

A TANGLED WEB.

(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER VIII.

Before a month had passed, Sylvia showed marked signs of improvement. She still looked rather like a colt, but like a colt that is well fed and cared for; whereas when Neville—or Jack, as he had christened himself—had bought her, she was like a colt that had been left to the mercy of the cold wind and bitter weather on some bleak moor.

Her face had lost the wan, sorrow-stricken expression which had gone straight to the heart of Neville that ever-memorable night on which he had first seen her, and though sometimes she was quiet and thoughtful, and the gray eyes dark with melancholy, showed that she was thinking of her dead father it was evident that Time, the consoler, was passing his healing hand over that wound, and soothing its aching.

Meth, who had at first merely tolerated the girl's presence, and scarcely looked at her without muzzling: "Lawk's sakes, nine hundred pounds!" got used to her, and, in a way, fond of her. At any rate, she was good enough to permit Sylvia to do most of the work of the hut, and would have extended her kindness to the length of allowing Sylvia to do it all, but Neville interfered and informed Meth that he had not bought a domestic servant, but a "sister."

As Sylvia grew stronger she became happier. Those wondrous gray eyes of hers grew bright with a light that seemed to illuminate the hut, especially at night, when the solitary candle shone in them as she sat at her needle-work—the said needle-work generally consisting of repairs to "Jack's" clothes, which sorely needed them.

Her voice, too, altered, and though it was still low-pitched and refined, there was a ring in it which reminded Neville of bells heard at a distance, of an Eolian harp, and sundry other kinds of music. But if her voice was like music, her laugh was music itself. It is true that she laughed but seldom, but when she did, Neville found himself obliged to laugh too, or die, and he caught himself setting traps for that laugh, and rejoicing when he succeeded in catching it.

It was a strange life for a young girl. Besides her "brother" Jack and Meth she saw no one, excepting at a distance; for the miners, taking the hint which Neville had given Lockett, carefully avoided the neighborhood of the Young 'Un's claim, and left him alone more severely than ever.

But Sylvia did not appear to find it dull, and seemed perfectly content. Neville had found two or three books at the bottom of his trunk—a volume of Tennyson, Macaulay's "England," "Wild Sports in the West," and "The Farmer's Vade Mecum;" and Sylvia devoured these of an evening, when she felt disinclined for needle-work, and sometimes brought one down to the edge of the claim and read there very often however, letting the book lie disregarded in her lap while her eyes dwelt on the handsome face and stalwart form of her "brother," as he picked and dug and toiled in the dusty hole.

Indeed her eyes were seldom off him when he was within her sight, and she followed him about unobtrusively whenever she could, and seemed quite contented if he would allow her just to keep him company, and did not mind his long fits of silence.

Neville was not a great talker, but often when Sylvia thought he was unaware of, on had forgotten her presence, he was thinking of her. Half unconsciously, he liked to have her near him, and it she remained away from the claim longer than usual, he found himself looking out for her.

For the rest he treated her as a young man of nearly twenty always treats a girl of fifteen. She was a mere child in his eyes, a child to be petted and humored and taken care of; but sometimes he felt himself startled and bothered by some trick of speech or tone of thought of the child which savored very strongly of the full-grown woman, and at such times, when for instance, she would quote Tennyson as she had quoted Shakespeare, and let fall some bit of worldly wisdom from her soft red lips, he would straighten his back and wipe the perspiration from his brow, and stare at her meditatively, and the question would rise in his mind uneasily, "What on earth shall I do with her when she grows up?"

But he always put it aside with the reflection that she was only a child and that she wouldn't grow up for years yet and so end with laughing at her precocity.

As to the light in which Sylvia regarded him—who can describe or even divine it? This much may, however, be said, that she regarded him as her brother, and in the recesses of her girlish mind thought him the best, the handsomest, the bravest, and altogether the noblest specimen of men.

Besides, he was something more than her brother. She never forgot for a moment, though since his injunction she had never again referred to it, that he had "bought her," and she regarded him as her owner and master. She considered that she owed him not only sisterly love, but implicit obedience.

