

(CONTINUED FROM TENTH PAGE.)

Sylvia looked up from the letter to the manager which she had sat down to write. "That wild-goose chase of yours—how tired you must be of it," she said, sympathetically.

"You are right—I am." "I wish I could help you," she said softly. "But I can't can I?"

He shook his head. "Not even in London? Is there anything I can do? Is there no message I can take for you?"

He gnawed at his mustache, and smiled absently. "I'm afraid not. There is only one person I should like to send a message to—"

He stopped abruptly. "Mercy was seated mending some stage lace of Sylvia's, and out of hearing."

Sylvia looked up at him with a light in her beautiful eyes.

"It's—it's a lady?" she said in a whisper.

Lorimore colored.

"Yes," he said in as low a voice as hers. "Ah, now I understand!" murmured Sylvia.

She meant that she understood why this best and most generous of men seemed to be living under a cloud, and as if he had some absorbing worry and anxiety always with him.

"Is—is she very good and beautiful? But of course she is."

He threw himself into a chair beside her and leaned forward, the color coming and going in his dark face.

"Yes, I think her both good and beautiful," Lorimore said, at first with the shyness with which men always speak of matters of the heart. "I think her the best and loveliest on earth, and my heart has been set upon her for years. If it hadn't been, well—" and he looked at Sylvia, whose eyes dropped for a moment; then she looked up at him and shook her head.

"I am very glad and very sorry, for you don't seem happy. You kept away from her?"

"That's because she sent me," said Lorimore. "She sent me away more than two years ago to look for a friend—a great friend—who had disappeared. I was to search for two years, and then—well, perhaps, I can't say for certain—she would listen to what I had to say."

"The time is up," said Sylvia, staring at him. "Why, oh, why don't you go to her?"

Lorimore looked down rather sheepishly.

"Well, you see, Sylvia, I—Don't you think she might think I was acting meanly in returning without her friend, and keeping her to the letter of her bargain?"

Sylvia almost sprang off her chair.

"Oh, to think that one so wise and good should be so simple!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands and regarding him with a mixture of pity and anger.

"Eh?" said Lorimore, staring at her. "Why, don't you see?" she said in a tone of one addressing a rather dense child—"don't you really see? I suppose you don't know whether she loves you or not?"

"I don't," said Lorimore. "I should say, if I were asked, that she didn't." "You foolish man!" retorted this child in years and woman in instinct; "of course she loves you, or she wouldn't have sent you on an errand for her, especially such a big one."

Lorimore's breath came fast and his dark eyes began to glow.

"If I felt that you were right—" he began; but Sylvia broke in:

"Right? Of course I am right. So you think one woman doesn't know exactly how another feels. She's as much in love with you, and perhaps more, than you are with her."

He got up and began to walk about again.

"And you have been staying away from her all this time? But, of course you have written to her often?"

Lorimore shook his head.

"No," he said, rather shyly. "There wasn't anything to write about. I hadn't found the man, and—and there wasn't any other news, excepting, excepting that—that I still love her and would die for her if that would do her any good, and she knows that well enough."

"And do you think that a woman doesn't like being told, though she may know it as well as she knows her own face? Oh dear! how stupid men, even the best and wisest, are!" and she threw up her hands like the little actress she was.

"That's just what all—what this lady would say," said Lorimore. "I could almost fancy it was she who was speaking."

"Of course all women are alike—only thank goodness! you men haven't discovered it," said Sylvia.

"And you think I ought to go to her now?" said Lorimore meekly.

"Certainly—at once—by electric telegraph, if they will take you," responded Sylvia, promptly; "and I hope—oh! oh! I hope you won't be too late, though you almost deserve it." She repented the bantering speech the moment it had left her lips, for a terrible change came over Lorimore's handsome face. It grew deathly pale, and the dark eyes glared and flashed under the straight brows. Sylvia put her hand on his arm. "Oh, forgive me! I did not mean to wound you. But go—oh, go at once! Think of what may happen in two years!"

Lorimore was silent for a moment or two; then he looked up.

"I'll go directly—in a week or two," he said. "I have just heard of a last chance. There are several gangs of men, mostly Englishmen, employed on the new Swiss railway. I will run over and search for my man there, and then—well, then I shall be able to go to her and say that I have left no stone unturned."

