

* A TANGLED WEB. *

(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER X.

For several days Sir Jordan Lynne did not leave his rooms in South Audley Street without pausing at the door and looking round carefully. But the woman with the wan and sorrowful face, though she may have haunted his dreams, did not trouble him with her actual presence. Neither he nor the friendly policeman who kept a look out for her, saw her again, and Sir Jordan, though he still looked about him as we have seen him on the first night of our introduction to him, was not looking for her.

His manner, indeed, resumed its wonted calm and serenity, and the large audiences, which gathered at Exeter Hall to hear him make a speech on behalf of the Society for the Reformation of Outcasts, declared that he had never been in better form. He made an admirable and thrilling speech, so touching indeed that he was quite melted apparently by his own pathos and eloquence, and there was even more than the usual number of wet eyes and pocket-handkerchief business.

Everybody was charmed with him, and the ladies spoke of him as 'That dear good Sir Jordan, you know.' He made, too, another effective speech in the House, before it rose, and the newspapers hinted pretty plainly that some place in the Ministry should have to be found for a politician who had rendered such good service to his party.

The autumn season was over, and everybody was anxious to get away from London, that had become sloppy and damp and altogether used up. The Marlowes, with Audrey, had already gone down to the Grange. Lord Marlow had a very nice place of his own in the adjoining county, and would have preferred to go there, but Audrey had asked them to spend Christmas at the Grange; and though Lady Marlow might have withstood her coaxing Lord Marlow could not. He was, as his wife said, little better than a child where Audrey was concerned; and indeed he never could make anything but a show of resistance to the will of the imperious young beauty.

There was to be a big party at the Grange, for Lady Marlow liked to be surrounded by bright people, and among the guests Lord Lorrimore had been included.

'I hope you'll come, Lord Lorrimore,' Lady Marlow had said. 'I don't know whether we can offer you any inducements so set against Monte Carlo; but I believe the pheasants have been looked after, and there are some horses, so that you can hunt when it doesn't freeze. Pray, come if you can.'

Lord Lorrimore hesitated, then raised his grave eyes.

'Does—forgive me, Lady Marlow—but does Miss Hope wish me to come? I know it's her invitation as much as yours.'

'Bless me! yes; it's her own house, you know.'

'Yes, I know. But do you think she really wishes me?' 'My dear Lorrimore, Audrey asked me especially to ask you.'

'Very well,' he said; 'of course I will come, and thank you very much. I should come it—well, if there were no pheasants, no hunting, no anything.'

'Except Audrey,' put in her little ladyship, with a smile.

'Just so,' he assented in his serious way. 'You know how it is with me. I'll be down on the eleventh.'

Audrey smiled half irritably when Lady Marlow described Lord Lorrimore's manner of accepting the invitation.

'He's too absurd,' she said. 'I'm almost sorry you asked him. Now he'll bother me all the time; I know he will.'

'Are you really sorry, Audrey?' asked Lady Marlow, looking whimsically at her. 'If you doubt it, I'll send him a note asking him not to come!' cried Audrey, with pretty defiance.

'Oh, don't do that, or he'll go off to the other end of the world for years.'

'Perhaps it would be better if he would,' retorted Audrey, with a laugh. 'No, let him come. I daresay I can manage to keep him in order. Besides, perhaps he may fall in love with one of the girls who are coming; that pretty Miss Chester, for instance. I'm sure I should fall in love with her if I were a man.'

'Perhaps he may,' said Lady Marlow, with a smile, 'and if he should, you'll forgive me if I say—it serves you right?' 'You may say what you please,' said Audrey.

This conversation took place in the morning room of the Grange the day after their arrival, and the two ladies were standing by the window, looking out across the lawn and the park.

Lynne Court was divided from the Grange by the high road, and the estate ran parallel with Audrey's.

A thin line of smoke from the Court chimney rose above the trees, and reminded Lady Marlow of Sir Jordan.

