

(CONTINUED FROM TENTH PAGE.)

I had to tell you. My own selfish egotism has driven it out of my head," and he laughed softly. "Oh, yes, I remember; I have some news of our absent friend, Lorrimore."

He saw her start and the blood rush to her face, though he pretended to be looking straight into the square.

"Oh, Lord Lorrimore?" she said, rather faintly; and with the utterance of his name came back the scene at Lynne Burrows the day she had sent him from her in quest of the lost Neville.

Her eyes shone eagerly, and her breath came fast; but Jordan, lounging over the balcony, and apparently interested in the people below, affected not to notice her change of manner.

"Yes," he said. "It is singular that we have not heard from him, or at least of him, before, is it not?"

"Yes," she said, trying to speak indifferently, but conscious that her voice was unsteady. "What is it? Is he—I hope he is well?"

Jordan laughed softly. "Oh, yes; I should say so—well and happy."

It was her turn now to draw near to him. "What is it you have heard?" she asked.

"Well, it's very strange news," he said, inwardly raging at the interest she displayed—she who had listened to his eloquence unmoved, and at last repellent. "It seems that Lord Lorrimore has fallen in love."

"Fallen in love?" she repeated, slowly, the color flying to her face. Her eyes hid themselves under their long lashes, and she turned slightly away from him.

"So that touches you, my cold, proud beauty, does it?" thought Jordan.

"Yes," he said, "and in a most romantic fashion. One can scarcely imagine so proud a man as Lord Lorrimore—the Lorrimore peerage goes a tremendous way back, you know—is falling in love and marrying an opera-singer."

"An opera-singer?" echoed Audrey.

"And—he is married?"

The words dropped from her lips with a strange, cold dullness. Then she laughed.

"Lord Lorrimore married? It is news indeed! Where did you hear it? Perhaps it isn't true," she added in the same breath.

"Oh, I think it is true enough. Though, by the way, I don't know that he is actually married, but he may be by this time."

"And an opera-singer, you say?" said Audrey, leaning on the balcony so that her face was partly hidden from Jordan.

"Yes," he replied, slowly and lightly, as one tells an interesting piece of news; as I said, it is a most romantic story. It appears that during his travels Lorrimore fell in with a young lady who was in training for the operatic stage. There is some hint of a romantic rescue, but I take that to be so much literary garnish to make the story more piquant. The young lady whose name is concealed under the nom de theatre of the Silver Star, is said to be very young, very beautiful, and possessed of a voice which is likely to take the musical world by storm. Lord Lorrimore, it would seem, had fallen in love with the—er—young person, and they are regularly betrothed, and by this time probably married. Fancy an opera singer the Countess of Lorrimore!"

Audrey was trying to realize it, and the effort to do so was made at a cost that made her angry with and ashamed of herself.

What could it matter to her whom Lord Lorrimore married? And yet it seemed, as she stood there listening to Jordan's soft, suave voice, as it were only yesterday, instead of more than two years ago, that Lord Lorrimore had told her that she was the one woman in the world for him.

She felt the tears rising to her eyes, and knew that she was trembling; but she struggled against her emotion and forced a laugh.

"I hope he will be happy," she said. "I dare say she is very beautiful, and I feel sure that Lord Lorrimore would not choose anyone who was not good as well. But it may be all false!" she broke off.

Jordan took a newspaper from the pocket of his dress-coat.

"Oh, no; I think we may take it that the good news—for it is good news, don't

you think?—young, beautiful, gifted—we may take it as true. Here is the paragraph—quite a long paragraph—in the Paris 'Figaro.'"

He held out the paper to her with a smile and Audrey, after a moment's hesitation took it.

"I—I cannot see it," she said. "There is not enough light here."

"Let me read it to you," he said; and holding the paper toward the window, he read the paragraph.

While concealing the lady's name under the pseudonym of "Silver Star," the journalist had given Lord Lorrimore's name openly and correctly, had referred to his rank in the peerage, and set forth a short sketch of his life, so there could be no doubt as to his identity.

According to the "Figaro," the Silver Star was destined to blaze upon the world with all the splendor of a new and glorious planet, and the paragraph wound up with respectful and profound congratulations to lordship, who had been so fortunate as to win so lovely and charming a lady.

Audrey listened with averted head and downcast eyes, then she put out her hand.

"Will you let me have the paper?" she said. "I should like to show it to Lady Marlow."

"Certainly," assented Jordan, cheerfully. "I brought it that you might do so. Stay; let me cut out the paragraph."

