

(CONTINUED FROM TENTH PAGE.)

"Sometimes, while I've been lying here, I've thought it was all a dream, and that it wasn't true. Sometimes I've even seen him—seen Jack—standing near the bed and heard him talking; and when I came to and found it was only a dream, and that he really was dead, I was sorry, sorry that I had not died too. We should both be in heaven then and happy—but not happier than we used to be," she added, with a simple pathos that brought the tears to Lorrimore's eyes.

He remained silent, for he knew that it did her no harm to talk. It is the pent-up grief which works the keenest torture.

"There was no one like him," she went on, more to herself than to Lorrimore. "All the rest in the camp seemed different; not one like him. My Jack—she lifted her eyes solemnly to his face—"was like my father—one of God's gentlemen."

Lord Lorrimore stroked her hand soothingly.

"I think I know how you must have loved him, my poor child," he said. "If I had ever had a sister, I should have wished her to love me as you loved your brother. Other hearts as well as yours will miss him. He must have had many friends in the camp."

She shook her head. "No," she said, absently. "They all admired him, but he had no friends. They were different; they were all common men, not like Jack—and now I am all alone!" and she hid her face again.

Unconsciously she had given Lord Lorrimore the information he required.

If this girl's brother, who was dead, was the only gentleman in Lorn Hope Camp—and he felt that her opinion could be relied on—then Neville Lynne was not there.

It never occurred to him for a single moment that she was mourning for the very man for whom he was searching.

How could her brother be Neville Lynne who never had a sister?

He stayed with her a little longer, until her tears had ceased and she had fallen back with her hands clasped tightly on the coat; then he stole out and hunted up the doctor and gave him an account of the interview.

"Poor girl!" said the doctor. "It must have been heart thrilling, my lord, but it's a good sign. She has seemed half-frozen with grief, and when they're like that one can only wait for the thaw. She'll be better and grow stronger now, and then the sooner she is taken away out of this better."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it. You see, what's the matter with her is the loss of her brother; and while she's here, in the midst of scenes that must remind her of him, she'll pine and fret—that's the common sense. Take her away, my lord, as soon as you can. I'll answer for her recovery once the change of scene begins to lessen the memory of her trouble. She's got everything in her favor, you see for I never saw a stronger little lassie. Yes, what you've got to do is to get her away from here as quickly as you can. We shall be sorry enough to lose her, for the poor girl with her sweet patient ways has stolen into my misanthropic heart, and it will be like parting from a child of her own."

"Very well," said Lord Lorrimore. "But I must ask her what she would like to do; for, though she is only a girl in years, she seems a woman in experience and self-reliance."

"That's just how she strikes us," said the doctor. "She's been through a lot, my lord. That girl's history would be worth hearing."

Lorrimore thought the matter out during the remainder of the day. Most men would have rested, satisfied with what he had done, but Lorrimore was not the man to shirk a responsibility; and somehow he felt that Providence had placed Sylvia in his care, at any rate for the present.

There would be a certain amount of inconvenience in travelling about with a young girl, but he could engage a companion and chaperon for her, and no doubt he would be able to learn something of her people from her and ultimately restore her to them.

That same evening, Sylvia, waking with a sigh from a troubled sleep, saw a strange face bending over her. She was startled for the moment, for hitherto her only nurse had been the kind-hearted doctor's wife. And yet there was nothing in this new face to startle her, for, though a very sad one, it was a gentle and, in a way, a beautiful one.

It belonged to a woman who, though still young, looked as if some great trouble had prematurely aged her. The face was pale and marked with the lines and hollows which sorrow graves more surely and deeply even than time, but the eyes were gentle and full of sympathy, and the lips smiled with a gentle pity. Altogether it was a sweet face, and Sylvia's large eyes rested thoughtfully on it.

"You did not expect to see a stranger," said the woman in a low voice. "I hope you do not mind my being here? Mrs. Langley has gone to help nurse a man who has broken his leg, and I asked permission to come and sit beside you."

"It is very kind of you," said Sylvia, with the apathetic resignation to anything and everything which belongs to a mind debilitated by bereavement.