'I suppose he will be down in a day or two,' she said.

'He? Who? Lord Lorrimore?' 'No, no; Sir Jordan.'

'Oh!' said Audrey. 'Yes, I suppose so. He said that he should tell us.'

'I should think he would find it rather dull in that huge place all by himself.'

Audrey shrugged her shoulders.

'He is used to it, I dare say. He never has any company.'

'No, I don't think there has been a party at the Grange since 'Sir Greville's death. I'm rather surprised at

that, for Sir Jordan is not an unsociable man. Perhaps we ought to have asked him, dear.'

'Oh, I don't know,' she said indifferently. 'It would seem rather singular, wouldn't it, as he has a house of his own so near?' 'Ye-es,' assented Lady Marlow. 'Do you consider—You know him better than I do.'

Audrey looked up quickly from fondling a big colly.

'No, I do not—that is, of course, I have known him since he was a child, but we never were intimate; he is so much older.'

'Not so very much,' said Lady Marlow, thoughtfully.

Perhaps she was thinking of Sir Jordan's immense wealth, and asking herself whether, if Lord Lorrimore had no chance, the millionaire neighbor might not be encouraged.

'Well, so much older than—than Neville's said Audrey, and a faint dash of color came into her face. 'He—Neville, I mean—and I were playmates—always together.'

'Yes, I know,' said Lady Marlow. 'It was from that young gentleman you learned all your tom-boy tricks, I believe.'

'Poor Neville!' said Audrey. 'I wish he were here to teach me some more.'

'I'm very glad he isn't, if that is what you would do, for you know quite enough. But it seems as if there was not much chance of his turning up. Sir Jordan tells me he has tried every means of discovering his whereabouts, and failed completely.'

'Yes, I know,' said Audrey in a low voice. 'But he may come back some day. Indeed, I'm sure he will. The world is such a small place, as uncle says.'

'Uncle' was Lord Marlow, though there was no relationship between him and his ward.

'Oh, if you're going to quote your uncle,' said Lady Marlow, with a laugh. 'How well you manage him, my dear! But you are dreadfully mean over it; with your flattery and your coaxing, you've made him a perfect slave!'

'He is a perfect dear,' said Audrey—the dearest, the goodest person in all the world!'

'For whom may those lavish superlatives be intended, young lady?' said the viscount, entering the room at that moment.

He was a large, good-tempered-looking man, with a face and figure very much like those owned by Mr. Micawber. He was a very fair specimen of the English nobleman; an easy going landlord, a good sportsman, not very keenly interested in politics, and not overfond of society. He put in an appearance at the House of Lords perhaps twice in the session, or when he was 'whipped' very hard; and now and then turned up at one of his wife's parties. He was quite content that the gray mare should be considered the better horse, and never interfered with his wife in any way. In London he almost lived at his clubs, as Lady Marlow said, with an affectation of plainness; and in the country he spent most of his time out-of-doors, riding or shooting.

But for all that he possessed a will of his own, and it was only Audrey who could be said to have thoroughly enslaved him.

Having no children, he had grown to love the daughter of his old friend as if she were his own.

'Who is the goodest and the bestest man in the world?' he asked.

Audrey left off fondling the dog and slipped her arm through his.

'Not you, you may be sure,' she said. 'Isn't it a lovely day? Wouldn't you like to have a ride, uncle? If you're very good and promise to let me have a real gallop, I'll go with you.'

'Sorry,' said the viscount. 'Steward's coming to go over books this morning.'

'Then put him off,' said Audrey, promptly, and laying her peach-like cheek against his arm.

'Eh?' he said, hesitating at once, and patting the uppermost cheek.

'Well—But, oh! I say, you know I can't very well.'

'Oh, yes, you can,' she insisted. The idea of spending such a delicious morning over musty books!

'They're not musty, miss. Checks keeps his books in beautiful order.'

