud uv 'im, didn't yer? Pinchin' his gal's money—drinkin' till he's got the 'devils' an' talkin' 'tommy rot' 'bout being a gentleman an' the son uv a gentleman. W'y he ain't got no more decency 'an a pig. When he can't gorge himself no longer a pig'll lie in the swill trough, and when your gentleman father's had a skinful he'll snore by the hour 'longside a quart pot."

He stole a glance at the girl out of the corner of his eye. The busy, bustling life of London eddied around them;

the roar of the great Babylon was in their ears; but not Strephon and Chloris in the sweet seclusion of idyllic lanes could have been more oblivious to the passing moment than this pair of city lovers in the hot and crowded streets.

"P'raps he ain't as good as he might be. But there's wuss about, an'—he warn't allays so, Joe."

"Oh, if you likes to put up wiv 'im, 'Liza, so do. 'Tain't no concern o' mine—is it?" he added, moodily.

"I can't sen' 'im to the workus, Joe."

"But yer can sen' me to the devil!" he snapped sharply; and an ugly look leaped out of his eyes.

They passed under the railway bridge which spans the lower end of Queen Victoria street and reached the point where they usually parted. The girl stopped, but the man went on.

"Aren't yer goin' to sell out, Joe?" she queried, timidly, as he turned in the direction of the river.

"Wot for?"

The tone and the manner puzzled her more than the words.

For the moment they stood confronting each other, the face of the man working convulsively, and the girl's features contracted with pain.

CHAPTER IV.

Alice became weaker and grew really ill. A tour on the continent was strongly recommended by the doctors as the likeliest means of restoration. It was impossible for me to go; but some

WORN BY THE SEA.

Astonishing effects are sometimes produced by storm billows tearing away beaches and bluffs on the seacoast. But, upon the whole, the steady wearing effect of the ordinary sea-waves striking, or sweeping along, a shore-line exposed to in-drawing winds is even greater, although being distributed over a comparatively long interval of time, it attracts less attention. Some statistics recently published show that on the eastern coast of England, between Flamborough Head and Spurn Head, along a distance of 30 to 40 miles, the beach has been retreating before the onslaught of the ocean, for the last 37 years, at the average rate of nearly six feet a year. The same publication shows that man sometimes unintentionally assists the sea in destroying the bulwarks of the land. This has occurred at the great chalk cliffs near Dover, which have suffered from the withdrawal of a part of the drifting sand accumulating at their feet and shielding them from the direct assault of the waves. Long piers constructed at Dover and Folkestone have diverted the sand, and it has been found necessary to construct heavy sea-walls to protect the cliffs.