

# A TANGLED WEB.

(CONTINUED.)  
CHAPTER XIV.

Time passes, even in the gold fields, and the months glide by 'taking with them things good and bad'; among the latter may be reckoned the extreme heat. The cool season had set in now, and the weather and the temperature were delicious; it was neither too hot nor too cold, and Lorn Hope Camp became quite cheerful. The luck, as well as the weather, had improved, and Lorn Hope had become so important a place as to quite warrant an additional grog-store.

'If this yere place don't look out, it 'ull grow into a town, and there'll have to be a mayor and a corporation,' the Doc declared.

It had not only increased in size, but in morals and manners. The improvement in these two essentials was doubtless owing to the presence of a clergyman sent by one of the London societies.

Lorn Hope, on hearing of his arrival, was at first astounded, then indignant, and lastly amused. Perhaps the camp was induced to tolerate his presence by the fact that he had brought his wife and daughter with him, the latter a shy, pretty girl with fair hair and blue eyes.

Some of the other new-comers had also been accompanied by their women-folk, and Lorn Hope was in a fair way to civilization.

'Pears to me,' said the Doc, 'that I shall have to send home for my dressclothes. What with the parson prancing around in black togs and gloves—who says it's a lie? I saw him!—and tip-top ladies promenading about just as they do at Margate and other fashionable places at home, this yere camp is gettin' spiled.'

Indeed, a change was palpably working, and was made manifest to the 'boys' pretty obviously, when Macgregor stuck up a notice at the head of his tent; 'Swearing not allowed,' and followed it by a second notice that, 'Gentlemen is rekwested to keep their knives and shooting-tools in their pockets.'

But though all these changes were taking place in the camp itself, they in themselves did not effect Neville and his household of two.

He had taken a new claim higher up the ravine and had moved his hut and belongings near to it, so that he was still further from the camp than before, and he saw still less of it.

And yet an alteration had taken place in him. He was no longer homesick, for one thing, and had apparently exchanged his restless dislike for Lorn Hope for some thing very near content. He worked as Meth said 'like a nigger,' returning 'home'—as he called the hut—of an evening tired out and just satisfied to eat his supper and sit and talk to Sylvia, or watch her as she read or worked.

The poet Pope remarked that the proper study of mankind is man; he should have said woman, for of all the fascinating studies to which man can apply himself, that of a young girl is the most entrancing and delicious.

In nine months Sylvia had grown tremendously. She was now a tall, exquisitely graceful girl—one might almost write 'woman'—for her wandering life with her father and the peculiar education she had received, had 'forced' her mind, so to speak, and hurried on her intelligence, and though a delightful frankness and simplicity were conspicuous traits in her character, she was as cute, as sensitive and as fully developed in that shrewdness which belongs to her sex as any woman of two-and-twenty.

She had not only grown in height but in strength. When the cool weather came, Neville began to take long walks—tremendous tramps over the hills and through the valleys made musical by the streams which, now swollen to torrents, roared between and over the immense bowlder.

The first two Sundays Sylvia stayed in doors or wandered round the hut, counting the hours till he should return, and devoured by an awful sense of loneliness.

The third Sunday he remarked casually: 'You wouldn't care for a walk, I suppose, Syl?'

She put down the plate she was washing and looked at him, the color coming into her face, a light flashing for a moment in her eyes.

But, woman-like, she suppressed these signs of hope and delight and shrugged her shoulders—a trick that always amused Neville.

run out of meat. How quiet it all is! It reminds me of an English Sunday, somehow. You know that in England everything seems to know that it's Sunday and ceases off. The birds don't sing so loud, and the wind drops, and the only thing that makes a row is the church bells.'

He sighed involuntarily, and she glanced at him with the corner of her eyes.

'Do you wish you were in England, Jack?' she asked in a low voice.

'For some things—yes,' he replied. 'But if wishes were horses beggars would ride. I wouldn't go back to England unless I was rich, or, at any rate, had some money. But I expect you'll go there before I shall. I'm saving up, look here.' He stopped and looked round, as if he feared spies and eavesdroppers even in that vast solitude.