Neville had only to express a wish for her to set about gratifying it; indeed, very often Neville found that she had supplied his desires before he had given them voice. She felt that she owed him unquestioning obedience. If he had told her to climb up the rugged hill that overlooked the valley, and throw herself from the highest precipice, she would have done it.

She was his by right of purchase, and something more; and this conviction, which in her mind was as strong as a religion,

brought no pain with it, but rather a vague kind of pleasure and satisfaction.

During the month things had been looking up at Lorn Hope Camp, and, though no one had found a nugget as big as Neville's the men had had better fortune than before, and some of them declared that the "Orphan," as they called Sylvia, had brought the luck back again to Lorn Hope Camp, and that they were all going to be rich.

Neville's claim only just paid for the labor at very low wages, but he still stuck to it, and with more contentment than he could have imagined possible.

Working for one's self, with no one to share hopes and fears, was a very different thing to working with Sylvia's sympathy always "turned on," and the dust and the heat, though they were really quite as bad as before, did not seem half so unendurable and aggravating with Sylvia sitting by the edge of the pit, just out of the dust, and in the shade of an awning he had rigged up for her.

She was never tired of sitting there, and sometimes, after a long silence, Neville, thinking she had fallen asleep, would turn and look at her and find her gray eyes fixed upon him as if she found him more worthy of her attention than the book or the really beautiful scenery which stretched before them.

One day in the midst of one of these silences, she began to sing. At first she sang in a low, subdued voice; then, as if she had forgotten his presence, her voice grew fuller, but not less sweet, and she sang like a nightingale.

Neville was startled, but he was careful to keep his back to her and not frighten the bird that had suddenly filled the hot silence with such delicious melody.

He waited until she had finished, and then he said, as carelessly as he could, as he scraped the dust from his spade: "Bravo, Syl! You don't pipe badly. Thought it was a thrush at first—an English thrush, you know."

"I know," she said, with an utter absence of self-consciousness, without even a blush—"I remember." Her eyes grew absent and thoughtful. "Yes, I remember. It must be a long time ago."

"When you were in England?" said Neville.

She nodded. "Yes, it was in the country I heard the birds sing," she pressed her lips together and knit her brows till they made a straight line over her eyes. "Yes, it was in the country, and I can remember, now I try, that I was riding a little pony, and—"

She put her hand to her forehead and sighed. "It's all gone now. Wait a minute," and she knit her brows.

"Never mind," said Neville. "No," she said, carelessly, "it doesn't matter, does it? And do you like to hear me sing, Jack?"

"I do indeed, very much," he replied. "What was it you were singing? I seem to have a recollection of it."

"Bid Me Discourse," she answered promptly. "It was—she hesitated a moment, but only for a moment—it was one of my father's favorites. He taught it me, and some more of Bishop's."

"Let's have another of the bishop's then," said Neville.

"Not the bishop's; it's a man's name. Did you never hear of him, Jack?"

"Never," said Neville, placidly.

She pondered for a moment or two over this confession of ignorance.

"You don't seem to know much, Jack," she remarked, not in a tone of censure, but by way of recording a simple fact.

"You're right, Syl," he assented cheerfully. "What I don't know would make the biggest book you ever saw. My ignorance is—sublime. If I hadn't been such a complete duffer I shouldn't have been here grave-digging."

"Where would you have been, Jack?" she enquired, leaning her head on her little brown paw and looking at him with her great gray eyes.

"In the army," he said, shoveling up the dust. "I had my chance, but—but I threw it away. I might have had another, for the governor was as fond of me as I was of him, but for—"

He stopped suddenly. He had been speaking more to himself than to her. "Poor Jack!" came a soft murmur like sweet music.

Neville looked up. "Oh, I don't deserve any pity, Syl," and he laughed. "I only got my deserts. Many a better fellow than me—"

"Then I," said Sylvia. "Oh? Oh, yes! I'm not much of a grammarian; that's one of the reasons I'm here."

"Then it's a lucky thing for me you are not," she said, naively.

"That's one way of looking at it," he said. "Now sing something else, Syl."

She sang to him again—this time an old French ballad.

Neville leaned against the side of the pit and listened with all his ears. He was passionately fond of music.

"Hullo!" he said. "What's that—French? Who taught you that? But of course—I beg your pardon, Syl."