Then he walked out of the room, as if he could not bear to hear or say any more. But before he started on this, his last search, he arranged Sylvia's and Mercy's journey to England with his usual care and forethought. Sylvia had her own maid and a courier; and, indeed, the orphan of Lorn Hops might have traveled with the state of an empress if she had been so minded.

Mercy decided that they would be quieter in lodgings than in a hotel, and the courier had engaged some comfortable rooms in Bury Street, St. James.

Here she was called upon by the great London manager, who was rather startled to find the famous prima-donna so young, and so quiet, and so sad-looking.

For the first two or three days she and Mercy amused themselves in the intervals between practice and rehearsal in going about the great city, which Mercy seemed to know quite well. They saw most of the famous sights; but, of all things, Sylvia enjoyed the park with its throngs of beautifully dressed men and women, and was quite unconscious that, as she and Mercy drove round the ring in the modest hired brougham, all eyes were bent upon her own beautiful face.

One afternoon, on their way home, they passed down Park Lane and South Audley street, and Sylvia, who had turned to Mercy to make some remark, was surprised to see that she had gone deathly white and was trembling.

"Oh, what is the matter, Mercy?" she asked, anxiously.

"Nothing, nothing," said Mercy, evidently struggling for composure. "It was only something—"

She stopped as if she did not wish to say any more; and Sylvia looking around anxiously, could see nothing to alarm her companion. A thin, tall gentleman, with a pale, thoughtful face, had just passed them, but he had not glanced at the carriage, and there was no one else near at that moment. Sylvia stole her hand into Mercy's still trembling one.

"Are you better now, dear Mercy?" she asked.

Mercy smiled at her in her sad, resigned way.

"Yes, Sylvia; don't be alarmed. I shall not be taken that way again." And she set her lips firmly.

The night of Sylvia's first appearance arrived, and she admitted to Mercy that she was rather nervous.

"I don't know why," she said, with a little trembling sigh, as Mercy arranged the simple dress in which Marguerite first appears; "but to-night I feel as if—Don't laugh, Mercy—but there I you never laugh. Perhaps it would be better for me if you did—but I feel as if something were going to happen."

"Something will happen—a very great success," said Mercy. "The manager tells me that the house is crammed, and that it is, what he calls, in capital humor."

Sylvia sighed. "Yes," she said, "every one is so kind and indulgent. I am not afraid of them"—she waved her hand toward the stage—"it is not that. I can scarcely tell what it is. But do not mind me; I shall forget all about it directly I go on and begin to sing."

The manager himself came to the dressing room when her 'call' time came, and amid a breathless silence she appeared in sight of the audience. A curious murmur of satisfaction and admiration rose, which swelled into a burst of delighted applause at the end of her first song.

Mercy was waiting for her at the wings, and took her down to the dressing rooms, and noticed that Sylvia was, though outwardly calm, still a little agitated.

"How beautiful you sung to-night, dear!" she said, kissing her. "I wish you could have heard the delightful remarks of the people at the wings. I think it will be the greatest success you have yet had."

Sylvia nodded. "And yet I trembled so that—Did you see any of the people in the house, Mercy?"

But before she could reply, the manager knocked at the door, in a flutter of excitement, to tell her that the house was calling for her to come on before the curtain.

"Oh, no, no!" she said, putting a little. "Not yet; I must rest. Oh! please not yet; let them wait till the opera is finished; they may not want me then."

The word and wish of a prima donna are law, and the manager retired disappointed, and yet marveling at the young lady's modest humility. It was something startlingly novel in his experience.

Sylvia repeated her question. "Did you notice any one, Mercy?"

"No, dear," replied Mercy; "I had only eyes for you, as usual. Who was it you wanted me to see?"

"No one I know," said Sylvia. "There is a lady sitting in the second box on the second tier, on the right-hand side. She is the most beautiful creature I have ever seen."

"There are a great many beautiful women in the house to-night," said Mercy. "I dare say, but I have only seen this one distinctly. She is with another lady, rather older than herself, her mother, I suppose. I could scarcely take my eyes off the younger one; it is such a face! Oh! do you know, Mercy, dear, that I seemed to be singing and playing at her, and for her alone. She watched me as closely as I watched her, and at first, I mean when I first came on and raised my eyes to the box, I fancied that she started and looked coldly and angrily at me."