'I don't care. Besides, we shan't have another opportunity of a good ride together all by ourselves; the people will be here directly, and then—well, I shan't have to beg for a companion, sir.'

The viscount laughed, and Audrey sprang to the bell and rang.

'Tell Mr. Checks that Lord Marlow cannot see him this morning,' she said to the footman. 'He'd better come—when, uncle?'

'Oh, to-morrow, I suppose,' said the viscount, rubbing his ball head.

'To-morrow,' said Audrey. 'And now I'll get ready. You see how quick I'll be!' and she ran, singing, out of the room.

'You spoil her shamefully, George,' remarked Lady Marlow.

'I know,' he said, with a laugh, 'and so do you, only you pretend you don't. I'd better go and see about the horses, I suppose. Checks will be awfully mad, though.'

No doubt Mr. Checks was indignant, but Audrey managed to soothe him and dispel his injured brow as she passed him on the road with his books under his arm.

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'It's such a lovely morning, Mr. Checks!' she said, pulling up her horse and smiling down at him, 'and I persuaded his lordship to come for a ride. It's all my fault.'

'That's true, Checks,' said the viscount, with an apologetic smile. 'Never mind; come up to-morrow. Oh! by the way, has Sir Jordan arrived?'

'He comes this evening, sir,' said the steward.

'It would only be hospitable if we rode round and asked him to dinner—eh, Audrey?' said Lord Marlow.

'Very well; as you like,' she replied, not very warmly.

They rode down the Grange avenue and out by the gates into the road. The lodge-keeper had a large family, and a troop of chubby boys and girls bobbed and courtesied to his lordship and 'Miss Audrey,' and one mite ran beside her horse and clutched at her habit.

'Oh, it's Tommy, of course! I was forgetting!' she said; and with a laugh she bent down and lifted the yellow-headed urchin in front of her on the saddle.

'What memories children have!' she said. 'I always used to give this little fellow a ride, and he hasn't forgotten it, you see.'

'Yes,' said the viscount; 'horses and children have wonderful memories; they never forget a kindness.'

'Or a cruelty. But Tommy seems to have grown a great deal heavier,' she said, pretending to let him fall, at which Master Tommy was not at all afraid. 'There, I cannot take you any further!' and she lowered him down gently, with a sixpence in his fat fist.

They rode along the road for nearly the third of a mile before they came to the court gates. There was no children to meet them there, and the gate-keeper seemed particularly grave and sober.

Lord Marlow looked about him curiously as they proceeded up the drive. The drives were in perfect order, and were evidently kept in readiness for the owner, but there was rather a melancholy air about them.

'Some of these cedars want lopping or coming down,' he said. 'They make the drive dark and shadowy—eh, Audrey?'

'Yes,' she said; 'but Sir Greville liked them. He was not fond of sunlight, and I can remember, as a child, how dull and gloomy the Court seemed to me after the Grange.'

'It's a fine place, too,' remarked Lord Marlow. 'The largest, if not the finest, in the country. I suppose Sir Jordan must be proud of such a place. And yet he is not often here. What a facade!' and he looked admiringly along the front of the house, with its wide terrace and liberal windows. 'Now, if you'll hold my horse, I'll leave a message.'

But a footman in dark livery opened the door and came down the steps before Lord Marlow could dismount.

'I want to leave a message for Sir Jordan. He is not here yet, I believe?'

'No, my lord. Sir Jordan comes to-night.'

'Got a piece of paper, Audrey?' the viscount asked.

Audrey pulled out an old envelope and offered it to him, then drew it back, as if it had suddenly occurred to her that she did not wish the invitation to come direct from herself.

'Oh, here's a card,' said Lord Marlow; and he scribbled a line on it. 'Give that to Sir Jordan immediately he comes, please.'

'Yes, my lord,' said the man.

He spoke in a subdued tone, and was as grave and joyless in his manner and appearance as the lodge-keeper.