The new nurse smoothed the pillows and drew Sylvia's mass of hair from her white face, then sat down beside her, with that motionless quietude which is the first quality in a nurse. Sylvia lay and watched her dreamily and absently for some time, neither of them speaking.

The pale face, with its sad, resigned expression, interested her in a vague unconscious fashion. At last she said:

"What is your name?"

The woman started slightly, as if she had been engrossed in her own thoughts, but she answered at once:

"Mercy Fairfax."

Sylvia repeated it mechanically.

"It's a pretty name," he said. "Do you live in Wildfall Camp? Have you been here long?"

"At present. No, not very long—I came out with the doctor and his wife."

"Are you any relation of theirs?" asked Sylvia in an objectless way.

"No," replied Mercy. "I came out from England with them. I was quite alone and friendless, and they were very good to me." Her voice faltered slightly.

Sylvia's face flushed.

"I—beg your pardon," she said in her direct fashion. "I didn't mean to ask painful questions. Yes, they must be very kind people. See how they have been to me."

"The world is full of good people," said Mercy, gently.

Sylvia turned her head away.

"And bad," she murmured, thinking of Lavarick.

"And bad—yes," assented Mercy. "But God rules over all!"

Sylvia turned her head again and looked at the speaker. The tone of resignation and long suffering patience impressed her.

"Do you like being here in camp?" she asked, for the sake of saying something. "You look so quiet, so unsuited to the wild life."

"One has to adapt one's self to circumstances," said Mercy. "But I don't think I must let you talk, or Mrs. Langley, when she comes back will say that I have been anything but a satisfactory nurse. Try and go to sleep again; and she arranged the bed-clothes with a gentle hand."

Sylvia sighed.

"I am almost afraid to go to sleep," she said, pitifully, "for I dream directly—dream of all—that I have lost!" and the tears welled to her eyes.

Mercy bent over her and wiped her eyes.

"Try and think that all is for the best," she murmured. "It is a hard thing to do, I know—yes, I know! For I, too, have been so unhappy as to fear to sleep and dream. But try and remember, dear, that we are all in God's hands!"

Sylvia sighed and closed her eyes. The wise words brought little consolation just at that moment, but the voice—the tone in which they were uttered—soothed her.

She slept for some time, and when she awoke, Mercy was still sitting beside her, watchful and unwearied.

"You are still there?" Sylvia said.

Mercy assented.

"Did you think I should leave you? Yes, I am here, and I am going to ask Mrs. Langley to let me stay—that is, if you would care to have me."

"Yes, stay," said Sylvia, with a sigh.

"I'd like you to stay."

"I'm glad of that," responded Mercy, gently, then relapsed into silence.

Several times that night Sylvia turned her eyes upon the pale, sad face, and each time with increased interest. When one is in the depths of trouble and sorrow the sight of other people's happiness jars painfully upon the sore heart; but here was a face which, with its expression of resignation and peace, acted like a balm on the bereaved girl's aching spirit.

When Lord Lorrimore came to the tent the next morning he was almost as startled as Sylvia had been at the presence of the new nurse, for in her plain black dress, and with her subdued manner, she seemed singularly out of place in such a wild spot as a diggers' camp.

She made Lord Lorrimore a respectable little bow.

"You will find her much better this morning, I hope, my lord," she said—for Lord Lorrimore's rank had leaked out by this time—and she went and stood at the door of the tent, just out of hearing.

"So you've got a new nurse?" said Lorrimore, taking the hand Sylvia extended to him. "And I hope her report of you is a correct one."

"Yes," said Sylvia, "I am better."

"Well enough to listen for a little while to something I have to say," said Lorrimore.

"What is it?" she asked, opening her eyes upon him almost fearfully.

"Nothing alarming," he answered.

"There is no more bad news."

"There can be no more for me," she answered, with a simple pathos.

"I wanted to talk over a proposal I am going to make," said Lorrimore, cheerfully, "and I hope you'll be quite frank with me, Sylvia." He hesitated as he spoke her name, for she looked so womanly that he almost fancied he ought to say "Miss Sylvia." The doctor thinks you ought to have a change as quickly as possible—that it would be better for you to leave Wildfall."

"Yes?" she said, apathetically.

