

* A TANGLED WEB. *

(CONTINUED.)

"Well, then, after she pulls through—and I tell you it was touch and go—she thinking her brother was dead, you see, why, she accepts the offer of this English lord, and goes off with him and Mercy Fairfax; and a right down good woman she is, too. You ain't no call to be afraid on the gel's account while Mercy Fairfax is there to look after her. And this yer lord's a real gent, too."

"Where have they gone?" asked Neville in a low voice, and after a short silence.

"Goodness knows," replied the Wildfall man. "They made t.f. Ballarat, but where they're going to from there I can't say; perhaps Langley—that's our doc—might know. I did hear that this lord was on the wobble—just travelling about; some of 'em gets that fit on 'em, you know. Anyhow, don't you make yourself uncomfortable, mate; the gel's in good hands, and—the truth's the truth, you know—in my opinion she's a darn sight better off than she was in Lorn Hope Camp. I've heard she's a lady, and, if so, why, this ain't the—what d'ye call it?—spear—for her. Make your mind easy, mate; get up your pecker and follow her. That's my advice, though I allow that, as a rule, it ain't worth much."

"It's good enough," said the Doc; "and now you fellows clear out. Come on."

Neville was left alone to think. That Sylvia was alive and safe filled him with a thankfulness unspeakable; but his heart ached all the same, for he had lost her.

He knew that the man was right, and that she was better off, and he tried to be thankful to the Providence which had rescued her from Lavarick and raised up such good friends for her; but human nature is human nature, and he did not succeed very well.

But the news of Sylvia's safety did more for him than even Doc's attention and medicine. He got better, slowly at first, and then quickly, for he was young, and had, as the Doc put it, the constitution of a mountain mule.

The men were kind to him in their rough way, and one of his first visitors after his recovery was Mr. Brown. Mary did not come, but she sent him some jelly and some flowers, and a kind message, and I regret to say that Neville was not over and above grateful, for in his sensitive condition, he could not help remembering that that young lady, though unwittingly, had been the cause of the only disagreement between himself and Sylvia.

He got better, and presently appeared in the valley with his tools. His bag of gold was gone, but he scarcely thought of it. What was the use of money to him now that there was no Sylvia to share it? He worked fitfully, apparently quite satisfied if he got enough to provide Meth and himself with food; and for days he would not go near his claim, but wandered about the woods and over the hills, his hands in his pockets, his head on his breast.

Absence, it has been remarked, makes the heart grow fonder, and every day of Sylvia's absence she seemed to grow more dear to him. He often found himself standing staring into vacancy, recalling her beautiful little face, and repeating, with a melancholy smile, some half-witty phrase of hers. It a bird twittered, he was reminded of Syl's laugh—the laugh that used to make him laugh, too, even against his will.

Once he wandered down to Macgregor's and stood at the bar, listening absently to the men, and drinking—drinking steadily, with a grim and gloomy persistence.

But his good angel stepped in and saved him from that danger. He suddenly flung the glass to the floor, and amid an amazed silence walked out.

"The Young 'Un's in a bad way," said Locket, looking round solemnly. "Something wrong here; and he touched his forehead significantly. 'I shouldn't wonder if the knock he got's cranked him a bit.'"

The Doc shook his head and gravely tossed off his whiskey.

"Young 'Un's top story is all right, you bet!" he said. "He's fretting after the orphan, that's what's the matter. But don't take any notice, boys just let him alone and he'll come round."

"We ain't likely to interfere with him," said the Scuffer, dryly. "Leastways, only those of us as is bent on committing suicide. Why, it was only the day before yesterday that one of us happened to make a remark as the Young 'Un didn't like, and his hand was on his shooting-iron in a moment, and those eyes of his just looked thunder and lightning. Oh, no, we sha'n't interfere with him."

They left him alone, but the Doc's promise of an improvement in the solitary man's condition did not seem to be in the way of fulfillment. His work in the claim became still more fitful, and his wanderings more frequent and prolonged, and about a month later Locket burst into Macgregor's with the announcement that the Young 'Un hadn't been home for four days and that Meth had declared she had good reasons for asserting that he had gone for good.

"Gone, eh?" said the Doc, with a sigh. "Well, it's just what I expected. Boy's fill up! Here's luck to the Young 'Un, wherever he is, for he warn't a bad sort, and"—his voice faltered for a moment—"and I don't know as I couldn't have spared any of you better."

It was true. Neville had shaken the dust of Lorn Hope Camp from his shoes at last. But where had he—a penniless man—gone?

CHAPTER XXII.