'Now, let me see,' said Lord Marlow. 'I want to go into the town. Any objection?'

'No; we need not go back to the front gate; there is a road at the back of the house which will lead us to one of the last gates.'

They turned to the left and made their way round the huge place, and Audrey looked about her thoughtfully and rather sadly.

'There is where Neville and I used to play. I remember climbing that old oak there; he dared me to do it, and I did it; and of course I fell.'

'And he was more frightened than you were hurt, I suppose?'

Audrey laughed.

'No, I wasn't hurt, and certainly Neville wasn't frightened. He only laughed and called me a stupid clumsy girl. He used to get me into the most awful scrapes, for he was a dreadful boy. You see, he did not know what fear meant, and of course I didn't like to be outdone, and so I generally came to grief.'

'That's what happens when women try and rival men, my dear,' said the viscount. 'But, by Jove! this is very fine,' and he reined in his horse and looked at the house. 'This is the old part, I suppose, judging by the ivy. Very fine. Halloo! what's that?' and he pointed with his whip to a door high up in the wall and opening apparently into space.

'That is the door leading to Sir Greville's room,' said Audrey in a lower voice; 'the room in which he died.'

'But there is no way of getting down,' said the viscount. 'He didn't jump or drop it, surely?'

'Oh, no! There used to be steps like those one sees leading from the balcony in a Swiss chalet. Sir Greville generally entered and left the house by that door. Sir Jordan had the steps taken away directly after his father's death.'

'Rather a strange old man, Sir Greville, wasn't he?'

'Yes,' said Audrey. 'Very strange; such a queer, silent old man. He always seemed so unhappy that it made one sad to be with him.'

'I've heard the story of his life,' said the viscount; 'a regular case of vendetta. When a man forgets who is it that says "Vengeance is mine," he is sure to be unhappy, even if he gets as much revenge as he can desire; and that was the case with Sir Greville, I suspect. But he altered a great deal before his death, didn't he?'

Audrey nodded.

'Yes, he was ever so much gentler.'

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'Well?' said the viscount.

'I was thinking whether it was fair to go on,' said Audrey.

'Why, did he say anything to you in confidence?' said the viscount with interest.

'N-o; scarcely in confidence. This is what he said: "Audrey, if ever you are tempted to do wrong, don't wait until you are old before you repent of it and try to put it right; it may be too late then."

'A solemn warning,' said Lord Marlow. Then, after a moment or two of thought, he added:

'Do you think he referred to Neville—to his having quarrelled with him and having left him penniless?'

'I don't know,' replied Audrey. 'That was all he said. Of course I have remembered it. I never saw him again. I don't think he left his room afterward.'

'He died rather suddenly,' said the viscount.

'Yes.' She looked back with a little shudder. 'Let us hurry on, uncle; the place makes me feel sad. Isn't it strange that Sir Jordan has allowed the rooms to remain just as they were when his father lived in them?'

'Has he done so?'

'Yes; so one of the maids at the Court told my maid. That's how things get carried.'

'Trust women to gossip.'

'Thank you, dear. She said that Sir Jordan wouldn't allow any one but himself to enter them. Oh, thank goodness, here is the gate! Now let us talk of something else.'

They quickened their pace, and getting on to some grass let their horses indulge in a gallop which drove all the gloomy thoughts out of Audrey's brain and set her cheeks glowing and her eyes sparkling.

'This makes me almost wish we were going to be alone all the winter,' she said.

'Oh, what rides we would have!'

'I dare say,' laughed the viscount, immensely pleased. 'You appear to think I have nothing else to do than scamper about the country with a wild girl of the woods.'

'I'm sure you couldn't have anything better to do,' she retorted. 'There's dear old Stoneleigh! How pretty it looks; and there's the rector and old Miss Heaps! How nice it is to be back in the old place and among all the people one knows! Uncle, why don't we always live in the country?'

