

* A TANGLED WEB. *

(CONTINUED.)

Neville had a faint recollection of the voice, but could not completely recall it, but stood regarding the man watchfully.

"What, don't you know me, sir?" he said, rubbing his ankle and still eyeing Neville excitedly. "It's me, Trale—Inspector Trale! You remember me, surely, sir?"

Neville's face cleared, and he held out his hand with a smile.

"Of course," he said. "How are you, Trale?"

The inspector laughed rather ruefully.

"Well, pretty bruised, I expect, sir," he replied. "But who ever would have thought of seeing you here, Mr. Neville?"

Neville glanced at the house rather sadly.

"And yet this used to be my home," he said, more to himself than to the inspector. "You've got rather a singular way of welcoming an old friend, Trale," he said aloud.

Trale looked a thousand apologies.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, Mr. Neville," he said, humbly. "I don't know what you must think of me, but a man must do his duty, you know, sir; and seeing what I took to be a—"

"Tramp," said Neville, with a smile, as he glanced at his shabby get-up. "Out with it, Trale!"

"Well, sir, begging your pardon, that or worse is just what I took you for," admitted Trale. "I've been watching you for the last half hour, and it looked to me as if I was on the track of a burglar."

"I dare say," said Neville, grimly; "and to tell you the truth, I was just thinking, when you collared me, whether I couldn't manage to get inside and have a look at the old place."

"And very natural, sir, indeed," said Trale, still glancing askance at Neville's rough and threadbare garments—"very natural, and I'm sure they'd only be too pleased to see you, especially those who remember you, sir. Why didn't you go in by the proper way—the front door, Mr. Neville?"

Neville shook his head.

"I'm scarcely in visiting trim, Trale, he replied, evasively. "Besides—Well, I've my reasons for keeping my presence here in Lynne, a secret, for the present, at any rate. I see my bro—Sir Jordan isn't at home."

"No, sir; Sir Jordan's very seldom here, especially in the season," said Trale. "The old place is quieter than ever. Sir Jordan's a very great man now, Mr. Neville, and they can't spare him up in London; but I dare say you've heard all that."

"I have not heard much," said Neville.

"I only came back to England a week or two ago."

"You don't say!" said Trale, with friendly and respectful interest. "Been all over the world, I expect, sir?"

"Part of it," said Neville. "Yes, the old place is very quiet, Trale."

"Very, sir," assented the inspector; "and it's because it's so lonesome like that I keep it pretty well watched."

"Burglars, eh?" said Neville, absently.

Trale nodded.

"Yes, sir; there's a lot of plate and valuables inside there, and it's well to be on the alert. To tell the truth, Mr. Neville, I didn't really take you for a crib-cracker, planning a job, but for a customer I've been on the lookout for some time past. He disappeared here in the park, not far from this very spot, and seeing you standing here, it flashed upon me that he might have turned up again on the very spot where he was lost. Though I'll admit that it wasn't very likely."

"Oh!" said Neville, not very greatly interested. "Who was that? We'd better not stop here talking, or some one will hear us, and, as I said, I don't wish to be recognized."

"Quite so, sir," assented Trale; and together they walked away toward the lodge; but as they did so, Trale looked back over his shoulder.

"Remember the old door, Mr. Neville?" he said gently.

Neville nodded.

"Yes," he said slowly.

"I suppose you know, sir," Trale went on in a low voice, "that Sir Greville died in that room?"

Neville shook his head.

"I know nothing more than that my father is dead," he said. "I learned that much soon after I landed."

"Yes, sir," said Trale, glancing hesitatingly at the grave, handsome face. "Yes, sir, Sir Greville's death came like a shock to most of us, though he was an old man; and the will was a shock, too, Mr. Neville; for, begging your pardon, sir, we did think that he'd have left a good share of the money to you. I hope I don't presume Mr. Neville, but you and me are old friends, and have had many a game of cricket and wrestling bouts together in the old days; in fact, it was the best way in which you checked me just now that helped me to spot you. It was just the same trick that used to do for me in the old days. I don't think I should have recognized you by your appearance, Mr. Neville. You've altered wonderfully."

"A man has a right to do what he likes with his money, Trale," said Neville gravely. "Yes, I must have altered pretty considerably to be mistaken for a notorious criminal."

Trale colored and looked rather embarrassed.

"Well, you see, sir, it was the clothes and the fact of your wandering about the place at this time in the evening that misled me for Jim Banks is ever so much older than you, and"—he laughed—"with a very different kind of face."

"Jim Banks?" said Neville. "I seem to remember something about him."