The London season was at its height, and the Marlows' mansion in Grosvenor Square was filled with light and music, for Lady Marlow's ball was in full swing.

The great ball room and the ante-rooms were full; couples sat upon the stairs and lounged in the corridors and balconies, for this was one of the principal balls of the year, and everybody wanted to see her or his name in the list of guests which would appear in the morrow's "Morning Post."

There were a couple of dukes, rotund and smiling, a serene highness from across the Channel, ambassadors, celebrities of all kinds—in short, to quote Percy Hale, if the roof had fallen in, half the peerage of the United Kingdom would have been in mourning.

And this brilliant throng her little ladyship moved, smiling and serene, her bright sharp eyes everywhere at once and overlooking nothing. England expects every woman to do her duty, and Lady Marlow considered it her duty to collect this crowd of nobilities, give them music and dancing, and a supper which would have made the most epicurean of the Roman emperors envious, and she did her duty well. And doubtless, as she moved among the dazzling groups of distinguished men and beautiful women, she felt that she had her reward, for was not every one saying that hers was the most brilliant and successful ball of the season?

In a heaven full of stars it is hard to distinguish the best and brightest; but of all the lovely daughters of Eve congregated in Lady Marlow's rooms that night there was none who excited more admiration and attention than Audrey.

She was, if it be possible, more lovely and bewitching than when we saw her last two years and five months ago, for the fair promise of then had ripened into a beauty which, if not absolutely perfect, was of a kind which charmed all sorts and conditions of men; and perhaps the charm lay in the rare fact that she seemed quite unconscious of it.

She was just as bright and frank and lovable a girl as when she had played with Neville Lynne in the Lynne orchards.

To night she had had a triumph which would have turned the heads of most girls, for, in addition to her usual admiring and devoted court, she had received the unmistakable homage of the prince himself.

He had come in late, and had murmured to Lady Marlow, in that pleasant voice of his, his regret that he should not be able to stay more than ten minutes. For the poor prince had only just returned from laying a foundation stone in one end of the kingdom, and was off by an early train in the morning to open an institute in the other.

But an hour had passed, and he was still in the room, and although he had danced one dance with Audrey, his august initials were down on her programme for another.

Two waltzes in one evening with the prince, whose bow confers distinction, and whose smile sheds happiness! Surely she should have been proud, elated, and happy.

And yet at times her sweet face grew clouded, and the bright eyes became thoughtful and absent, and a faint, dreamy smile, half sad, half regretful, flickered across her lips.

Half the women in the room were talking of her, speaking of her as "that dear, sweet Audrey, that lovely creature. Don't you think she is really too lovely?" and trying to conceal their envy; and more than half the men were thinking of her.

"The lady with the marble heart," Percy Hale had one day called her, and the catch phrase was heard spoken in a whisper many times that night.

For surely a girl must have a heart of marble, or none at all, to be able to refuse one eligible proposal after another, to receive devoted adoration from some of the best men of the day, and be incapable of rewarding them all with nothing warmer than a kindly smile and a curt "No, thank you."

The eldest son of one of the dukes then present had offered her his hand and ducal coronet, and to the amazement of all her friends, Audrey had declined even this great match.

Lady Marlow had been almost heart-broken at her ward's "obstinacy," but all her entreaties and remonstrances had been in vain.

"To decline the best, the very best offer of the season—of any season. My dear Audrey, forgive me, but you must be mad!" And Audrey had thrown her arms round her friend's neck, and kissed her murmuring:

"I should be mad to accept him, dear."

"Why, the marquis is head over heels in love with you. What more do you, can you want?"

"Not much—only to be in love with him," Audrey had responded, meekly, and Lady Marlow could for once have lost patience and been angry with her; but it was simply impossible to be angry with Audrey Hope while her arms were round your neck and her lovely face lovingly pressed against yours; and so, with a sigh Lady Marlow had surrendered.

"I don't know what you want or what you are waiting for," she said, resignedly.

"You have sent that poor Lorrimore away, and you refuse offer after offer—There, don't cry," for she had felt a warm tear fall on her cheek—"for Heaven's sake, don't cry, or Marlow will say that I've been cruel to you, and we shall have a scene. There!" and she soothed the spoiled girl instead of scolding her. "Marry whom you like, or don't marry at all, but for goodness' sake, don't be unhappy. I've done my duty, anyway—"

"And I am a wretched, ungrateful girl," Audrey had broken in, half sobbing, half laughing. "You are the best and dearest of mothers, and we should always be happy if it weren't for the tiresome men. Oh, dear! sometimes I wish there were nothing but women in the world. There would be some peace for a poor girl then."

