

A TANGLED WEB.

(CONTINUED.)

But Audrey had run off with Sylvia and did not appear to have heard the question. Sylvia looked round the dainty rooms, which, although the notice of their coming had been so short, seemed to have been prepared for them for weeks, and appeared to contain every conceivable luxury the most exacting young woman could desire looked round with a sigh of admiration, which grew into an exclamation of delight as she ran to the window.

"Oh! how can you ever leave this paradise for that awful London?" she exclaimed. "This makes me long for our little cottage in the country more keenly than ever—doesn't it you, Mercy?"

Mercy smiled sadly as she bent over the portmanteau which a maid was helping her to unpack.

"Audrey, you must show me everything, mind—all the places you used to play in when you were a girl, all the things and the animals you love. I shall want to see them all, that I may persuade myself that I have known you for years instead of a few weeks. Dinner? What a shame it is that one must spend time in eating and drinking when there is so much to do and only four days to do it in!"

Audrey's dressing-room adjoined that given to Sylvia, and the two girls talked through the open door as they changed their clothes; and as they had insisted upon Mercy going to her own room to rest, Audrey was constantly coming in to Sylvia with offers of help—offers which Sylvia refused laughingly.

"My dear Audrey, I have not been the mistress of a modest grange and accustomed to ladies-maids and dames of honor. I can dress myself. Why, at one time I had scarcely anything to dress in!" she added brightly.

The dinner-gong sounded, and the voice of the viscount came up the great stairs, shouting blithely but warningly:

"Now, you girls! and they went down. As they passed along the corridor, Sylvia, who wanted to look everywhere at once, glanced through an open door into a large room, in which she caught sight of a huge rocking horse, a doll's house, and similar toys.

"That was my play-room," said Audrey. "Oh, how happy I was then!"

"I must have a ride on that horse!" said Sylvia, determinedly.

Audrey smiled.

"I have gone many a hunt on him, and have been thrown off scores of times when Neville rocked him too fast by accident—on purpose. We used to play together in that room. There is scarcely a place I shall show you in which he and I have not spent, oh, such happy hours! Poor Neville!" and she sighed.

But Sylvia would not permit any sighing for that night at any rate, and the dinner with these two lovely girls was, so the viscount declared often afterward, one of the happiest he had ever eaten. He was so happy that he did not even regret the absence of the Right Honorable Jordan, and Audrey herself did not seem to miss her lover.

After dinner the girls went into the great drawing room, the splendor of which would have struck Sylvia with amazement if she had not been accustomed to splendor on the stage, and the viscount joined them after a very short interval.

"Is there any clause in your agreement signora, forbidding you to play the night-ingles for your friends' delight?" he said.

"If there were I should break it and pay forfeit," responded Sylvia; and she drew Audrey to the piano, and in a moment or two the exquisite voice was filling the room and floating through the open window.

"What a lovely creature, and what a voice!" exclaimed the viscount to himself. He did not see that Audrey's eyes were full of tears.

A little while before this, Trale rushed into Mrs. Parsons, nearly startling that good lady out of her life, and causing Neville to spring out of his chair with an exclamation.

He had placed himself in Trale's hands, and, following his advice, was still at the cottage, though consumed by an almost intolerable desire to be doing something.

"What is it now?" he demanded, eagerly. "Have you got that scoundrel?"

"No; but it's all right," said Trale, drawing Neville outside. "And Sir Jordan's gone now."

"Gone?" echoed Neville, fiercely. "It's all right, I say. He's only gone to London, and a man I can trust is in the same train with him and won't lose sight of him. It's not that I've come to tell though. Miss Audrey's here."

"Miss Audrey here!" and his face flushed.

"Yes, at the Grange. She came down with Lord Marlow, and a lady friend."

"Audrey here!" murmured Neville, "and engaged to that villain; and she knows nothing. I must go to her; she must be told," and he took a step or two in the direction of the Grange.

Trale caught him by the arm.

"Don't do anything rash, Mr. Neville," he said. "It isn't time yet. You leave it to me."

"But I must see her, man, I must see her!" he broke out, passionately. "I won't speak to her! she shall not see me, but I must see her. Little Audrey, my dear little Audrey!"

Trale saw that it was no use to argue with him.

"All right, sir," he said: "I can understand, and it's only natural. Come along, then; we'll manage to get a sight of her. But, Mr. Neville, you won't spoil the

wholes of my plans by doing anything rash?"