"Yes, sir. Lived with his daughter in the little cottage on the Stoneleigh Road. A regular bad lot, he was, Mr. Neville," and the inspector warming up, told the story of Jim Banks very much as he had told it to Audrey on the morning she had amused herself by reading the description of the "wanted" men outside the police station.

"Disappeared in the park," said Trale; "disappeared just as if the earth had swallowed him up. That's the aggravating part of it. If he'd kept in London, and gone off from there, it wouldn't have been so bad; but to think of him coming back here and then giving us the slip!"

"Very trying for you, no doubt," said Neville, half absently. "Has anything been heard of the daughter?"

"No, Mr. Neville; she went off while her father was in prison—went wrong, I'm afraid. She was a pretty, lady-like girl, and—But there, I'm boring you with all this, sir. What do you mean to do, Mr. Neville, if you won't go to the Court?"

"I wish some one would tell me," replied Neville, smothering a sigh. "I should like to stay near the old place for a little, but I don't want to be known."

"Yes, sir; I can understand that, Mr. Neville," said Trale. Then, after a few minutes' pondering, he said. "I tell you what you might do sir. You remember old Mrs. Parsons who used to keep the West Lodge?"

"Quite well," said Neville, with a smile, as he recalled the tricks he and Audrey used to play that excellent woman.

"Well, sir, Sir Greville left her a little annuity, and she's living in a small cottage just outside Stoneleigh. She's got a spare room. It's a poor place for the likes of you, Mr. Neville."

"My good fellow," said Neville, "I have slept under hayricks and in stables for the past week, to say nothing of having roughed it for years past—"

"Good Lord, Mr. Neville!" muttered Trale, in a horrified whisper. "You as used to be—"

"And Mrs. Parsons's cottage will seem like a palace to me."

"Very well then, sir," said Trale. "We'll go straight there. The old woman will be half-mazed with delight at the thought of having you under her roof, and she's a decent old body, and can keep her tongue quiet. You'll be comfortable enough there in a rough kind of way while you care to stay and look about you. It's a pity Miss Audrey isn't at home, Mr. Neville; but she's up in London. She'd be glad enough to see you, bless her heart! begging your pardon, sir."

Neville laid his hand on the man's shoulder and his voice trembled.

"You can't offend me by blessing Miss Audrey, Trale," he said. "But I'm glad, in a sorrowful way, that she's not here."

"I understand, sir," said Trale. "But isn't there anything I can do for you—I mean anything that is something?"

"Yes; you can come to the little inn at Stoneleigh and have some supper with me, and we can talk over old times. That's the kindest thing you can do, Trale," said Neville, desirous to inform the inspector that he, Neville, was not quite a penniless tramp; and Trale gladly and respectfully assenting, the two men went toward Stoneleigh.

CHAPTER XXV.

Sylvia had fallen into good hands. Lorraine and Mercy Fairfax vied with each other in their attention to the sick and bereaved girl, and Mercy's careful nursing and the constant change of air and scene soon brought the color back to the pale cheeks and the wanted strength to the lithe, graceful form. But the improvement ended there.

She was physically whole, but the spirit had received a wound which seemed to defy even time and change.

She took no interest in anything, and though Lorraine and Mercy were unwearied in their efforts to rouse her and woo her to forgetfulness of her loss, they did not succeed.

"She seems to be living in dream-land, poor girl!" said Mercy, and that very nearly described Sylvia's condition.

She would sit for hours in one place, and in almost the same attitude, her head resting on her hand, her large eyes fixed on vacancy, apparently dead to all that was going on around her.

They passed through the most beautiful scenery, sojourned in great cities, in which they were surrounded by luxury, and what was novelty to Sylvia; but it was all disregarded by her. She was living an inner life—feeding upon the memory of the past, and while her body moved through this weary, wonderful world of ours her soul was back at Lorn Hope Camp, which Jack's presence had made a paradise to her. And yet she was gratified for the kindness and unwearied devotion of her two guardians.

"You are too kind to me, you and Lord Lorraine," she said one day to Mercy, who had been even more than usually attentive to the sorrow-stricken girl. "I think if Lord Lorraine would scold me and try and speak roughly and you would stop treating me as if I were the most precious thing on earth, it would do me good," she said, with a touch of her old naivete; and Mercy had smiled and shook her head.

"I'll ask Lord Lorraine to do so," she said; "but I'm afraid he won't."

"No," said Sylvia. "I think he is the kindest and gentlest man in the world, excepting—"

She stopped. Jack wasn't in the world now, alas, alas!