"At any rate there would be peace for one woman," retorted Lady Marlow, smiling, but still vexed, "for all the men you make miserable come to me, poor wretches, and pour out their wails and lamentations in my ears, as if I could help them. Mark my words, Audrey, you will come to a bad end. You will marry the worst man of the lot—"

"And be as wretched as I deserve," said Audrey, lightly. "Very well; but I'll wait till the hour of my punishment arrives, and be happy while I can."

The young marquis was there tonight, only wanting a word of encouragement to renew his suit; but Audrey kept him at bay as successfully as she kept the others, and remained a mystery and cause of conjecture and wonderment to all around her. No one knew of that promise which she had given Lord Lorrimore. She had assured him that for two years she would remain Audrey Hope, and she had kept her vow.

But the two years had passed five months ago, and she was free.

In all that time she had received no word from, no news of him. That he was not dead she knew, because news of his death would have reached the world at large; but beyond that she knew nothing. That he had not found Neville was certain, or he would have brought him back and claimed his reward; for she knew that when she had sent him on his quest she had as good as promised to be his wife if he were successful.

She thought of the two men constantly; she was thinking of them in the middle of the present dance as she floated round in the arms of a young attaché to the divine music of the Hungarian Band; and it was this thought which brought the soft, half-pensive smile to her lips and eyes.

The young attaché came down from the seventh heaven of delight as the music ceased, and sighed.

"An awfully short waltz that, Miss Hope," he said.

"Was it?" I thought it was longer than usual," she said, innocently, causing the young fellow to wince and groan inwardly at her hard-heartedness.

"I suppose I dare not ask for another?" he faltered.

Audrey shook her head laughingly. "I haven't one left, and indeed don't mean to dance till I have done."

"Ah, well," he said, with a sigh, "I ought to consider myself very lucky to get one, seeing that the prince is down for two."

"Poor prince!" said Audrey. "How hard he works. I wonder if he would be very much offended if I suggest that he should go home and go to bed, instead of staying and dancing with me, just out of politeness. He must be so tired!"

"If he is like the rest of us, he'd rather never go to bed again than lose his dance," responded the young fellow, ruefully.

"Thank you very much; that is really a very pretty compliment. How clever and quick you diplomats are! It must be very nice to be able to say just the right thing, however absurd. Sometimes I think I should like to be a great man—just for one day, say. Does it feel very nice?"

"I don't know," he said, smiling, but still ruefully, for he had a suspicion that the beauty he adored was making fun of him. "I'm not a great man, but there's one coming. You might ask him, Miss Hope."

Audrey turned and glanced in the direction in which he was looking, and saw Sir Jordan Lynne. The young fellow had spoken in sober earnest. Sir Jordan Lynne was now a very great man indeed. In two years, when one is rising, one may rise very high. Sir Jordan Lynne was in the Cabinet now, and his friends—your successful man has any number of friends, though most of them hate him—declared that, if he played his cards properly, he must assuredly in time be Prime Minister.

Prime Minister! the first commoner in England! one of the foremost men in the whole world! No wonder Sir Jordan made his way slowly and with difficulty through the crowd, in which so many wanted to shake the large white hand, or exchange a word with the great man who might presently have so many good things to give away.

He had a word and a smile for all, but under his lowered lids his keen eyes were watching Audrey as he made his way to her.

In two years and a half Jordan had not altered in appearance—at any rate, he looked no older. Indeed, some declared that he looked younger. Success is the best elixir that has yet been discovered.

His face was still smooth and placid, his eyes as keen, his lips as supple and smiling. If he still looked about him as he walked or drove through the streets, he did so more guardedly than of old, and no one ever so much as guessed that there was a thorn in the great man's bed of roses.

Now, though none of the men who had proposed to Audrey had been more attentive than Jordan, he had not spoken the open word of love to her.

During the two years and five months of Lord Lorrimore's absence, Jordan had been Audrey's constant companion. Wherever she went—at concert, ball, theatre—Jordan seemed always present.

He would snatch an hour from the House, as he had done tonight, to sit beside her in the Marlows' box at the opera, or break an important engagement to exchange a few words with her at some ball or reception.