"Now, I am going away directly," he said; "and what would you say to coming with me?"

Sylvia looked at him thoughtfully, but without answering.

"I am going to travel for some months, and the change would do you good, we all think. Of course, you must do as you like. I don't want to ask you painful questions, Sylvia, but it is for you to decide whether you will stay here with the kind friends who will, I know, be glad to have you, or whether perhaps you would like to go back to Lorn Hope."

A shudder shook her.

"Go back there—without Jack!" she breathed.

"Very well," said Lorrimore, quickly. "Will you come with me, then? I will get some kind woman to keep you company, and she and I will take every care of you."

She put out her hand to him.

"Why do you take so much trouble for me?" she said.

Lorrimore smiled.

"Well, for one thing, because you are not capable of taking any trouble for your-

self," he said, lightly. "And now, then for another question. I want to ask you about your friends, relations, Sylvia."

She shook her head.

"I have none," she said. "I had only Jack, and now—"

Lorrimore saw that it was useless to question her further.

"Then you will go with me?" he said.

"Perhaps when you get to England we may find that you are not so friendless as you think."

"Perhaps," she said, indifferently. "I don't know. I shall know, but not yet;" and her hand went to the sealed packet which Lavarick had so nearly succeeded in stealing.

At that moment the doctor and his wife came in, and Lorrimore turned to greet them.

"Miss Sylvia and I have just been coming to a decision as to her future. How soon do you think we can start, doctor?"

"In a day or two," said the doctor.

Mrs. Langley stooped and kissed Sylvia.

"My dear, I shall miss you very, very much," she whispered. "But it is better for you to go."

"I shall want someone—some woman to accompany her," said Lorrimore, walking toward the door of the hut with the doctor.

"I've thought of that, and will find someone. What you want is a steady, sober person—neither too old nor too young—who will not only be a watch-dog, but a companion for her."

"Exactly," said Lorrimore. "But I'm afraid you'll find it rather difficult to secure such a person in a diggers' camp."

"Yes—yes," said the doctor, thoughtfully.

As he spoke, his eyes fell upon the figure of Mercy Fairfax standing outside the tent, with some needle-work in her hand. He put his hand upon Lord Lorrimore's arm.

"By Jove!" he said, "there's the very woman, if she will go."

Lorrimore looked curiously at the pale, sad face.

"Who is she?" he asked. "I noticed her when I entered the tent just now."

"She came out as a companion to my wife," replied the doctor. "As to who she is—well, I'm afraid I can't give you anything like full information. I met her at one of the London hospitals; she was a nurse, and a remarkably good one too. She attracted my attention by the peculiar—what shall I call it?—quietude of her manner. Look at her now!"

Lorrimore did look and understand what it was the doctor found it so difficult to explain.

"A woman with a history," he said in a low voice.

"Just so. But what that history is no one knows, and I have never asked. Beyond hearing that she is a widow, I learned nothing about her. But this I can say," he went on earnestly; "that I believe few better women exist. She was patience and tenderness and devotion personified in the hospital, and since she has been with us our respect for her has increased daily. My wife will give her the best of characters. If you are content to let her past history remain a blank and will take her on our credentials—our experience of her—why, I'll answer for it, you will get just the woman you want."

While he had been speaking, Mercy had withdrawn to a little distance.

"I'll take her," said Lorrimore. "Her face and manner inspire me favorably. Speak to her, you doctor."

She turned and came toward them as the doctor called her, and stood with down-cast eyes and placidly sad face.

"Mercy said the doctor, "Lord Lorrimore and I have been talking about you."

She raised her eyes.

"I know it, sir; I heard nearly all you said until I moved away."

"Well, then," said the doctor, "what is your answer? Will you go with Sylvia and take care of her? You know we shall be very sorry to lose you, but—"

Her lips twitched for a moment—then she looked from one to the other.

"Yes, I will go," she said in her subdued voice. And so another link in the chain of coincidences was forged and clasped.

CHAPTER XXI.

Two days after the fight with the rangers, Locket and the Scuffler, happening to be strolling in the direction of the woods, came upon a man lying full length under a big tree.