Mercy had grown very fond of Sylvia, and it would seem as if the womanly tenderness so long pent up in her bosom had found a vent and lavished itself on the young girl so strangely committed to her care. Lorraine, too, grew attached to Sylvia, and under other circumstances his attachment would have developed into a warmer feeling; but Lorraine had only one heart, and it had left him forever. If Sylvia had been ten times more lovely and bewitching than she was—and she was beautiful and fascinating enough—Lorraine would have been safe. There was only one woman in the world for him, and she was Audrey Hope, who had sent him on the errand which apparently became more of a wild goose chase each day. But, notwithstanding the charge he had undertaken, Lorraine did not neglect his mission, and all their journeying had the one object—the finding of Neville Lynne.

They passed through Australia to New Zealand, Lorraine pursuing his search with unremitting ardor, but without success; and at last they came to Europe. It was late in autumn when they landed on the Continent, and Sylvia's continued lethargy caused Mercy and him some anxiety.

"I don't think she ought to winter in England," Mercy said, as they talked over their plans. "An English winter is very enjoyable for those who can stand it; but Sylvia is just in that state when all sorts of trouble from cold and bad weather may set in."

Lord Lorraine nodded.

"Very well," he said. "You had better go to Italy. I will see you there safe and settled comfortably; but I must leave you then, at any rate for a time; but I will look you up now and again."

Sylvia raised no objection to the proposal. She would have consented to go to Siberia, the coast of New Guinea, anywhere, with the same indifference; and they made for Florence.

Lorraine saw them settled in one of the best boarding-houses, and left them to continue his search. He meant going through all the big continental cities.

Sylvia parted with him with tears in her eyes and broken sentences of gratitude; but immediately afterward she sunk into the old lethargy and indifference.

Mercy used to drive her about the delightful old city and the exquisite scenery around it, and Sylvia would look upon it all with about as much interest in her dreamy eyes as if she were asleep.

Mercy was almost in despair, but as patient as ever and as tender and gentle.

One day her devotion met with some reward. Sylvia had complained of the wind—there is an east wind in Florence which would shame an English one—and Mercy had taken her into one of the churches.

Service was going on, and the two women knelt reverently with the rest of the congregation. Suddenly Mercy felt the girl kneeling beside her tremble and heard her sigh. One of the choristers was singing an exquisite solo, and sending forth music which seemed to float, like a strain from the heavenly choir, through the grand old church.

Mercy said nothing, but Sylvia, as they drove home murmured, "How beautiful, oh, how beautiful!" and that evening, as Mercy was dressing for dinner in the room adjoining Sylvia's, she heard a voice singing the solo. She was so startled by the beauty and sweetness of the voice that she did not at first realize that it was Sylvia's and when she did so she dropped the brush from her hand and opened the door between the two rooms.

"My dear, was that you singing?" she exclaimed.

Sylvia, with faint surprise, looked over her shoulder from the glass before which she was standing.

"Was I singing?" she said. "I was only trying to hum the hymn we heard in the church this afternoon; I didn't think you could hear me."

Mercy stared at her with astonished surprise.

"My dear child," she said, putting her arm round her neck and kissing her, "you sing like an angel! Why have you never sung before? Lord Lorraine would have been so pleased and delighted!"

"Would he?" said Sylvia. "I would have sung to him if I had thought of it, but I haven't sung since—"

She turned her head away. Mercy wisely said no more at the moment, and left her; but a few evenings afterwards she persuaded her to sing a simple ballad in the drawing-room, little dreaming of the consequences that would ensue.

There were some very nice people staying in the house—English and Italian—and among the latter was an old professor of the Conservatoire. He was a very silent old man, who used to sit reading his Italian newspaper and apparently too much absorbed in it to take any notice of his fellow-boarders; but that night, when Sylvia began to sing, he lowered his paper, then dropped it altogether, and starting to his feet with an exclamation of amazement and delight, trotted across the room to the piano by which Sylvia was standing.

"My dear young lady," he said, in broken English, "where did you get that voice?"

To such an unanswerable question Sylvia could only smile, and the old man hastened to explain.

"Bah! I do not mean where did you get the voice itself—that comes from Heaven, we know—but who taught you to sing like that?"

"My father," said Sylvia, as she had answered Jack.

"Oh, then, my dear your father was a musician, and, what is better, a first-rate tutor. Let me hear you sing again."

Sylvia complied, and the old professor stood and listened with bent head and profound and critical attention.

Then he patted her arm approvingly, and even enthusiastically.

"My dear young lady," he said, earnestly and almost solemnly, "you have a voice which is phenomenal. You did not know it! No one has told you! It is like a diamond buried in the sand! Bah!