Have you ever seen a blood-hound at work? He starts upon the trail with one single bay, no more; then he settles down to work, nose to the ground, following the trail with a silent, deadly persistence, looking neither to the right nor to the left, but

keeping steadily on, with his whole attention absorbed in the work in hand, regardless of anything, however exciting, that may be going on around him. He follows the trail step by step, yard by yard, till his prey is fairly run down; then with a bound and a bowl of triumph he springs on his victim and—It is extremely disrespectful to compare the great Sir Jordan Lynne to a bloodhound, but it was exactly in this fashion that he hunted Audrey. He kept patiently to the trail, waiting for the supreme moment when, weary and exhausted, his quarry should come within his reach.

Tonight there was a significant flutter of his heart under his calm exterior. The blood-hound was about to spring.

Audrey looked at him with a pensive smile. She did not grow grave and almost shudder at his approach, as she used to do a year or two ago.

Voltaire says that one would get accustomed to the devil if he always presented himself in the garb and with the manners of a gentleman, and Audrey had got accustomed to Jordan Lynne. You see, he was always so kind and attentive and thoughtful; it would have been base ingratitude to coolly receive so constant a friend.

She held out her hand with a smile, and Jordan bent over it with a self-possessed grace that would not have shamed Lord Chesterfield himself.

"I thought there was a great debate on tonight," she said, "and that you could not possibly leave?"

"So they were all polite enough to say," he responded; "but I managed to steal away for half an hour. You see, I naturally wished to witness a friend's triumph."

"Which friend?" she asked innocently.

He smiled, and taking her from the attaché, whom he seemed to dismiss with a smile, he drew her arm through his.

"Why, yours, of course. The prince—I have just been speaking to him—declares that Miss Hope—"

Audrey put her fan to the ear nearest him with a gesture of incredulity, and he stopped and laughed.

"I know. You don't care for all that. That is where you are so wise, Audrey."

He called her Audrey now. "The rest of the women would be half delirious with the success you have won tonight. But you—"

He paused, and the pause was more eloquent than anything he could have said.

Audrey smiled and sighed slightly. "How small—how pitifully small one's life seems!" she said, half to herself.

"And yet life is big enough," he said in a low voice; "given work to do, and the ambition to do it. How crowded the rooms are!" Surely everybody must be here. May I take you on to one of the balconies?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

She said neither yes nor no, and taking her silence for consent, he took up a shawl and put it over her shoulders, and they went out.

Audrey leaned over the balcony and looked dreamily at the square beneath. A delicious summer air stirred the leaves of the trees; the lights of the lamps twinkled yellow and garish in the light of the half moon; a line of carriages was drawn up waiting for the departure of the guests, and a small crowd of curious persons stood as near the door as the policeman would allow them, waiting to catch a glimpse of the celebrities as they came out to their carriages.

Jordan stood beside Audrey, but he looked at her instead of the trees—looked at her with a keen, watchful expression in his eyes and an admiring one. He knew that her loveliness had increased during the last two years, and it made her seem more desirable in his sight.

Should he venture to propose to her to-night? He stroked his chin hesitatingly and undecidedly. She had refused so many men. Was it likely that she would accept him, after declining a ducal coronet? He decided to feel his way gently, so that if she should grow restive, he might draw back without committing himself.

The individual he was most afraid of was Lord Lorrimore, but Lord Lorrimore had disappeared for two years. He, Jordan, had no certain knowledge why Lorrimore had gone so suddenly, but he concluded that Lorrimore had proposed to Audrey on Lynne Burrows, and that she had refused him.

At any rate, he thought, with a smile, as he stroked his smooth chin, if she still had any sneaking fondness for the noble lord, he, Jordan, had something in his pocket to-night which would go far toward curing her of it.

"Of what are you thinking, Audrey?" he said; and she started though his voice had been softer even than usual.

Audrey looked down again into the square with a little laugh.

"Oh, I was thinking what a monotonous, unsatisfactory affair life is," she said, dreamily. "As I said just now, it seems so small and selfish."

"And you are the least selfish of women," he murmured.

"I?" She smiled and shook her head. "I know that I am not. At any rate, if I am not the most selfish, I am the most useless. Why, look at the coachman and footman down there; they are of more use in the world than Audrey Hope;" and she sighed.

This let Jordan in. He drew a little nearer to her and leaned one arm on the balcony rail, so that he was bending over her.

"Do you remember what I said to you in the ball room, Audrey?"

"You said all kinds of nonsense, which I have forgotten," she responded, indifferently.

"You thought I was flattering you. Audrey, a man does not flatter the woman he loves—he respects, and I respect you above all other women. You complain of the uselessness, the monotony of your life. If I dared, I could tell you how it might be made useful and more precious even than it is."

She laughed incredulously.

"You are very clever, Sir Jordan, but

there are things which even you can not do."