'Look here, Syl,' and he untied a canvas bag fastened to his belt and opened it. I'm saving up. It's slow work, and it will be some time before I can scrape together enough to send you over. But perhaps I may happen on a piece of luck all of a heap some day.'

Sylvia glanced at the bag coldly.

'I don't know that I'm dying to go to England,' she said, curtly.

'Oh, you don't know what's good for you,' he responded. 'Young 'uns never do; and you're such a kid, you see.'

She drew her graceful, supple form as high as she could, and nearly reached his shoulder; but she was too shrewd to retort, and instantly changed the subject.

'Meth says that there are ever so many new people at the camp, Jack.'

'So I hear. I haven't been down lately—oh, for ever so long!'

'And there's a clergyman, Jack. You haven't seen him. He has brought his wife and daughter.'

'I know, a pretty girl with fair hair,' he said. 'I met her on the plain the other morning—a very pretty girl.'

Sylvia's lips grew close, and she tossed her head with its dark mane.

'It could not have been she,' she said decidedly. 'The girl I mean is a washed-out kind of girl, with no color in her eyes.'

Neville laughed.

'That's just like a grown-up woman,' he said. 'Catch one woman seeing anything in another, especially if her hair happens to be another color!'

herculean strength, he was bothered by her hair, which blew across his face and wound itself round his neck.

But she reached land safely, and when he put her down he saw she was pale. He laughed.

'By George! what a funk you were in. It serves you right, young lady.'

'I was not frightened. I was not!' she retorted, her face flushing, her eyes flashing.

'Oh, all right!' he said, refilling his pipe. 'But I tell you it was a narrow squeak.'

'It was you, then who were frightened?' she said, with a scorn real or affected.

'I'm not made of sugar and likely to melt—like the parson's daughter.'

Neville laughed again.

'Is she made of sugar? She's sweet-looking enough,' he said, carelessly.

They mounted the hill and Sylvia kept step by step with him, and they dropped down the other side and Neville looked about him, kicking at the rocky soil and staring at the holes which the prospecting party had made and quickly deserted.

'There's gold here!' he said in a low voice, as if he were afraid that the birds of the air should hear him and carry away the pregnant assertion. 'I'm sure of it. I'll tell you what I'll do, Syl: I'll come here to-morrow with the tools and try it. I'll start early and come back after dusk. If any one comes up to the claim of the hut, you can say I've gone off shooting. They'll find me out in three or four days at most—gold's the one thing on earth you can't keep secret—but three days' start will be something.'

'How eager you are about it!' she said, as they sat down and Neville took from his pocket the packet of bread and meat which he had brought for their dinner.

'Am I? Well, it's for your sake, little 'un,' he said, simply. Her gray eyes grew moist.

'Forgive me, Jack,' she murmured, 'but—'

'Well?' he said, intent upon cutting his sandwich with his bowie-knife.

'Well, I'm in no hurry to go—to leave Lorn Hope and—Meth—'

He laughed.

'I dare say. Only give you a chance of getting out of this hole and seeing England, my lady.'

She said no more, and went on with her lunch; but his words had spoiled her appetite, notwithstanding their long walk, and in a very few moments she rose and wandered to the small stream which trickled down from the hill. She came back presently and stood beside him as he lay full length, smoking his pipe and dreaming diggers' dreams.

'Jack,' she said.

early. I shall be at work. Give me three clear days!'

He was excited, flushed, palpitating with sanguine hope; but she stood calm and cold and unresponsive, as she had been at the claim nine months ago.

'Let us go, then,' she said, at last, and she shuddered slightly.

He looked up at her with astonishment.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing; only—don't laugh, Jack. I don't like this place. It is so still and solitary, and—'

She turned her head away.

'Lord! isn't that like a girl!' he exclaimed, securely fastening the bag to his belt.

'What's the matter with the place? It's a regular—what do you call it?—El Dorado?'