He cut it out with his pen-knife and handed it to her, and Audrey slipped it into her pocket. So much for modern chivalry, she thought, bitterly. He had vowed that he would go to the end of the world at her behest. She had asked him to find a missing friend, and he had promised to do so, with ardent vows of love for herself. He had not found the friend, had doubtless soon grown weary of searching for him, and, instead, had found a wife.

If Jordan had renewed his suit at that moment he might have won her, for her heart felt sore and her pride wounded, but even if he had thought of doing so, the opportunity fled, the curtains were swept aside, and Lady Marlow appeared.

"My dear Audrey," she exclaimed, "where have you been? The prince has been looking for you everywhere. This is his dance."

"Everywhere but here," said Audrey with forced levity. "Very well, I am ready," and with a nod to Jordan, she went off with Lady Marlow.

Jordan leaned over the balcony, a malicious smile on his thin lips.

"Curse her!" he murmured. "She started and shrunk when I offered myself, as if I had been a leper or a street beggar—I, Jordan Lynne, the future Premier. But I had my revenge, I think, Miss Audrey; and I fancy that now your old lover, the haughty Lorrimore, has transferred his affection to an opera-singer, you may set a fairer value on my devotion. And she was touched by my lofty eloquence; I saw that." He laughed, with a sneer. "Bah! what fools women are—even the best of them."

He smoothed the sneer from his face, resumed his usual mask-like smile, and returned to the ball room. Audrey was dancing with the prince; her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were glowing brightly.

Jordan heard her name on many lips as he passed through the crowd. She was the belle the most distinguished woman in the room, and he thought as he went down the stairs:

"Yes, she shall be my wife!"

Now it chanced as he stood upon the top stone step, and the footman bawled for Sir Jordan Lynne's carriage, a young man came slowly along the side of the square. He was a stalwart, handsome young fellow but he looked dreadfully shabby and down in his luck. His face was rather haggard, and his eyes, though they were brave and good-looking enough, were somewhat sad and gloomy. Notwithstanding the mildness of the night, he had turned up the collar of his well-worn coat, and he walked along with his hands in his pockets, and with an absent, preoccupied air.

He was passing along on the square side of the road, apparently fully engrossed with his own thoughts, when "Sir Jordan Lynne's carriage!" fell upon his ears.

He started, pulled up short, and then crossed the road and got into the midst of the crowd that was waiting to stare at the departing guests.

Down came Sir Jordan, and at sight of the popular and rising statesman the crowd cheered lustily. Sir Jordan raised his hat and bowed with a bland benevolent smile—his Exeter smile—and the young fellow, flushing deeply, pushed forward as if unconsciously.

But one of the policemen put a hand on his shoulder and bid him "stand back," and the young fellow, after a gesture which looked very much as if he intended to resent the policeman's peremptory interference with the liberty of the subject drew back obediently. But as he did so he laughed slowly and bitterly and looked from Sir Jordan's irreproachable evening dress and bland, "successful" countenance to his own worn and seedy clothes; and the laugh should be a familiar one in our ears, for it was that of Neville Lynne, Sir Jordan's half-brother, the Young 'Un of Lorn Hope Camp.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Neville stood for some minutes in the midst of the small crowd, gazing absently at the famous people coming out of the brilliantly lighted house, thinking of his half-brother.

What a contrast their respective conditions presented! Here was Jordan basking in prosperity—evidently one of the great ones of the earth—while he, Neville, was an outcast and a wanderer, with exactly twenty-seven shillings and sixpence half-penny in his pocket.

At last he pushed his way out of the throng, and crossing the road, leaned against the railing of the square, lighted his pipe, and looked on moodily at the procession of carriages; and it may be stated with confidence, that there was scarcely a more unhappy young man in all London.

He was the second son of a wealthy baronet, and at one time the favorite of his father, who had always given him to understand that he would be handsomely provided for. His half-brother had stirred up bad feelings between him and his father and had doubtless secured the whole of the patrimony. Then Neville had left England in search of fortune—had found it and lost it, with the exception of twenty-seven shillings and sixpence.

But the cruellest blow fate had dealt him had been the loss of Sylvia. It's easy to snap one's fingers in the face of misfortune while those we love remain to us. Were Sylvia by his side, Neville could have endured the bullets of unfriendly fate with equanimity; but Sylvia had gone he knew not whither. And if he had known, it during the terrible journey from Lorn Hope to England—a journey performed a great part on foot, with "hunger stalking by his side"—he had seen her, his pride would scarcely have allowed him to make himself known to her; for he had gathered that she was in the care of wealthy and powerful friends, and he was the last man to thrust himself, penniless and friendless, upon her prosperity.