"Oh, but that's impossible, Sylvia!" said Mercy. "It is not like you to be so fanciful."

Sylvia laughed softly. "No, I deserve that credit, I think; but—Well, I suppose I am fanciful to-night."

"Was there no one else in the box?" asked Mercy.

"One or two gentlemen, I think," said Sylvia, indifferently, "but they were at the back, in the shadow, and I could not see them. I wish you could find out who she is, Mercy. Not that I should know her name, even if I heard it for I know no one—no one—here in England."

When they went up for the great jewel scene, Mercy managed a moment or two before Sylvia went on, to address a question to the great Mephistopheles, who had been singing the praises of Signora Stella to an excited and enthusiastic crowd of fellow actors.

"Will you tell me the names of those ladies in that second box, please?" she said.

He swept her a bow, and looked across the house.

"Ah, yes!" he said. "One is Lady Marlow—the Viscountess Marlow—the other is the charming Miss Audrey Hope."

Mercy started, thanked him, and whispered to Sylvia:

"Her name is Audrey Hope."

Sylvia had only just time to nod, then glided on the stage. And as she done so she raised her eyes directly to the sweet face which had so attracted her, and felt certain that Audrey Hope's eyes met hers with a certain kind of significance, with something more than the curiosity, and perhaps admiration, with which one of a large audience regards a player.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Directly he had seen the announcement of the appearance of Signora Stella, Jordan booked a box. The report he had read to Audrey might be true or false. Lord Lorimore was in some way connected with the new and famous opera singer who had taken the world by storm, and Jordan knew that Lord Lorimore could not be far off. There was no time to lose. He would take Audrey to see her rival, and clinch matters before Lorimore could arrive on the scene.

On the morning of Sylvia's advertised appearance he called at Grosvenor Square. He had not seen Audrey since the night of the bell, and he was careful to greet her as if nothing had been said which could cause any embarrassment.

He chatted pleasantly, in his very best style, and did not mention the object of his visit until Lady Marlow came into the room. And then, as if he had suddenly remembered it, he said:

"Oh, by the way, Lady Marlow, of course you are going to the opera to-night to see the new marvel—Signora Stella? What highflown names they assume, do they not?"

"Well, I meant going," said Lady Marlow, "but we haven't a box this season, and when I sent down to the office for a seat they sent back word that there wasn't one in the house."

"How fortunate!" murmured Jordan. "I got a box a week ago, intending to go, but I'm afraid I shall not be able to do so. Pray take it, Lady Marlow."

"Oh, but—" began Lady Marlow. "Please do; and if I can look in for half an hour I will do so."

Lady Marlow glanced at Audrey inquiringly.

Audrey had colored and winced at the sound of the signora's name; but she said, calmly enough:

"I should very much like to go."

Jordan took his leave at once; but an exultant smile played about his thin lips. If this singing-girl, whose name was linked

with Lord Lorimore's, was as beautiful as was said, Audrey, piqued and jealous, would be in a condition of mind that would induce her to listen to him tonight.

Audrey was very quiet for the rest of the afternoon, and when she came down to the early dinner, surprised Lady Marlow by the splendor of her costume, for Audrey, as a rule, was not given to diamonds and gorgeous apparel.

"Why this tremendous war-paint, young lady?" demanded the viscount, with a smile of admiration. "Any one going to be scalped to-night?"

Audrey blushed a little. "Do I look too resplendent?" she said, with affected indifference. "I am going to the opera with mamma, that is all."

"Oh, yes, to see the new wonder. They say she is really a rara avis. Don't be surprised if I look in. By the way, what is this nonsense I see in the paper about her and Lorimore?"

Lady Marlow pressed her foot with hers under the table, and, of course, he stammered and said "Eh?" as men usually do; but Audrey scarcely seemed to wince.

"Do you mean that she is engaged to him?" she said, calmly, and a little defiantly. "I don't know why it should be nonsense. She is very beautiful, so they say, and—why do you say it is nonsense?"