"Yes," she said in a low voice, "he taught me that—everything. He said knowledge is power to the person who knows how to use it—and yet he was so poor," she mused

thoughtfully. She was already beginning to discern that there is no greater fool than the maxim maker.

"You don't remember your mother, Syl?" asked Neville, as it occurred to him that he might learn something of her people. He would have to find them some day and restore her.

She shook her head.

"No. She died soon after I was born. Papa seldom spoke of her; it always made him sad and unhappy, and yet I know that they were so happy once—for he told me that they lived in a beautiful house in the country, and that the sun always shone—he meant that they were always happy."

"Yes; he couldn't have meant that the sun really always shone—that is, it was in England," said Neville.

"Yes, it was in England their trouble came."

"What trouble?"

She shook her head thoughtfully. "I don't know. Papa lost all his money. It was not his fault; he had an enemy—"

Neville stared at her solemn face.

"A what?"

"An enemy," she repeated—"a man who hated him and vowed to ruin him. Then mamma died—I think she died of grief."

She paused, and Neville turned his head away. If there had been any tears in her eyes, they had gone when he looked round again.

"Well?" he said; he had not learned much that was of any use to him as yet.

"Then papa left England, and we traveled about. We lived in France, and papa taught in a school—that's as far back as I can remember—and we were very happy—we two. We used to take long walks along the river-bank, and he'd tell me the name of every flower and teach me things. Then one day he came home very sad and tired-looking, and said that we must leave. His enemy had been to the school and told lies about him, and the people had believed the enemy because he was rich and powerful and papa was poor and unknown."

"Neville's blue eyes expanded. "Why it's just like a novel, Syl," he said, gravely.

She nodded. "Is it? Then we took to wandering again, and sometimes papa got work teaching in a bank, or an office; but sooner or later the enemy would come and we had to leave."

"He was a nice kind of man—the enemy, as you call him. What was his name, Syl?" She shook her head.

"I don't know. Papa never told me."

"I'm sorry for that," said Neville, grimly.

"Why, Jack?"

"Because I should make it my business when I got out of this hole to find that individual, and try and square accounts."

"What could you do, Jack?" she asked, dubiously.

"Well, I could give him the soundest thrashing—but I suppose he would be too old, confound him!"

"Yes, she said, softly. "But I thank you all the same, Jack; and she stretched out the brown paw and laid it on his hot, strong arm."

Neville endured the caress, permitted it just as a young fellow of twenty suffers his sister to kiss him.

"Well," he said, "is that all?"

"That's all, I think—except that poor papa lost heart at last, and we crossed the ocean—oh, how sad I was!—and came here to Australia. But he couldn't dig—he wasn't strong enough, and was different to the rough men, and—"

She stopped and looked down at the pit. "I hope you'll find another nugget, Jack."

"So do I," he said, resuming work.

"I think there's bound to be one there. Meth says that where there's one there's sure to be another. Jack."

"Well?"

"Did you give Meth all the money?" she said, you did."

"Yes," he replied, shortly. "But Meth shouldn't let it take out of school."

The gray eyes grew soft and melting as they dwelt on him.

"Jack, I think you are the best, the most generous—"

"Hullo!" he interrupted, with a laugh. "Stop that, Syl. Don't knock me down with compliments of that kind, especially when I'm busy."

He stooped and sifted the sand, and put two or three tiny lumps of gold on the edge.

"That's something like, Syl."

She took them up in her hand, and her eyes sparkled.

"Oh, Jack, if you could only find another nugget!"

"Yes," he said; "and I want it more than I did."

"Do you?" she said, turning over the yellow morsel. "Why? Ah, yes; you haven't much money left after paying for me—"

"Now, then?"

"—And giving so much to Meth. But what will you do with it, Jack, when you find it?"

And she threw herself full length toward the edge of the pit, very much as an Indian does, but with the added grace of a young girl, and looked eagerly down into it.

"What shall I do with it?" said Neville, cheerfully. "Well, I shall send you home to England and put you at a good school—a first-rate one, you know where you will be with young ladies like yourself. And then—Take care! There, you dropped those lumps into the pit."