He smoked his pipe with his hands deep in his pockets, his head sunk upon his chest, almost unconscious of all that was going on around him. Every now and then he heard some great name bawled from the steps, and saw the carriages move forward. He saw the prince drive away, but he heard and saw as if in a dream.

Presently two gentlemen came down the steps arm in arm, and crossing the road to where he stood, waited for their carriage.

One was Lord Chesterton, wrapped in his sable overcoat; the other was Percy Hale; and regardless of Neville, whom no doubt they took for a tramp, they went on talking close beside him; and he started to consciousness of their proximity as he heard a name he knew.

"Our sweet Audrey looked more bewitching than ever to-night," said Percy Hale, with a little sigh.

The old bean nodded two or three times. "Yes, yes; I don't think I ever saw her look lovelier."

"There may have been more beautiful women in the room, but for me and others it would seem"—and he smiled at the poet's plaintive face—"Audrey Hope bore away the palm!"

Neville almost dropped his pipe as this familiar name fell upon his ears.

"She is a queen among women!" sighed Percy Hale.

"A maiden queen," remarked Lord Chesterton; "and I am not surprised that she declines to become a wedded one. Who is worthy of our peerless Audrey?"

"I know one who considers himself quite worthy," said Percy.

"You mean Jordan Lynne?"

The young man nodded gloomily.

Lord Chesterton took a pinch of snuff pensively, and shook his head.

"Oh, you don't know what Jordan Lynne is capable of," said Percy irritably. "That man would move heaven and earth to gain anything he had set his heart on."

"His what?" interpolated Lord Chesterton, with delicate irony.

"He had set what he calls his 'heart' upon," continued Percy. "I hate that man!"

"No doubt," said Lord Chesterton, dryly. "I don't think any of you too deeply love the simable Sir Jordan, and that's only natural. But, after all, my dear, desponding lover, beyond the fact that Jordan Lynne happens to be your rival, you don't know anything against him?"

"Anything against him?" responded the young man, slowly and reluctantly. "No, but everybody distrusts him. You never hear his name mentioned without a shrug of the shoulders and a queer look on men's faces. Depend upon it, there's some reason in it. No smoke without fire."

The old bean smiled.

"My dear Percy, it is human nature, to hate and envy the successful man. You see, he is a standing reproach to those of us who are not successful, for we have to admit that he is a great deal cleverer than us, and therefore our superior. Human nature, my dear Percy, human nature! And you think our divine Audrey will marry him?"

"I think so—we all think so," replied Percy despondently. And it strikes me as deuced hard, though I haven't a chance myself, I know. But though you aren't in the running yourself, you don't like to see the prize carried off by a fellow who—"

"Whose only crime, as far as you know, is that he has overtopped you all," finished Lord Chester cynically. But I sympathize

with you my dear young friend, and rather than she should marry Jordan Lynne, I'd—yes, I'd marry her myself."

"I would to Heaven you had the alternative!" replied Percy.

"Hem! thank you. I am duly grateful but I'm afraid you'd discover that I'd committed numberless crimes, and was even a more hideous monster than the amiable Jordan. Here's my brougham at last. You'd better come down with me to the club."

As the Brougham drove up, the old gentleman turned and saw Neville, who stood near, pale and agitated, and mechanically Lord Chesterton pulled out a shilling and offered it to him.

Neville started declined the coin with a wave of his hand, and strode off.

"Dear me!" said Lord Chesterton; "a tramp refuse a shilling! We live in wondrous times. Percy! Poor devil! he looked as if he wanted it badly enough too! But there, I'm afraid if I were a tramp, and a man clothed in purple and fine linen offered me a shilling, I should feel more inclined to knock him down and tear some of his festive raiment from his back than accept his miserable charity. Human nature even in a tramp, you see, my dear Percy."

Neville stalked on through the silent streets. Every word he had heard seemed eating into his brain.

Audrey, dear little Audrey, his old playmate, marry Jordan! The thought made him feel bad—very bad indeed.

And yet—he pulled up and asked himself the question Lord Chesterton had put to Percy Hale—what did he know against Jordan?

Excepting that he had come between him, Neville, and their father, nothing—absolutely nothing; and yet he felt that Jordan was a bad lot.