"So it is," said Lord Marlow, disregarding his wife's warning frown. "Men of Lorimore's rank and position don't marry actresses unless they're not the actresses, but the men—are fools; and no one ever called Lorimore a fool yet. Why on earth doesn't he come back to London? I've no patience with fellows who trapse round the globe like wandering Jews, especially when there is plenty for them to do at home."

Audrey said nothing more, and the meal was rather a silent one.

The two ladies drove to the opera, and Audrey leaned back in the carriage and appeared very thoughtful.

"What a tremendous house!" said Lady Marlow, surveying the crowd through her lorgnette, and bowing to her acquaintances; but Audrey merely glanced round in a preoccupied way, and then returned her attention to the stage.

Then amid the expectant silence Signora Stella appeared. Audrey leaned forward, her breath coming and going quickly, her eyes devouring Sylvia's face, as she stood modestly waiting for the applause to cease.

Audrey listened to the sweet voice in a kind of rapturous pain, then she sunk back and hid her face with her fan.

"A very pretty girl," said Lady Marlow. "And very young, too. It is a delicious voice."

"Pretty! She is lovely!" said Audrey, as if she could not help herself.

"They 'make up' so well nowadays," said Lady Marlow.

"Her beauty is natural," responded Audrey. "And how graceful she is!" She smothered a sigh. "It is a delight to watch her move across the stage; all the others seem awkward and clumsy compared with her."

Her heart ached while she did this justice to the girl for whom Lord Lorimore had deserted her. No wonder that he had forgotten her, Audrey, after he had seen and known this lovely creature with her sweet voice and bewitching ways. And Signora Stella was a great personage, while she, Audrey, was a nobody.

She told herself that she ought to hate this graceful girl upon whose lips the crowded house hung as it fascinated; and yet, somehow, she could not; and she found the tears welling to her eyes as Marguerite's voice waivered out the plaintive song over the dead body of her brother.

Lord Marlow came into the box after the second act, and was as enthusiastic as the rest of the audience.

"By George!" he exclaimed, "the papers have not exaggerated; the girl sings like a nightingale, and has got the face of—"

"An angel," said Audrey, softly.

He stared at her. "That's the nearest thing in feminine admiration I have ever heard," he said. "Bravo, Audrey! It's well that your enthusiasm isn't wasted on a foreigner; she's English, they tell me, though no one knows anything about her."

"Excepting that she is engaged to Lord Lorimore," said Jordan's smooth voice behind them.

Audrey did not turn her head, and with a general bow Jordan came and stood behind her chair, well in the shadow of the box. He looked at Sylvia through his opera-glass with a cold, keen curiosity.

"Lord Lorimore has some excuse for his infatuation," he said in a low voice, meant to reach Audrey alone. "The new signora has the fatal gift of beauty."

Audrey made no response, but seemed wrapped, as she was, in the opera.

Between the acts the foyer was full of people, eagerly discussing and warmly praising the new star, and one or two men came to Lady Marlow to pay their respects to her ladyship and offer their opinion. Among them was Lord Chesterton, and he was enthusiastic.

"The dream of my life is at last fulfilled, my dear Lady Marlow," he said. "I have long sighed for a singer who should be an actress and at the same time a naturally beautiful and refined lady. Tonight I have had the unspeakable delight of looking at and listening to one. She has taken us by storm; there is not a dissentient voice in the chorus of praise and gratification. And so young, too! They tell me that she is not yet twenty; though really her antecedents are shrouded in so much mystery that one doubts everything one is told about her. Do you like her, Miss Audrey? But of course you do."

Audrey turned her face to him; it was rather pale.

"I think she is bewitching," she said. "It is the right word," he assented. "We are all under the spell to-night. There goes the curtain, and I must get back to my place."

As Sylvia came on, Audrey leaned forward in an attitude of complete attention, and the eyes of the two women met and

seemed to linger on each other with an exchange of admiration and even sympathy which was strange, when one comes to think of it.

Sylvia, as she had said to Mercy, played and sung to the beautiful girl in the box above her, and inspired by the rapt attention and admiration in Audrey eyes, she surpassed herself in the last act, and brought down the curtain to a storm of cheering, which was prolonged until the manager brought her on again.