"I wish that you would give me leave to speak my mind," he murmured. "Audrey you must promise not to be offended with me, to remember that he who speaks is a friend who esteems you more, he thinks and believes that he understands you more clearly than anyone else in the world. Audrey, I spoke just now of what one might do with one's life, if one had but the ambition and the will to follow it. Let me speak of myself; I am ambitious—"

"And you have succeeded in gratifying your ambition," she said in a low voice.

She was a girl, and, being a girl, could not be flattered by the confidence of so great a man as Sir Jordan Lynne; but she was not very deeply interested as yet.

"No," he said in his soft murmur—"no, not yet; I have only reached the foot of the hill which I mean to climb."

"The foot?" she asked.

"Everybody says you are a long way up."

"Everybody does not know me, or to what I aspire," he said; "but you shall know, if you care to. Listen, Audrey: It is true that I have met with some success, but I count it only as the stepping-stone to higher and greater things. I have become—what shall I say?—of such consequence in the world, and some would say that I am already famous."

She made a gesture of consent.

"But I am not satisfied with what I have achieved; I have a greater prize in view. What will you say, Audrey, if I tell you that I have dared to let my ambition soar as high as—the premiership? Hush!" he glanced round. "Yes, nothing less will satisfy me; I must be the first—the first. You understand?"

She smiled gravely.

"And you will be," she said.

"Such a word of assurance and encouragement from you, Audrey, almost inspires me with the conviction of success. And think of it! To be the master of England—for that is what it means. Think of it! To hold the destinies of this great England in the hollow of one's hand!"—he extended his great white palm uppermost. "Is not that worth living for? Consider what one in such a position could be—"

"And what good one could do," said Audrey, thoughtfully.

Jordan changed his tone to one in harmony with hers.

"Yes," he murmured; "and there is so much to be done, is there not? With the poverty and the ignorance all around us. To feel that one had made the world better and happier—is not that a worthy ambition, Audrey? Ah, I see you think so! And I—I venture humbly to think that I may aspire to effect some good. But I can not do it alone. A man wants some one to help him in his good work—a soul attuned to his own, and full of sympathy with his. Working by one's self is like working with one arm crippled. One must have a helpmate, Audrey—"

She had been listening, interested, but quite cool and unconcerned, until he reached this point; and then she started slightly and glanced at, and then quickly away from him.

Jordan went on, carefully and watchfully.

"Such a helpmate, companion, can not only share one's toil, but lighten and elevate it. Such a helpmate can encourage and cheer one on to loftier heights, to loftier aspirations. With such a one by his side a man could feel that he had not only a wife to love, but a soul thrilling with the same aspirations, the same high aims. Are you listening, Audrey? May I go on? It is of you I am thinking; it is your aid I would win—your love!"

She started and faced him, her cheeks suddenly pale, her eyes wide open with something very like fear in them. She shrunk away.

Jordan bent lower, and his voice sunk to a whisper.

"Are you angry with me, Audrey, dear Audrey? Is it possible that you have not seen that I love you—that the dearest hope and ambition of my life is to call you wife?"

"No, no," she breathed; and she put her hand to her throat as if something were choking her, but she still kept her eyes fixed upon his face as if she were fascinated.

"You are angry, frightened," he said, inwardly raging at the mistake he had made in showing his hand too soon. "Heaven forbid that I should anger you, Audrey, or cause you a moment's uneasiness! If I have said too much, if my love—was it a shudder that shook her as his soft voice spoke the sacred word again?"

"—prompted me to open my heart to you all too soon and suddenly, forgive me. I would rather give up the dearest hope of my life than lose that which is almost as sweet to me as your love would be—your friendship." She drew a long breath and leaned her head on her hand, and he came a step nearer. "I know I am not worthy of you, that there are others—better, greater men—" She put out her hand to stop him. "But it is so; and yet none of them can love, admire, worship you more than I do, and shall ever do. Tonight I have revealed to you the proudest dream of my life; I have distressed, alarmed you. Forget it, Audrey; do not let my avowal come like a shadow between us. I implore you to forget it, or, if you cannot forget, to forgive, and show your forgiveness by letting me remain the humble, devoted—friend."

If there are any woman who could resist this kind of appeal, Audrey, with her tender heart, was not one of them. She put out her hand in token of her assent, and he took it and reverently pressed it to his lips.

It was well for him and his hopes of winning her that she could not see the gleam of disappointment and rage which shot from his eyes as he bent his head.

"And now let us talk of something else," he said, cheerfully, as he meant to show her that he felt no resentment at her repulse.

"Let me see; there was something

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)