You may be convinced that a man is a villain, although you have not seen him rob a church or commit a murder, and that is just how Neville felt as regards Jordan.

And to think that sweet, lovable Audrey should be going to marry him!

Neville had been wretched enough before, but he was ten times more wretched, dissatisfied, and upset now.

Some men, in his plight, would have summoned up courage and gone straight to Audrey Hope, but the idea did not even present itself to Neville; and, if it had, he would have scouted it at once. What! go and claim friendship with Miss Audrey Hope? Present himself in his seedy clothes, looking like a tramp—he had been taken for one that night—to be pitied and humiliated by offers of assistance? He would have starved to death by choice.

He wandered on till he reached the depressing garret which he had taken for a few shillings a week on arriving in London, two nights ago, and climbing the steep stair, he flung himself on the apology for a bed and buried his face in his hands.

He had been hungry an hour ago, but though he took some bread and cheese from his pocket, he could not eat. The vision of Audrey as Jordan's wife had effectually destroyed his appetite. In another pocket was a newspaper. Your returned wanderer always buys a newspaper, though it cost him a dinner, for he has an uncontrollable hankering to learn what is going on in the old country; and Neville, hoping to get away from his own thoughts, at any rate for a few minutes, opened the paper and tried to read.

And the first thing that caught his eyes was the report of a speech which the Right Honorable Sir Jordan Lynne had made at a meeting of a well-known charity.

It was a beautiful speech, full of the highest morality, with choice quotations from the most sentimental of the poets, and with heart-stirring appeals to the sympathies—and the pockets—of the charitable.

It ought to have softened Neville's heart toward his half-brother and made him proud of being related to so great and good a man; but, strange to say, it produced exactly the opposite effect. You see, he knew Jordan, and as he read the glowing periods and the glowing sentiments, he remembered a thousand little meannesses of which in the old time he had known Jordan to be guilty, and his anger rose at the hypocrisy of the whole business.

He crushed the paper in his hand and flung it from him with an expression of disgust. The face he had seen that night, as the Right Honorable Sir Jordan Lynne had come down the steps to his carriage, had been the same face—mean, treacherous, crafty, for all its smile of amiability and benevolence—that he remembered years ago, and he knew that Jordan had not changed. He was the same Jordan who had by all kinds of lying and meanness come between his younger brother and his father.

Neville paced up and down the barren room until he was exhausted; then he went to bed and dreamed of Jordan, of Audrey, of Sylvia—no dream of his was ever complete without Sylvia's form dancing through it—and lastly, he dreamed of the old home.

And when he awoke from his uneasy, phantom-haunted sleep there sprang into his heart the irresistible longing to go down to Lynne.

His father was dead; he had learned that within a few hours of his return; but he should see the old place once more—visit the spots where he and Audrey had played in the old happy time. He got out his money and counted it, although it wasn't at all necessary to do so, for he knew too well how much, or, rather, how little, he had and decided that he would make the journey on foot and incog.

He ate the bread and cheese for breakfast—cheese is particularly unsuitable to that early meal, but he had lived in Lorn Hope Camp, and had fared on far less sumptuous food—and paying his rent, started on his tramp for Lynne.

As he went through the streets in the early morn he passed some bill-stickers who were pasting a large placard on a

boarding; but Neville bestowed only a casual glance on the bill, and if he had stopped and studied it attentively it would not have conveyed any special significance to him. It was headed: "Royal Italian Opera," and in huge letters announced the all-important fact that Signora Siella would presently appear as Marguerite.

It was glorious weather, and under more favorable circumstances, Neville would have enjoyed his tramp. The country was smiling in all its summer bravery, and to Neville the green hedge-rows, the bright turf, the twitter and trilling of the birds seemed like old friends bidding him welcome back to the old country. He walked during most of the day, living on the simplest food—a loaf of bread and a cup of milk bought at some farm—and sleeping beside a hayrick in the stable of some friendly farmer, for whom he would do half a day's work in acknowledgement of the hospitality.

He was as strong as a horse, and the regular exercise and the frugal fare acted as a tonic to his spirits. But he missed Sylvia just as keenly as he had ever done, and twenty times a day thought wistfully how delightful it would have been to have had her with him to share his delight in the fresh air, the green fields, the singing birds. Then he would accuse himself of selfishness, and remind himself, with a sigh, that no doubt Sylvia was happier with her grand friends than she would be tramping through the country with him.

But the thought of her kept his heart soft, and no child or dog scuttled out of the way of this handsome young tramp with his kindly blue eyes and pleasant but rather sad smile.