She had let the gold drop from her hand and had shrunk back under the awning, her face turned away from him.

"That's what I shall do," continued Neville, picking up the gold carefully, and ignorant of her sudden change of position and manner. "The sooner you are out of this hole, the better. It's not the proper place for a young lady. You ought to be in England, in the care of nice people, and that's where I mean to send you with the first nugget that turns up. And then perhaps if the luck holds out I may come over and see how you are getting on. But there by that time I expect you'll be ashamed of a rough digger who says 'me' for 'I,' and

—No, I don't mean that. You're not that sort, are you, Syl?"

He looked up and saw that she had turned her back to him, and that her head was drooping over her bosom. But with the blindness of his sex and age he had not the least idea of what was the matter with her.

"Feeling hot and tired, Syl?" he said. "Better go in-doors. But just wait five minutes. I fancy I've come upon a streak, and you are as keen on it as I am. I know, and ought to be keener after what I've told you."

She was keen enough, as a rule, and was wont to watch every spade-ful of the dirt he threw up; but now she seemed quite indifferent, and would not turn her head.

"There's gold here," said Neville, cheerfully. "I'd stake my life on it; and you may see dear old England sooner than you think, Syl. Lord, though, how shall I miss you! That comes of my never having a sister, you see. I sha'n't have anybody to come and talk and sing to me when you're gone. Just pitch me that 'cradle,' will you?"

She pushed it with her tiny foot, still keeping her face away from him.

"Look here!" he said. "What did I say? Here's some more of it. Look at this, Syl!"

But, to his amazement, she refused to look at him, but rose slowly, and, tossing the thick, dark hair from her face, walked majestically toward the hut.

CHAPTER IX.

NEVILLE looked after her with all a man's beautiful stupidity.

"Now, I wonder what I said to offend her?" he mused. "What rum things girls are! Any one would have thought that she'd have been delighted at the thought of getting out of this beastly place and going back to England. Well, there's no understanding women, even when they're kids. I remember little Audrey Hope used to be just like that—take the huff in a moment. Little Audrey! By jingo! I suppose she's grown into a woman by this time. What fun we used to have!"

He leaned upon his spade and looked vacantly across the plain. He had forgotten the little maiden who had stalked off to the hut, and was back in England, a boy again, romping with Audrey Hope of the Grange.

With a sigh he roused himself and resumed work. At dinner time it was Meth, and not Sylvia, who appeared.

"Hullo!" he said. "Where's Sylvia?"

Meth shook her head. "Pears to me that young gal o' yours. Young 'Un' is gettin' proud. 'You take his dinner, Meth,' says she as bold as brass; 'I sha'n't! I told yer all along as you was pamperin' her too much. Young 'Un. There she sits, with her hands in her lap, starin' at nothin', just like—just like an Injun's himage!"

"All right," said Neville, hoisting himself up on to the bank and beginning to munch his dinner. "You let her alone, Meth; I won't have her interfered with."

"Hinterfere! Who's hinterfere with her? Seems to me I'm no accounts now, and 'ud better take my hook."

"Oh, no!" said Neville, who thoroughly understood Meth. "You've got to stick by me, Meth, because you've got to take care of Sylvia."

"Seems to me, Young 'Un," retorted Meth, darkly, "that it's you as wants takin' care of more than her."

Neville fell to work again directly after dinner. The claim "paid" well that day and in an unusually buoyant frame of mind, he shouldered his tools and wended home.

Sylvia was seated very much as Meth had described her, and when Neville spread out the result of his day's work on the plank table, she would scarcely deign to look at it, but swept it into a heap disdainfully, and plumped down his supper in front of him.



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"Why, you might be an empress, the way you treat the 'root of all evil,' Syl!" he said, with a short laugh. "I tell you, it's been a jolly good day. But come and have your supper."

"I don't want any supper," she said, and walked to the door of the hut.

"What did I tell you?" said Meth. "That's the way she's been behavein' all the afternoon. It's pride and a full stomach—that's what it is."

"Shut up and leave her alone!" said Neville, good-temperedly. "You don't understand a young girl, Meth. Leave her alone; that's the best thing to do."