Audrey had leaned forward so far that her arms were resting on the velvet edge of the box, and as Sylvia passed just beneath her, in front of the curtain, Audrey raised her bouquet and dropped it at Sylvia's feet. The vast audience recognized the spontaneity of the action, and applauded enthusiastically. Sylvia was startled for a moment, then, as the manager picked up the bouquet and handed it to her, she raised it to her lips, and her eyes to Audrey's face.

Jordan took Audrey's cloak from the back of the box and held it for her; and as he did so, he saw that the hands she put up to take it were trembling.

"How generous you are?" he murmured. "Most women would have hated her; but you—"

Audrey hung her head, her eyes still fixed on the stage on which Sylvia had just been standing.

"I—I do not hate her," she said, more to herself than to him, and there was a faint tone of wonder in her voice.

"Nor despise him?" he whispered. "No, you are too noble. But I—well, I will not speak of my contempt for the man whose constancy is so poor a thing. Audrey, I at least am constant. Though you may send me away from you, my heart will remain with you and forever. Have you no pity in that gentle heart of yours for me? Audrey, dare I hope? Will you not say one word and make me the happiest man in all the world?"

As he spoke, his hand glided toward hers and took it softly, and—

She was in a state of excitement and emotion; her heart was throbbing with the pain of looking on at the triumph of the beautiful girl who had won Lord Lorimore from her; she was, in short, just in that condition when a woman turns for consolation to the nearest and most persistent of her lovers, and she let her hand remain in his.

"My dearest love," he murmured. She started then, but he held her hand so tightly that she could not have withdrawn it.

"My dearest love be repeated, 'I devote my life to you,' and glancing swiftly round, he raised her hand to his lips.

Lady Marlow happened to turn at the moment, to tell Audrey that they could make their way out, and saw the caress.

Jordan took Audrey down to the carriage, and his hand lingered round hers as he said good-night, and his face, with its keen look of triumph, would have told Lady Marlow that he had won, even if she had not witnessed the little action in the box.

Audrey sunk back into her corner and closed her eyes, her opera cloak drawn well up round her face, and Lady Marlow left her alone until they reached home; then she followed her into her room and put her arm round her.

"Am I to wait till Jordan tells me, dear?" she said.

Audrey started, and the blood left her face, and she looked from side to side, as if she had suddenly realized what she had done.

"I—" she stammered, putting her hand to her lips.

Lady Marlow kissed her affectionately. "My dear, I saw a little of what was going on, and I am not surprised. It is always the man with the longest patience who wins. May you be very happy, my dear, dear girl!" and Audrey, as a commencement of her happiness, laid her head on Lady Marlow's shoulder and wept.

Jordan stood for a moment or two looking after the carriage, the light of triumph still glowing in his eyes, then they took a keener and more calculating expression, and calling a cab, he told the man to drive him to the office of a well known society paper.

"There shall be no chance of drawing back my timid Audrey!" he muttered. "I knew I should win; but luck has favored me. Whether there is anything in this rumor of an engagement between this opera-singer and my Lord Lorimore or not, it has served my turn. No, there must be no drawing back!" He drew a long breath. "I am safe now, with the Hope estates and money I can defy even the worst!"

In less than an hour the paragraph announcing the engagement of the Right Honorable Sir Jordan Lynne, Bart., M. P., and Miss Audrey Hope was in type.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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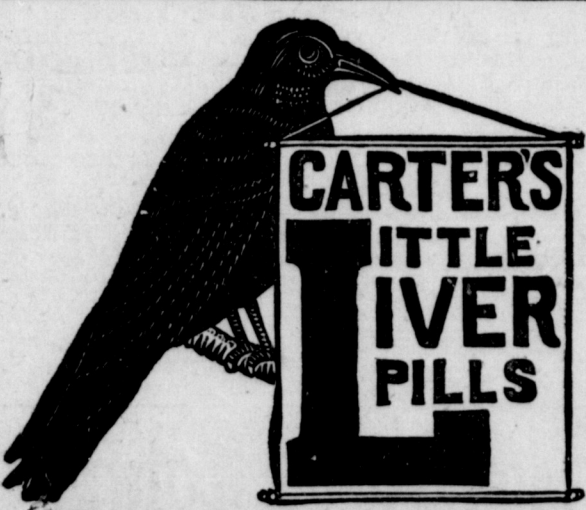
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