He reached the village of Lynne at last, and only they who have paid a visit after long wandering to the beloved spot which spells "Home" can imagine how he felt. Every cottage, every tree was familiar to him—even the village pump, which take it altogether is not a very romantic object, made his heart thrill, and he worked the handle and took a drink for auld lang syne.

He had rather feared that he might be known, but though the simple people stared at him, they did it with the heavy curiosity of country folk, and no one recognized in the stalwart, sunburned man the slip of a youth who had left Lynne years ago.

In this matter his rough, seedy clothes helped him, for the villagers were not likely to identify a passing tramp as Neville Lynne, the favorite son of Sir Greville, the well-dressed lad who used to scamper through the lanes on his thorough-bred pony, with a groom in attendance.

Neville kept away from the house until dark, for he knew that he ran greater risk of being recognized there than elsewhere, and he filled up the time by visiting the places where he and Audrey used to play together. He went to the Burrows and eat his dinner on the very spot where Audrey had bidden Lord Lorrimore go in search of the lost Neville; he had sauntered down to the stream in which he had persuaded her to join him in wading, and every one of the familiar places roused old memories and played upon the heart-strings as the soft summer breeze plays upon an Eolian harp.

But the strange pause in these emotions of his was this: that, somehow or other, he got Sylvia mixed up with Audrey, and at times it absolutely appeared to him as if it had been with Sylvia he had played, and not Audrey. The two girls seemed to share his heart between them, and to reign there like two queens in friendly rivalry.

Toward dusk he climbed the railing of Lynne Park and cautiously approached the house. The old place was as quiet as the grave in the fading light, and, notwithstanding the excellent order in which the grounds were kept, seemed to Neville to have a neglected air. He walked round it, keeping under the shadow of the trees, and presently came to the door high up in the wall from which Jordan had removed the staircase.

He was gazing at this with a dull pain in his heart—for by that door how often had he seen his father enter and emerge—when suddenly he found himself seized from behind.

He swung round and grappled with his assailant, and the two men wrestled together for a minute or so, at the end of which time, Neville, putting into practice the well-known "leg trick," threw his opponent on the grass. Not a word had been spoken, and Neville, taking the man for a gamekeeper, was hesitating between offering an explanation of his presence and making off, when the man uttered an exclamation of astonishment, and rising, said:

"Good Lord! it's Master Neville!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

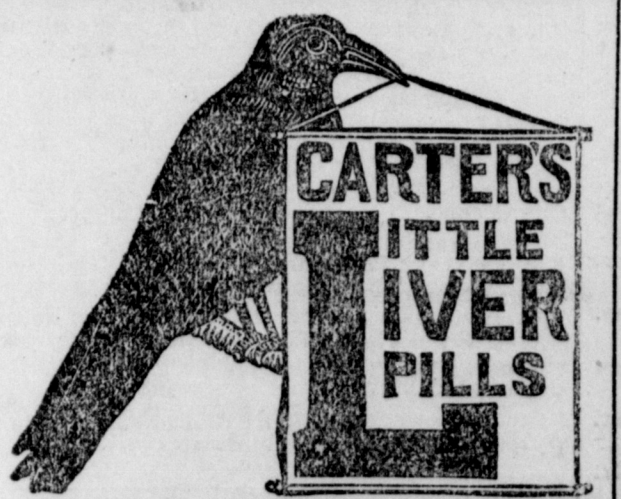
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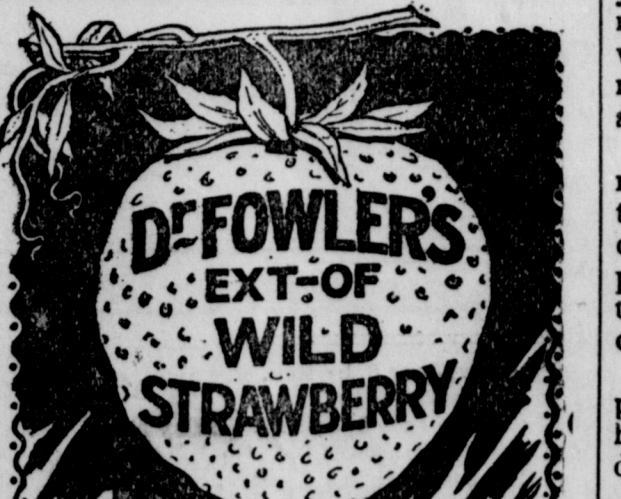
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