He ate his supper, but with only half the usual relish, and with many a glance toward the door of the hut, and was filling his pipe when he heard a cry.

He dropped his pipe and leaped to the door. Sylvia was not there, and was nowhere to be seen.

He ran out wildly, calling for her as he ran. It was dark, as dark as it can be at that time of the year and night in Australia, and he blundered on straight before him, still calling her name.

Suddenly he heard, to the right of him, the cry repeated. It was her voice.

He tore along, his revolver in his hand, and stumbled upon a horse. Beside the horse stood Lavarick struggling with Sylvia.

Neville hurled himself upon the man like a thunder-bolt, and struck him twice with the stock end of the revolver.

Lavarick released Sylvia and turned upon Neville. Something glittered dully in the darkness, and Neville felt a sharp stinging pain in his shoulder. The next instant he had a grip on Lavarick's throat, and that gentleman was within an appreciable distance of his end when Neville felt a hand upon his arm, and a trembling voice said in his ear:

"No, no! Don't Jack, don't! He's not worth it."

Neville loosened his hold, and Lavarick struggled to his feet, his long, claw-like hands fumbling at his throat, his eyes, almost starting from their sockets, glaring in a frenzy of terror at his assailant.

Neville gave him a shake which threatened to loosen every tooth in his head.

"Lavarick," he said in a voice terrible in its unatural coolness. "I shall have to kill you!"

Sylvia, shaking in every limb, drew near with a faint cry; but Neville waved her back. His face was white, his lips set, and the blue eyes seemed to flash flames.

A strong man's rage is a terrible sight, but it is also glorious, and no one can measure the depth of admiration, adoration which filled the heart of the young girl to overflowing as she looked at her brother and protector transformed by his righteous anger into a demi-god.

"I shall have to kill you, Lavarick!" he repeated.

Lavarick put up both hands. "Give me time. Let me speak," he gasped, hoarsely. "I—I'll give you all the money—"

Neville flung him down and knocked his head on the hard ground two or three times.

"You bound!" he said, with each knock, "you viper! You're not fit to crawl about among honest men. You'll give me—"

There—

He flung him away.

"Get up and keep out of my reach. Wait—stay there! Sylvia, you go home while I talk to this gentleman."

She hesitated a moment, then turned and went, glancing back fearfully again and again.

"Now," said Neville, between his clinched teeth, "you owe your life, my friend, to her—you know that?"

Lavarick, still feeling his throat, and half choking, made a terrified gesture of assent.

"Very well, then. But take my second and last warning—the last, do you hear? I give you till to-morrow morning—six o'clock. If when I come down to the camp at that time I find you still there, I shall shoot you on sight—like a dog. Wait—"

For Lavarick, with an evil glance with his skew eyes, was preparing to shuffle off. The horse had returned to the camp long since.

"I don't think you'll risk your skin again—and yet you have done so. What is your object, Lavarick?"

The man looked at him silently, then dropped his eyes to the ground.

"A man of my years don't like to be teased by a young 'un like you," he said, "and the boys have worried me a good bit about it. I didn't mean her any harm. I wanted to get the best of you—that's all."

Neville, ignorant that Lavarick had played the spy while Sylvia's father was dying, did not know whether to accept this reason for Lavarick's attempt at kidnapping or not.

"Very good," he said. "You'll get the worst of me next time, my friend. Now be off! Remember the boys will want another undertaker to-morrow if I find you still in the camp. Go!"

Lavarick immediately availed himself of the permission, and Neville, after listening until his footsteps had died away, returned slowly to the hut.

Lavarick's persistence puzzled him. He knew that the man was a coward, and that it must have taken a strong inducement to urge him to make the attempt which Neville had foiled. Perhaps the "boys" had goaded him on in the hope that Neville would dispose of him. Lavarick was no favorite, and could well be spared.

Sylvia was watching at the door of the door of the hut for Neville.

"Has—has he gone?" she asked in a voice that trembled but very slightly.

"Very much gone," said Neville. "Jack! You don't mean—"

"No—no," he said, laughing shortly; "though he deserved it, and would have got it but for you. What I meant was that he's gone for good. Lorn Hope Camp will be deprived of one of its orn-

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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