You must sing! You have a grand future before you. Ah, but yes! Such a future as makes me dizzy to think of. But you must be careful—there is much to learn. See! if you will, I myself will teach you. Come to me to-morrow at the Conservatoire at eleven;" and taking it for granted that she could not dream of refusing such an offer, he trotted off to his nightly cigarette and game of dominoes at the club.

"You will go, dear?" said Mercy, when they had gone up to their rooms.

After this conversation Sylvia thought a moment or two.

"Did he mean that I could earn money?" she said in a low voice.

"I suppose so—yes, of course," said Mercy. "But that is of no consequence. It is of your happiness I am thinking, dear. If you can only find some amusement and interest in the occupation—"

"To earn money," repeated Sylvia, as if she had not heard her. Then she put both her hands on Mercy's shoulders and looked into her eyes.

"Do you think all this time that I have not felt, with all my gratitude for your love and Lord Lorraine's great kindness, that I am a dependent; that I have been living on charity—yes, charity? At times, Mercy, dear, the thought has nearly driven me mad—"

"That's nonsense," Mercy began, her eyes filling; but Sylvia went on:

"Often I have asked myself what I should do to earn my own bread; often I have asked myself what Jack would have said if he could have known that I was living on other people's alms; and I have felt hot with shame and misery. It is that, as much as anything which has crushed me, Mercy, and now that old man says I can earn money. Will I go? Why, I would walk a thousand miles with such a hope before me. Yes, we will go, Mercy, dear, and I will work—well, you shall see."

The course of lessons commenced, and the professor's enthusiasm, instead of decreasing, increased as his pupil progressed.

When Lord Lorraine came on a flying visit he found that the apathetic girl he had left had become transformed into a keen student with a hopeful, ardent light in the eyes that had so short a time since been vacant and lifeless. He was delighted, but still more astonished, when the professor gravely proposed that Sylvia should make her appearance at a matinee.

"Not that she will stop there, my lord," he said, earnestly; "she is fitted for bigger work. For she will act as well as sing, mark me; and it is the opera and not the concert platform to which she is making—"

Lord Lorraine was at first opposed to the idea; but a few words from Sylvia and a long look at her changed face reconciled him to it.

"What will your people say if ever we find them, Sylvia?" he said.

"You will never find them," she replied; "and if you did, they would say I have done right."

The day of the matinee came, and she appeared, not trembling and nervous, as are most debutantes, but calm and serene, with the true artist's confidence.

Lord Lorraine was spell-bound while the sweet, fresh voice rang through the hall. A storm of applause rewarded the singer, and at the close the professor, trembling with agitation and delight, brought forward a stout, elderly gentleman with a wig, whom he introduced as the manager of the Vienna Opera, and who, in bland voice and complimentary language, offered Sylvia an engagement.

She asked for one day in which to consider the proposal, and accepted it.

"You will stay with me, Mercy—you will always stay with me?" she said, when she told her.

And Mercy had drawn the girl to her heart and kissed her.

"Yes, I will stay with you, Sylvia. In fact, I'm afraid I couldn't go even if you sent me away."

A month afterwards, while the Vienna Theatre, crammed to its fullest to hear the new singer, Signora Stella, whose youth and beauty had been the topic of conversation throughout the gay city, rang with enthusiastic plaudits, Signora Stella herself sat in her dressing room, still in her costume, her face covered with her hands, her whole frame shaken with sobs, the tears trickling between her fingers.

"My dear, my dear, murmured Mercy, "why do you cry? You are overwrought. Listen to the plaudits, Sylvia! Think of the success—the great overwhelming success and don't cry."

But the sobs did not cease, and Mercy bending over her, heard her murmur brokenly:

"Jack, Jack! Oh, if Jack were only here!"

The successful Signora Stella, whose fame the electric wires were already flashing through Europe, was still as faithful to the man who had paid her ransom as Sylvia the orphan of Lorn Hope, had been.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Lord Byron remarked that he woke one morning to find himself famous; and Sylvia might with truth have said the same.

In these days, when news travels at more than a thousand miles a minute, it does not take long to be celebrated. The man who writes a successful book, the musician who composes a catchy comic opera, the acrobat who surpasses all others of his profession in the art of hanging by his eyebrows a hundred feet or so above the ground, does not have to wait months, or even weeks, before his great feat becomes known. The whole world is made acquainted with it in a few hours and he has only to step up and take his fortune with as little trouble as possible.

And Sylvia's was a genuine success. The music critics were, for once, unanimous in praising her voice and the way she managed it; and the dramatic critics declared that she would in time be as great an actress as she was a singer.