But Mr. Neville had got his hat and was already striding off to the Grange. The two men reached the house and in the dusk made their way to the ornamental gardens, and cautiously crept up to the terrace.

Here, however, Trale seized Neville's arm.

"No further, please, sir!" he said. "The windows are open; some one might come out at any moment; you'd be seen and all my plans would be spoiled."

Neville shook him off, but stopped irresolutely.

"Perhaps—perhaps she may come out on the terrace," he said, and he stood and gazed longingly at the lighted windows.

At that moment there rose a woman's voice singing the "Ah che la morte" with a power and sweetness that startled and thrilled even the practical Trale.

"Pshaw! but that's fine, Mr. Neville!" he whispered.

He got no further, for suddenly Neville uttered a terrible cry of intense amazement.

"My God!" he gasped, clutching Trale and shaking in every limb, "whose voice is that?"

CHAPTER XLII.

Well might Trale stare at Neville with surprise and alarm. The great strong man was trembling like a leaf; the perspiration stood in big drops upon his forehead.

"Good Lord! Mr. Neville, what is it?" demanded Trale.

Neville looked at him vacantly.

"That voice—Don't you hear?" he said.

"Yes; beautiful, isn't it?" said Trale.

"That's the great opera singer all London's mad about."

"What! No, that's Sylvia's voice. I should know it among a thousand. It is hers! Let me go!" for Trale had got hold of him, half fearful that he had taken leave of his senses.

"No, no, Mr. Neville; you're mistaken—indeed you are," he said. "The lady who is singing is the great opera-singer that all London's mad about. The name's Signora Stella."

"It is not!" said poor Neville, fiercely. "It is—it is a lady—Oh!" and he put his hand to his head. "Am I dreaming?"

"Sylvia here, so near! Hold on, Trale; I'm not as mad as you think. I tell you that the lady you hear is an old friend. We've been parted, and—He could not go on, for the voice still floating out to them confused them with a commingling of exquisite pain and joy.

"Steady, Mr. Neville, I'm sure that you're mistaken," said Trale soothingly. "I had the whole particulars of the party from one of the servants. It is the opera-singer, indeed—indeed it is. If you know her—"

"I know nothing of her!" broke in Neville, with agitation. "I only know the lady who is singing in there," and he pointed to the drawing-room. "I've heard her voice too often not to know it. It's the dearest, sweetest voice in all the world to me. Let me go, Trale!"

Then he stopped of his own accord. Trale could not of have held him.

"My God, I forgot!" he cried. "I can't go yet. She thinks I'm dead. The shock would kill her!"

"Thinks your dead, Mr. Neville!" he said, soothingly.

"Yes," cried Neville, sinking on to a seat, and resting his head in his hands. I can't tell you all, Trale, but I can tell you this much—that I love her, have loved her dearly—with all my heart—and that we were parted out there in Australia. She thought me dead—saw me killed, as she thought, poor girl!—and I thought it best for her to think so. But it's not too late!" and he halted rose, to sink down again irresolutely. "Some one must break the news to her—the news that I am alive. You must do it, Trale."

Trale looked anything but comfortable.

"I go in there, sir?" he said. "Lord, I couldn't! The viscount would be wild."

"You must do it gently, Trale," Neville went on, as if he had not heard him. "She has the tenderest heart, and—and the shock! Listen—there! Oh, I little thought I should hear her so soon—that I should be so near her!" and he looked wistfully, longingly towards the windows.

Trale stood beside him, sympathetic but terribly perplexed.

"Won't you wait until to-morrow?—or write to her, Mr. Neville," he suggested feebly.

Neville laughed gently.

"Wait till to-morrow? No, not another hour! What! after all these months of miserable and wretched longing for her? Ha! ha!"

Trale got frightened.

"They'll hear you, sir,—upon my word they'll hear you, and there'll be a fine how-d'ye-do. I wish I'd got a drop of brandy or something just to pull you together. You look—well, you look—"

"Out of my mind," said Neville. "So I am; but it's with joy, Trale—joy! What is to be done?"

"Come home with me and—and have a pipe, Mr. Neville," suggested Trale, as one speaks to a child or a man in delirium. "You won't do any good here. If—if it's the lady you think, you can go to the Grange in the morning, and—Oh, for goodness sake, come home, sir!"