"Halloo!" exclaimed Locket. "One of our fellows been on a tear? Why, dash my wig if it ain't the Young 'Un! Fancy the Young 'Un going on a spree! I thought he looked rather upset and bowled over when he came upon us in the valley and found we'd hit upon his secret. And he's been on the drink, he has, to rights!" he added, looking down at the prone figure with an expression half admiring and half envious.

But the Scuffler, whose experience in such cases was both varied and extensive, looked grave and shook his head.

"Pears to me," he said, as he bent over poor Neville and turned him face upward—"pears to me that this ain't no spree at all. By gosh! if the Young 'Un ain't dead he's pretty near it!"

Locket knelt beside the motionless figure and examined it.

"There's been a fight," he said. "That's what's been the matter. Lord! I see it all! The Young 'Un was clearing out on the quiet with his pile, and the rangers have gone for him. Is he quite dead, do you think, Scuffler?"

That worthy shook his head.

"Here's where the damages come in," he said, pointing to Neville's battered head and crippled leg. "I should so like to have seen that fight. I'm bound the Young 'Un gave as good as he got;" and he looked round as if expecting to see at least half a dozen of the foe lying round dead.

Locket shook his head.

"It didn't happen here," he said. "He's crawled some distance; you can see that by the path. Well, it he's handed in his cheeks, you but they're square and correct; for the Young 'Un, though stiff and proudish, was a straight man."

"He's stiff enough now, anyhow," retorted the Scuffler, with grim wit.

"I dunno that I'm so sure of that," responded Locket. "Anyhow, what we've got to do is take him back to Lorn Hope. If he's alive, it'll be some amusement for the Doc, and if he's dead, why, we'll have the biggest funeral that even Lorn Hope ever rose to."

Between them they carried Neville to the hut. It was hard work, and the two men arrived, bathed in perspiration, to find old Meth in a state of excitement bordering upon pronounced lunacy.

She set up a screech at the sight of Neville which caused the Scuffler most ungallantly to clap his great paw over her mouth.

"Stop that caterwauling, Meth!" he said. "We don't want to scare the orphan," meaning Sylvia. "Just you break it to her gently, and don't let her come upon him as he is. He ain't in a condition for a ladies' drawing-room."

"The orphan!" Sylvia!" shrieked Meth. "Why, you addleheaded fools, she's gone! They went off together. Didn't you get her, too?"

The two men looked at each other aghast.

"The orphan gone! It's that darned skunk, Lavarick!" said Locket. "Here, just see to him, Meth, while we go for the Doc. We don't think he's dead, at least we hope not."

"Oh, yer don't!" retorted Meth. "More fools you, for I tell yer if they've been and took Sylvia from him—and it looks uncommon like it—he'd far rather himself be dead than alive."

Neville was a favorite of the Doc, and as soon as he heard of his mishap, he shuffled off to the hut as fast as his legs could carry him.

The camp was in a stir. That solitary men and parties coming to and going from the camp should be stopped, robbed, and sometimes shot by the rangers, was bad enough, but that they should dare to kidnap the orphan of Lorn Hope Camp, passed the bounds of endurance.

Within half an hour half a dozen of the best men started, unfortunately, on Lavarick's trail. Unfortunately, because that astute individual had got beyond their reach; whereas, if they had ridden to Wildfall, they would have found Sylvia.

Meanwhile, there lay Neville hovering between life and death. He had lain for six hours where he had fallen, hidden from sight among the bushes.

When he had come to, what with the loss of blood and his crippled leg—for though the bullet had not touched the bone the wound was a severe one—he had been simply incapable of moving for some time, and when he tried to get up he discovered that he could not stand. Faint with pain and hunger, and half distracted with grief and anxiety on Sylvia's account, he lay and groaned and tore his hair like a Samson in bonds. Then, directly he could drag his legs after him, he set off to crawl back to camp; and on this terrible journey, broken down and unconscious, Scuffler and Locket had found him.

The Doc brought him back to life, but after one glance round, which revealed Sylvia's absence and brought home his loss to him, he became delirious, and the fever which had been creeping up stealthily took full grip of him. It required three men to hold him, and day and night, in the intervals of the paroxysms, he called upon her name—just as she at Wildfall had called upon his.

