

Lost Alice

By Caroline Conrad

It was too true. At the eleventh hour the bride had vanished. Minister and guests waited below; the merry bevy of blooming bridesmaids, turned out at the last moment by Alice Dudevant herself, waited in an ante-room till they should be summoned back, and chatted in whispers.

Leroy Sunderland, waiting impatiently for his bride, at last stepped to the door of her chamber and tapped lightly upon it.

He waited a little, and tapped more loudly; then still again, and finally he spoke her name in a low voice:

“Alice!”

Still that odd silence. Alice always was so queer.

Leroy Sunderland waited still, chewing his moustache in annoyed perplexity, and Alice’s aunt came bustling up to see what the delay was, and to mutter, as she went down again:

“Really, this is ridiculous! What notion has she got in her head now?”

Five, ten, fifteen minutes more passed, and still that deathly silence reigned in the bridal chamber, and in the ante-room perplexity and vexation. Leroy had gone so far as to try the door gently once, and found it locked.

As he was turning away, one of those fair girls, Alice’s pet friend, put a little hand timidly on his arm.

“I’m afraid something is the matter,” she said, in an awe-struck whisper.

Leroy looked down into the anxious face.

“Why, what could be?” he questioned sharply.

“Only she might be sick, you know. She might have fainted there all by herself.”

“That is so. Will somebody call Mrs. Dudevant?”

One of the girls put her head into the hall, and told a servant, and Mrs. Dudevant came at once, and having tried the door, and called to Alice, decided that of course something must be the matter.

The door was forced accordingly, and disclosed to the pale group flocking through it, *emptiness*. That only. The pretty, dazzling vision they had left there had vanished as completely as though she had dissolved in thin air.

“Really,” exclaimed Mrs. Dudevant—she was only Alice’s aunt, all the relative she had in the world though, and not extravagantly fond of her niece—“Really,” exclaimed she, “this is most incomprehensible. I don’t know about a girl indulging such whims as this, half an hour before she is to be married. Leroy, what shall be done?”

Leroy looked both vexed and foolish, but was silent.

Mrs. Dudevant crossed the room to a wardrobe and ostentatiously threw it wide, passing within, and Alice’s little friend burst into tears of uncontrollable agitation.

“You silly child, what are you crying about?” demanded Mrs. Dudevant; “Of course she is here somewhere.”

But where? That was the question.

The bedroom communicated with this, the dressing-room, by folding doors, which stood wide now, so that it could be plainly seen there was no one there, and other egress there was none, save that by which they had entered, and the windows. By the one way she had certainly not gone in the flesh, and for the windows, it would have been a rare escapade indeed, for a bride in all the flowing paraphernalia of wedding gear to have climbed out of them, and down that distance to the ground. Yet one of these ways, since she was unquestionably gone, she must have taken; and since also, most unquestionably, she had not passed the waiting bridesmaids and Leroy Sunderland, to their knowledge, there remained only the window.

“I believe she has gone crazy, that I do,” muttered Mrs. Dudevant; “no girl in her senses would treat her friends to a performance of this kind.”

“Of course she is here somewhere,” she persisted, when the mystery continued to baffle and perplex all, refusing absolutely to be solved.

But if the vanished bride was anywhere about the Dudevant grounds or belongings, she must have been hidden with surprising carefulness, since the most anxious search elicited no traces of her.

Alice Dudevant had been a wayward, spoiled child till fifteen, when, both parents dying, she had passed to the guardianship of this aunt, who, in her efforts to make over the impetuous child, had only developed, by harsh treatment, the very traits she sought to overcome.

These two had always been at cross-purposes; and outspoken, high-tempered Alice made no secret of these disagreements. Everybody in the neighborhood knew of them.

Leroy Sunderland had had somewhat of a stormy wooing; but his quiet persistence, together with Alice’s determination, had finally carried the day, in spite of Madame’s disapproval.

There were whispers of a possible elopement with another lover, but there was scarcely room for such a probability, the two had been so apparently devoted to each other, and their "course of true love" had been such common talk.

That Leroy Sunderland suffered now from this harrowing mystery which wrapped the fate of his beautiful love, no one could doubt who looked at him; but that he did not connect that fate in any possible manner with unfaithfulness to him was equally certain.

As time wore on and the mystery only deepened, people gradually settled into a conclusion which had somehow begun in an untraceable rumor, that Alice Dudevant had long shown occasional symptoms of insanity, and that on the night of her disappearance she must have been under the influence of such derangement. To this succeeded a whisper that she was dead.

Alice Dudevant was an heiress, and her aunt, by the will of her father, controlled her property till she married, and heired it in case of her death before such event.

Mrs. Dudevant exhibited no remarkable grief at the probable fate of her beautiful niece. She was, on the contrary, quite gay on poor Alice's money. She had her carriage, and she dressed more than ever, and aimed at a general style of expenditure that she had been a stranger to once.

One day as Madame returned from a drive, she found Leroy Sunderland waiting for her.

"Mrs. Dudevant," he said respectfully, "I wish to see once more the apartments which were my poor girl's."

With the least change of color, and great show of alacrity, Madame led the way.

Leroy passed her as they entered the dressing-room, and approaching the wardrobe, which stood as formerly, gravely opened it.

Portions of the lost girl's clothing still hung within. As he put his hand upon them Mrs. Dudevant darted forward, and stopped.

"Well?" he questioned, turning a stern gaze on her white face.

Mrs. Dudevant clasped her hands beseechingly.

"Don't move them, pray, Mr. Sunderland; my darling hung them there herself. I never have had the heart to touch them."

"Your darling!" repeated the young man indignantly, and compressing his lips, tore down the whole array with a sweep of his hand.

A door stood disclosed. He tried it. It was locked.

“Madame, I will trouble you for the key. This is precisely what I came to find.”

Pale as a sheet, and trembling in every limb, Madame refused.

The young man smiled bitterly.

“It is of no consequence,” he said. “I know my darling is not in there now, but she was in the room to which this door leads, in a drugged sleep, all that awful night while we were looking for her. Woman, confess all now; it is your only chance.”

And Mrs. Dudevant fell on her knees in an agony of terror, and confessed everything.

She had always intended some harm to poor Alice, but always her courage had failed her till this last desperate moment, when the chance and the nerve suddenly faced her. She had come in by this very door upon the girl as she knelt alone in her room, spending the last moments of her maidenhood in secret prayer. Waiting till she rose from her knees, she had smilingly whispered her to come in her room an instant.

Under the influence of the softening moment, Alice had unsuspectingly followed her. Once there, it was not difficult to induce her to taste the insidious draught already prepared. Insensibility quickly followed. The door was reclosed, and a wardrobe on the aunt’s side of the wall concealed it there, as in Alice’s room.

Leroy cut all that short by demanding:

“Does my poor girl yet live?”

The woman’s white lips syllabled, “Yes.”

“Take me to her, then.”

He found her in a private madhouse, well-nigh crazed indeed with the fright and horror, but, thank Heaven, not quite.

She knew her lover, though so incredulous of the blessed sight, poor thing, that she could hardly utter his name. Only love would have known her, so changed was she to the shadow of her old, sweet, impetuous self. He took her home, and very soon wedding guests gathered once more, and this time the bride did not vanish.

Mrs. Dudevant was glad to hide herself far from those who spared her that punishment which was due her wickedness only on this condition.

Leroy had got his clew by watching Mrs. Dudevant, and then bribing a servant in whom he perceived she placed great confidence.

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