"No," said Neville; "I'll stay here. I couldn't go if I wanted to, and I don't. I must see her somehow or other. There, I beg your pardon, Trale. I know you think I'm mad, and that the whole thing's a delusion. But it's not, and it's all true. I

tell you that lady is the woman I love, and from whom I've been parted, and whom I must and will see within an hour."

"Hush, hush! for goodness sake, Mr. Neville!" pleaded Trale. "We shall be heard directly, and there'll be a deuce of a row. There are servants all about, and—There! Just what I expected! Here's one coming now. Come into the shrubbery, sir—come on!" and he dragged at him.

Neville allowed him to half lead, half pull him into the shrubbery; but it was too late.

Footsteps were heard coming nearer, and presently a tall figure strode up to them and a voice sternly demanded:

"Who's there?"

Trale pressed Neville's arm to keep him silent. The new-comer repeated the question, and advanced upon their hiding-place.

"It's all up," said Trale, with a groan. "We must face the music," and he stepped out. "It's all right," he said, still thinking the man was one of the Grange servants. "It's me—Trale—Inspector Trale, and—"

"Trale?" said the voice; "what are you doing here? Don't you know me?"

Trale peered at him.

"God bless my soul it isn't Lord Lorrimore, is it?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," said Lorrimore, coloring a little. "I was going to call at the Grange. I'm—I'm just starting for Africa, and wanted to say good-bye to Miss Hope; and—But what are you doing here? Is there anything wrong?"

"No, no," said Trale; "nothing wrong, my lord."

"Who's that with you—one of your men?" asked Lorrimore nodding toward Neville, who stood still looking at the Grange and listening to the voice, and utterly and completely regardless of his companions.

"That?" stammered Trale. "Oh—oh, no, not one of my men; that is—Oh, Lord, what's the use of trying to keep it dark. No, my lord; that gentleman is Mr. Neville Lynne."

If Trale had said the Great Mogul, Lord Lorrimore could not have seemed more startled.

"Mr.—who?" he exclaimed.

"Mr. Neville Lynne," repeated Trale. "Here, Mr. Neville, here is Lord Lorrimore—a friend of Miss Hope;" and he pulled at Neville.

Neville woke up, and advanced and nodded impatiently; then he started and stared for Lord Lorrimore, as if some exquisite joke had been perpetrated flung himself down on the bench and laughed grimly.

"Neville Lynne!" he exclaimed, looking up at him.

"That is my name," said Neville, staring at him. "I have not the pleasure of knowing—"

"By heaven that's not my fault!" exclaimed Lorrimore, with sardonic irony, "seeing that I've spent months and tramped thousands of miles in trying to make your acquaintance, Mr. Lynne."

Neville put his hand to his head.

"I—I don't understand," he stammered.

"There is some mistake—delusion—"

"There is no delusion in the fact that I have been scouring the greater portion of the habitable globe in search of you," retorted Lorrimore, grimly. "How do you do?" and he held out his hand.

Neville took it mechanically, and sunk on to the seat beside him.

"Perhaps you'll explain, my lord?" he said in a bewildered fashion.

"Nothing easier," said Lorrimore. "I only wish it had been as easy to find you. I—I am a friend of Miss Hope"—his hand some face clouded darkly as he spoke her name—"and—and at her request I left England three years ago to find another friend of hers—yourself."

"She—Audrey—sent you to find me? God bless her!" said Neville, his voice shaking.

"Amen!" said Lorrimore, fervently.

"She thought of her old playfellow. Yes, that was like her, God bless her!"

"Amen again," said Lorrimore.

"But—but why did she send you? How came you to go?" asked Neville, not unnaturally.

Lorrimore glanced at Trale, who had discreetly withdrawn out of hearing.

"Because—because I have the misfortune to love Miss Hope," said Lorrimore, grimly.

"You loved—Ah! and she—Jordan?"

"Exactly," said Lorrimore, sardonically. "When I came back I found her engaged to marry your brother, Mr. Lynne. Mind, I make no complaint. She was not engaged to me—had given me no distinct promise; but as I have the misfortune to love her still, it is not altogether to be wondered at that I should be anxious to get away from your brother's happiness. I am going to Africa. It is a charming country, and presents all kinds of novelty to the jaded traveler, and—but I think it would be more interesting if we talked of yourself Mr. Lynne; and—well, if you will not deem me impudently inquisitive, I should like to ask where the devil you have been these last three years—down in a coal mine, up in a balloon, or at the bottom of the sea in a diving bell?"