Sometimes with her name he coupled Lavarick's, with a passion and rage which seemed to shake the hut. It was an awful sight to see him struggling in the grip of his attendants, imagining that Lavarick stood before him, and fighting with the terrible strength of madness to get at the scoundrel. Then, worn out at last, he would sink back, and moaning, "Syl, Syl, would weep like a child."

The hearts of even these rough and hardened diggers were touched.

"This yer's the hardest row I've had to hoe for a long time," remarked Locket, with a suspicious huskiness in his voice, and with a still more suspicious drawing of his sleeve across his eyes. It strikes me, Doc, that if you pull him through it will only be to land him in a lunatic asylum. I'd almost sooner they'd kill him right out than have left him like this."

"It's the loss of the girl," said the Doc. "When he comes to, you boys just clear out and leave him to me. If there's any lying to be done, it's best not to have too many on the job, and I reckon there's got to be lying."

The Doc had plenty of time to work up a falsehood artistically, for rather more than a fortnight elapsed before Neville returned

to sanity, and his first words, as he looked up with hollow eyes at the grimy, unshaven face of the old wretch who had nursed him so devotedly, were, as the Doc expected:

"Sylvia—where is she?"

"Halloo, old man!" said the Doc cheerfully. "Come round at last, eh? Well, you've had a rare time of it—"

"Sylvia—where is she?" demanded Neville, hoarsely, his eyes beginning to glow threateningly.

"There don't you worry that batt'ered old head of yours about her," said the Doc. "She's all right, you bet."

"Then, he looked around.

"Why ain't she here? Because she's been clean knocked out of time by this cursed contrivance of yours. We've sent her away for a change, Young 'Un, that's what we've done."

"It's a lie!" groaned Neville, struggling to rise, and glaring fiercely. That man has got her! Let me get up!"

The Doc called to the Scuffler and Locket, who were waiting outside.

"He's off again," he said.

"They came in, followed by a third man—a stranger—and got near Neville warily, for even in his weakness he was a tough customer to handle; but Neville waved them back.

"Keep off! I am not mad! How long have I been lying here? Oh, God! let me get up and try and find her!"

"Get up, you ornery lunatic! Yer ain't no more capable of gettin' up than a newborn babe. It it's Sylvia you want—"

said the Doc.

"Hold hard!" said the man who had accompanied the Scuffler and Locket. "I think I can chip in here. Things have got pretty well mixed up when a dead man as is not only dead but buried can string out chin-music like that."

"Dead?" echoed the Doc, amazedly.

"Why, yes," said the man, coolly. "We buried this yer chap over a fortnight ago—buried him out there in the woods."

Neville raised himself on his elbow and turned his gaunt, haggard face to the speaker.

"What cursed folly is this man talking?" he panted. "Tell me about Sylvia I will know the truth!"

"If it's the young girl as that darned skunk, Lavarick, got hold of, she's alive and well, for all I know—leastways, she was when I saw her last."

Neville staggered up.

"Let me—let me go to her!" he said, his voice vibrating with a great joy. "You are not lying like these others? It's the truth?"

"It is that," said the man, stolidly.

"But as to going to her, even if you were capable of doing so, which you ain't, I don't see how you could manage it. She's left the camp more than a week ago."

"Left the camp? What camp?" demanded Neville, putting his hand to his head.

"Why, Wildfall," replied the man; that's where she was took to when the English lord grabbed her out of Lavarick's clutches."

"Wildfall—English lord!" stammered poor Neville, glaring at the speaker.

"I for God's sake, be patient with me! Tell me all—tell me slowly. My head's dazed and my heart beats as if it would choke me!" and the tears came into his eyes.

"This is how it is, then," said the man, slowly and impressively: "Our vigilants came up soon after Lavarick had downed you. They laid out nine of the rangers and got the gel; unfortunately, Lavarick got away. You was missing, but a young fellow 'bout your make and wearing your jacket was found lying under the trees, and—"

Neville uttered a low cry.

"Poor Sylvia!" broke from his trembling lips.

"You're right," said the man; "it's hard on her; but what else was she to think? Get your jacket on, I tell you."

"Yes, yes!" groaned Neville; "and then? Go on—for God's sake, go on!"

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