Vienna raved about her—about her beauty, her youth, and her romantic history; and all sorts of absurd rumors went the round of the newspapers. Some hinted that she was the daughter of an English nobleman, others that she was a Russian princess who had run away from home because her parents declined to allow her to follow the bent of her genius; but by others it was declared that she was Lord Lorraine's betrothed wife, and that she would, notwithstanding her great success, presently wed the English nobleman and retire from the stage forever.

Meanwhile, the theater, on the three nights in the week in which she played, was full to overflowing, her appearance was greeted with cheers, and wreaths and bouquets, in accordance with the delightfully absurd custom, were thrown at her feet.

Sometimes a note was concealed among the flowers, and, not seldom, a costly article of jewelry. These Sylvia handed—the first unopened—to Mercy, who duly returned them the next morning to the senders.

All this would have turned the heads of nineteen girls out of twenty; but Sylvia bore her honors modestly. Indeed, it was this almost child-like modesty which won the hearts of her audiences as much as her beauty or her voice. She lived in strict retirement under Mercy's protecting wing; and, excepting the old professor who still remained her tutor, and occasionally Lord Lorraine, saw no visitors nor held any communication with the world outside the theatre.

She took her triumph not only modestly but with a sense of solemn responsibility. She had worked hard before she made her appearance; she worked harder still, now that the public expected so much from her; and nearly the whole day was spent in studying the music and acting the parts assigned to her; and she seemed to live entirely for and in her work.

Lord Lorraine looked on all this in an amazement which he found it impossible to get rid of, and night after night he would stand at the back of his box and gaze at the lovely young creature on the stage as she held the large audience spell-bound, and ask himself whether the brilliant, dazzling creature could be the girl he had seen in the grasp of Lavarick the ranger?

To that past, divided from the present by so short a space of time, neither he nor Sylvia ever reverted; but that she was constantly thinking of and dwelling upon it, both he and Mercy knew, as they sometimes watched Sylvia sitting in pensive silence the beautiful eyes clouded by sorrowful thought.

Poor Lorraine was in rather a peculiar frame of mind. The two years in which he had set himself to find Neville had expired and he might have gone back to Audrey with a clear conscience, but his love made him proud, and he felt it would be almost mean to go back so to speak, empty-handed.

By this time he hated the very name of Neville Lynne, and yet he felt as if compelled to make one more effort to find him. He resolved that he would spend just one more month in the search, and then, successful or unsuccessful, would go to Audrey and, in the latter case, say: "I have done my best to restore your friend to you, and have failed. I will not hold you to your implied promise—you are free. But I love you still, and if you can return me a thousandth part of that love, be my wife!"

He went next morning to Sylvia's hotel to wish her good-bye, and found her and Mercy consulting over an open letter. Sylvia handed it to him with a smile.

"I am so glad you have come," she said.

"Here is an offer from the manager of the London Opera. Shall I accept it or not?" Lorraine emitted a low whistle as he read the terms.

"At this rate you will be a millionaire, my dear Sylvia," he said.

"I wonder what you will do with your money?" and he smiled.

Sylvia smiled; and then she sighed and looked away.

If Jack had been alive, there would have been no need for that question. "Give it to Jack," would have been her answer.

"Sylvia finds a way of getting rid of a great deal of it easily enough," said Mercy. "I sometimes think that all the poor in Paris—"

Sylvia laid her fingers on Mercy's lips.

"No tales out of school!" she exclaimed, laughing. "But indeed I often ask myself the same question, and here is some more, and a very large sum. Shall I go?" she asked as meekly as a ward addressing her guardian.

"Yes, I suppose so," Lorraine replied, with a faint sigh. How he wished he could go to London and be near Audrey! "I suppose so. It's a very good offer, and you were bound to go to London sooner or later. They will be delighted with you there, Sylvia."

"Do you think so?" she said, modestly.

"Sometimes I am afraid when I think of it, and yet—"

She paused a moment, then went on softly: "I shall be glad to see England again. It is like home, though I left it when I was such a little chit I can scarcely remember it."

"You and your brother left it together?" said Lorraine, gently. He had always avoided mentioning "her brother," and he spoke now very hesitatingly and softly.

Sylvia colored, then turned pale.

"Some day I will tell you all about it, Lord Lorraine," she said in a low voice. "I—not now—not now!" and her voice began to tremble so that Lorraine quickly changed the subject.

"You will have to go over at the end of the month," he said. "It will be just in the season, and you will have a great triumph."

He sighed again and Sylvia noticed it.

"Are you not coming, too?" she said, with frank regret.

He shook his head.

"No—not just yet, at any rate. I'm off again on my wild-goose chase. But I shall be over in four or five weeks' time."

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)