Neville looked at him.

"I have been for the greater part of the time gold-digging in Australia," he said in a place called Lorn Hope."

Lorrimore swung round upon him.

"I—I beg your pardon. Where?"

"In a place called Lorn Hope," repeated Neville.

Lorrimore stared at him.

"You didn't bear your own name?" he said. "Lorn Hope! Why, I was there, sir, near it! There was no Neville Lynne living there then!"

"I didn't use my own name," said Neville. "I was called the Young 'Un or sometimes Jack," he said in a still voice. "Why—why, you're dead!"

"I know—I know," said Neville, putting his hand to his brow. Excuse me Lord Lorrimore, but this talk brings back an unhappy miserable time to me; but—but that's all passed now, I hope, and—" he glanced at the window.

"One moment, Mr. Lynne," said Lorrimore; "you speak of an unhappy time; you are, you say, the Young 'Un of Lorn Hope Camp; then you must know that a young lady, the Signora Stella—I mean Sylvia Bond—thinks you dead—actually thinks it at this moment!"

Neville stared at him.

"You know her! Can it be possible that—that you are the gentleman who rescued her from Lavarick?"

"That was his name, I believe—the bushranger. Yes," said Lorrimore.

Neville held out his hand and grasped Lorrimore's, his face flushing, his eyes glowing.

"I should like to try and thank you," he said.

"The young lady was so dear to you," said Lorrimore.

"Dear to me?" echoed Neville; then he laughed a strange laugh. "She is and always has been dearer than life to me."

"And yet you allowed her to think you were dead?" said Lorrimore, gravely.

Neville looked rather startled and uncertain.

"It was best," he said; "I did it for the best. When those scoundrels seized her and left me for dead they robbed me of every penny I possessed; luck was dead against me; I heard she had fallen into the hands of a kind-hearted lady and a nobleman, who would take every care of her—better care than I had taken; and I—I'm a proud man, and I would not stand in her way or be a burden on her," and he hung his head.

"Yes," said Lorrimore. "You are proud I see; but didn't it occur to you that the young lady might suffer somewhat at the loss of her brother, as she called you?"

Neville started.

"No," he said. "Poor Sylvia! Did—did she grieve much?"

Lorrimore laughed grimly.

"Great Heaven! he asks that!" he exclaimed ironically. "Did she grieve? Why, my good friend, she nearly died. We had to fight death inch by inch, hour by hour, for days; and as to grieving—But I think I'd better stop; a proud man's bad enough, but a conceited one is worse, and I should make you that."

Neville hid his face in his hands.

"My dear, dear darling!" he murmured, inaudibly. "And she's in there!" he exclaimed, dropping his hand on Lorrimore's arm. "In there! Think of it, my lord! And I shall see her directly."

"Yes," said Lorrimore, hanging his head. "You are a happy man. So is the woman I love in there, and I shall probably see her directly; but it will be for the last time—the last time."

Neville, biting his lips, looked at him.

"I—I wouldn't give up all hope, Lord Lorrimore," he said.

Lorrimore faced round and gazed at him, then shook his head.

"There can be no hope for me, Mr. Lynne," he said. "Miss Hope is engaged to your brother."

Neville groaned.

"Look here," he said in his abrupt backwoods fashion; "don't you go off to Africa yet. You can't tell what may turn up. Look at my case. Here am I, sneaking in the garden to get a glimpse of an old friend, Audrey, and I hear the voice"—his own broke—"of the girl I love, of the girl I've been parted from forever, as I thought. Take courage by my luck."

"Yes; but your girl is not engaged to another man—at least I don't think so; I don't know—"

"What!" gasped Neville, at the mere idea of a doubt, "Sylvia engaged—"

"You see," said Lorrimore, with a sad smile—"you can understand how I feel—hopeless!"

"No, I can't!" said Neville, his hand clinched at his side, his broad chest heaving. "If I found Sylvia—my little Sylvia—engaged, I'd—"

"Fling the man out of the window," said Lorrimore, with a laugh and a sigh. "Yes, that's all very well for the backwoods of Australia; but—" he shrugged his shoulders—"Mr. Lynne, though nothing would give me greater delight than to fling Sir Jordan out of the window—I beg your pardon; I forgot that he is your brother," he broke off apologetically.

"Because—because I have the misfortune to love Miss Hope," said Lorrimore, grimly.

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