'It's—it's hateful!' she burst out, then quieted down. 'Come, Jack, it will be late before we get back.'

He obeyed at once, but all the way he talked in a suppressed voice of the wealth they had discovered—not they, but she.

'It's your find, Syl,' he said. 'Remember that when you are over in England. It's your own money, and there's heaps of it. If it wasn't Sunday—and he looked back wistfully.

'Sunday!' she echoed. 'Jack, didn't you say that it's unlucky to find anything on Sunday? You did, I remember, and—and oh, there is going to be no luck in this!'

He laughed.

'Well, for a first-rate, unadulterated croaker, commend me to you!' he retorted. 'It's only unlucky when you work on Sunday, and you can't call just picking up a handful of gold dust work.'

Sylvia said no more, and was very quiet indeed all the way home. When they came to the river she stood still and allowed him to take her in his arms. He felt that she was breathing rather hard, and with masculine stupidity put it down to fear.

'Just keep your hair out of my eyes, Syl,' he said, laughing. 'It's so thick that it blindsides me. You've got wonderfully pretty hair, Syl.'

He held it back with his hand, and her eyes lighted up at his praise.

'It's like a horse's mane,' she said.

'Yes, in quantity, but it is ever so much softer. There you are! Here, give me your hand. Hold hard!'

But Mr. Brown had got into conversation with Neville, and like a good man intent on doing his duty, was leading up to 'I hope we shall see you at the services in the church then. Mr. Youngton,' and was so engrossed with this splendid specimen of young manhood that he did not notice how badly the two girls were getting on.

At last he made a move, and they took their departure, and Neville, who had enjoyed his talk with a gentleman—the first he had met for many a long day—mechanically walked with them. Sylvia stopped behind and stood looking after them, then went into the hut, and, plumping down beside the table, hid her face in her hands.

Before Neville had gone very far he missed Sylvia, and stopped short.

'I must not leave my sister alone,' he said.

'No, no,' said Mr. Brown. 'Then we shall hope to see you at the service next Sunday, you and your sister?'

'Oh, yes,' murmured Miss Brown. 'I hope you will bring her; she is so beautiful.'

'Yes; isn't she?' assented Neville, just like a brother. 'I'll bring her. Good-night, Miss Brown.'

His strong hand clasped her small one, and she blushed and smiled timidly up at him.

'That young fellow is a gentleman,' said the parson. 'What singular characters one meets in these wilds. Now, I wonder why he is here? He has a history, I am sure.'

Miss Mary wondered too, quite as much and more than her father, and all the way home, and through some part of the night her head was running on the handsome young fellow who lived all alone up the ravine with his sister.

Neville ran back to the hut and burst in, but not so quickly that Sylvia had not time to spring up and hide traces of what looked suspiciously like tears.

'Nice people those, eh, Syl?' he said, cheerfully. 'Lord! what a time it is since I shook hands with a gentleman. This girl seems quite pleasant, too; she'll be a companion for you, Syl. Quite an acquisition to Lorn Hope, by jingo! And I say, Syl, I've promised we'll go to church next Sunday. Fancy a parson and church at Lorn Hope!' and he laughed.

'You can go, Jack,' she said, softly. 'But I—' and she glanced down at her dress.

Neville caught the glance and understood it and his heart smote him. He had been so engrossed by his search for gold that he had forgotten such a trifling detail as Sylvia's wardrobe.

CHAPTER XV.

He said nothing at the moment, but the next morning he walked down to the camp and purchased some merino and a hat, as much like Mary Brown's as he could get, and carried them home.

'Look here, Syl,' he said, putting the parcel rather shyly on the table. 'Here's something for a new dress and a hat, I couldn't get a dress ready made, you know, but I expect you'll be able to build one—you're clever enough for anything.'

Now she would have received the present stiffly enough, but the praise that accompanied it melted her.

'Oh, Jack!' she said in a low voice, and bent over the stuff. But that was all she said. She carried the precious parcel into her own room, and gave him his breakfast.



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