'I don't know; ask me another question; or, rather, ask her ladyship; she'd be able



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to tell you, I expect. Now I'm going into the saddler's. I suppose, as you've just come from London, where there are no shops, there are no end of things you want to buy, so that you can amuse yourself for the few minutes I'm engaged.'

'I don't want to buy anything,' she reported, 'and I shan't get down; so please don't let your few minutes run into hours, as they usually do when you hadn't bought anything.'

'I admire the justice of that speech immensely, especially when I remember that I waited outside Marshall & Snelgrove's for you exactly eight-and-forty minutes the other day,' he said; 'and then I recollect you came out and said you hadn't bought anything.'

Audrey kept her horse still for five minutes, during which she had to bow and smile and respond to innumerable greetings and kindly welcomes; then the animal began to fidget, and she allowed him to walk slowly on.

She looked into the shop windows, and watched with much amusement a man trying to drive a couple of pigs down the road. Then she was about to turn back, when her eye was caught by a half-torn placard on a wall. It was headed 'Wanted,' in large letters, and in the center of the bill was a wood-cut portrait of a man. The wall adjoined the police station, and Audrey absently rode up to the placard and began to read it.

It contained the description of a man who had perpetrated two crimes. He had, so said the bill, been convicted of forgery, which was bad enough, and had broken out of prison, which, no doubt, the police would consider far worse.

Audrey was reading the description and looking at the villainous portrait, as one does look at such things in moments of waiting, when a policeman came out of the office and touched his hat with a respectful smile.

Audrey, as lady Marlow often complained, would speak to any one.

'Good morning, Mr. Trale.'

'Good-morning, Miss,' said the inspector. 'Anything I can do for you, Miss?'

Audrey laughed.

'You could only lock me up, and I suppose you wouldn't like to do that, Mr. Trale.'

The inspector laughed and shook his head, immensely gratified by Miss Hope's condescension and affability, and enjoying by anticipation his account of the interview over his glass of ale in the Lynne Arms that night.

'No, indeed, miss; you'd be missed too much. I thought perhaps I could hold your horse, or something.'

'No, thank you,' said Audrey. 'I am only waiting for Lord Marlow, who will be here directly, and I was amusing myself by reading this.'

'Ah, that's stale news now, miss,' said the inspector. 'It might as well come down for all the good it is.'

'Do you mean that the man has quite escaped?'

'I expect so, miss. Yes, got off clean and left the country, I should think. He was a very clever man, that, Miss Hope.'

Audrey laughed.

'You speak as if you were almost proud of him,' she said.

The inspector smiled apologetically.

'Did I, miss? Well, I suppose we officers—he spoke in the tone of a man who belongs to a crack regiment—do have a kind of sneaking respect for a man as baffles us. Besides, he was a native of this place, you know.'

'Oh, was he?' said Audrey. 'Then, of course, as he was so clever as to get away from you, you are naturally proud of him. What an ugly face it is!'

'Yes, miss; Jim Banks wasn't much to look at, but he was clever, and plucky, too! We had a hard job to bring the forgery home to him, but we did think that when he'd got his seven years we were rid of him for a time.'

'And he escaped?' said Audrey.

'Yes, miss; fled through a bar in his cell window, and let himself down into the exercise-yard by a rope made out of his blanket.'

'Quite like Jack Sheppard!' said Audrey.

'Quite, miss,' assented the inspector, much gratified by Miss Hope's evident acquaintance with criminal literature. 'And not satisfied with that, he actually has the impudence to come back here.'

'Here, where he was known?'

'Here, where he was known, Miss.'

'Poor fellow! though I suppose I oughtn't to pity him; but sometimes one pities the fox at the end of a run, you know. I suppose he came back to see his people.'

'Most like, Miss. There was only a daughter, and she'd left the town. He must have heard that, for he didn't go near his cottage. We should have had him if he had gone there, for we were on the watch.'

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)