

At the Eleventh Hour!

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DOUBLE SENSATION.

In truth Prentiss had often sneered at such matters, but, though he had been skeptical before, he was so excited by the sudden apparition on the very scene of the murder, that no doubt of its supernatural nature entered his mind.

Perhaps Graham Prentiss had a guilty conscience, for he certainly gave the impression of cowardice to the unseen spectators who gazed in blank surprise at the fear and emotion manifested in his recoil from Lynette as she stood there, wrapped in the sheet and trembling with excitement.

All three of them suspected at the first moment of recognizing him that he would tear the sheet away and give Lynette a playful shaking for trying to play a joke on him. But at his startled cry and familiar utterance of the name of "Madge," Lynette felt the blood run cold in her veins with horror, so comprehensive had been that tone, as if the dead girl had not indeed been a stranger to his acquaintance.

A terrible suspicion flashed over her mind, and, obeying a lightning impulse to test the man, she cried out in a hoarse sepulchral voice:

"Murderer!"

Out there in the solemn night the word had a terrifying sound that pierced the listener's heart like the point of a dagger.

He was already turning to fly from the accused spot, but the word struck coldly on his ears, arresting his flight. He groaned, reeled, staggered, then his stalwart frame fell prone upon the earth.

Lynette, almost frightened to death by the result of her daring rush, turned to escape from the spot, but fell into the arms of the girl, who rushed from their concealment, dropping their sheets as they came on to the assistance of the prostrate man, who was writhing on the ground in a sort of fit, uttering inarticulate words.

"Lynette, you startled the joke too far!" her uncle cried harshly, as she stooped over Prentiss.

Lynette made no answer, only clung to Myrtle, trembling and sobbing, and Vida was the only one who offered any assistance to Mr. Lewis, who was trying to get the prostrate man to understand that there was nothing to alarm him, no ghost at all, nothing but a girlish joke.

But at first Prentiss appeared unconscious of their presence. He was deathly pale in the cold moonlight as his eyes rolled in a ghastly stare, his lips were decked with foam and drawn back convulsively from his teeth, while his form trembled and writhed in a strange convulsion.

"This is dreadful! We have frightened him into a fit!" muttered Mr. Lewis. "We ought to have a doctor. I wish now I had brought that tin 'Rastus'."

"Hill y! boss, I thought you was gwine need me, so I follied the ker-ridge!" blurted out a triumphant nasal voice, and Erastus emerged from his hiding place behind a convenient tree, gibbly boasting: "I hung on at the back, an' you didn't fine me out!"

"You black rascal! I'll give you a hiding for that!" threatened the farmer; but the boy only laughed as he answered:

"Shut! I don't mind gittin' lathered a little bit for sech fun!"

At the same moment they caught the sound of a melodious negro chant coming toward them through the woods. It was Wilkins returning from his work, and singing to keep up courage on passing the scene of the murder.

The musical camp-meeting refrain blended melodiously with the wood-

land sounds and the low, dirge-like murmur of the river:

"When I die, I want ter die right; When I die, I want ter die right; I want ter go to Heaven, all dressed in white!"

Hill John's Army! Some goes to church to sing and shout—Amen!

Before six months dey is all turned out—Amen!

"When I die, I want ter die right; When I die, I want ter die right; I want ter go to Heaven, all dressed in white!"

Hill John's Army! Methodists here, and Methodist born—Amen!

When I die, dere's a Methodist gone—Amen!"

Myrtle Dare whose sympathies had not overflowed for Prentiss laughed aloud when she heard the fervent chant, and caught up the sheet again.

"I'm not going to lose the fun!" she exclaimed; and, running down the path, barely out of sight of the group, again donned the sheet and posed herself sepulchraly for the negro's benefit, while Erastus, ignoring his master's remonstrance, rushed stealthily after her, impelled by his love of fun.

Wilkins came steadily on, bearing a loose sack on his back, which he had perchance dropped a rooster surreptitiously obtained from the chicken-house at Bonnie Braes.

"When I die I want ter die right; When I—"

Oh, my good Lord a-massey, what fat!" his song trailing off into a cry of fear and awe as he came in sight of Myrtle.

Pausing a few yards away, the old negro stood with quaking knees and kinky wool beginning to straighten out with fear, as Myrtle had predicted.

He wished to turn and flee, but the power of action was gone. Seeing that she was accepted as a genuine spook, Myrtle was emboldened to stretch out her arms and mutter lugubriously:

"I am Madge McDonald's spirit!"

To her surprise, Wilkins returned affably, though his teeth were chattering.

"Lordy, is dat so, Miss. Berry glad to see you, dat's a fact! I been expectin' dis ebry nite when I come pass' dis spot! Please, ma'am, what fer you come back yere to dis place? I see in a drestful hurry ter git 'ome ter Marth, my ole 'oman."

Myrtle could barely repress her laughter at his alarm, and her voice trembled with it, as she said sharply:

"What have you in the sack, old man?"

"Miss! as if he did not hear aright."

"What have you in the sack—stolen chickens, eh?"

"Lordy, Lordy, how'd she know? N-n-no, ma'am, please."

"Wilkins, you are lying! There are chickens in the sack!"

"No, missis, indeed no—not not a chicken; leas'twise—of I must fess, an' I hopes you won't go back an' tell my Lord about it—dere's on'y one rooster, please, ma'am. Ez I wuz 'a leavin', he flew'd up on de fence an' crowed at me, so fat an' sassy, I jest wrung his neck fer spite, dat I did. An, den, finks I, might's well kyar it home ter Marth' ter mak a pot-stew. Dat's de God's true, missis."

What scorching admonition the ghost might have administered may never now be known, for at that crucial moment Vida and Lynette brought up the rear, each one in her sheet, and at the petrifying sight of Wilkins ended his confession with a

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groan, and sunk to his knees, moaning.

"Aadder, and aadder! T'ree, on 'em, all sperrits! Or is I crazy? I must be drunk, dat's it! Marth' ole me not to tek so many pulls at dat ole black bottle. I wouldn't listen, an' now I has de jim-jams and am a-sassin' sperrits ob de dead!"

The imp Erastus who had thoroughly enjoyed the situation, regretting that he had not also a sheet to pose in, here gave such a loud, irrepressible snicker that the girls felt the game was up, and, turning around, fled with one accord, leaving the boy master of the situation. He proceeded to improve on it by dancing in front of old Wilkins on his knees, and exclaiming:

"You silly ole fool! I didn't fink we could fool you so easy wid 't'ree sheets ober de young gals' heads—hit 'em, yit!"

Wilkins stumbled to his feet, muttering in a tone of relief:

"Was you jest foolin' me for shuah? And didn't I see three sasses? And ain't I got de jim-jams, nelder?"

"No; but you're drunk, I 'spect; and golly! won't Marse Prentiss be and when he hears 'bout dat rooster?"

"No, he won't nelder! What do dech men keer 'bout one pore leete, jech men keer 'bout one pore leete rooster—and a hen? I didn't fess ter dea, you see. Come, 'Ras', what you doin' here, anyway? What's all dis about?"

Erastus hardly knew himself, but he did not intend to give it away, so he capered about, and replied:

"Oh, jes a joke me an' de young misses got up for fun. But, come along, now, an' I'll see you safe home wid yer rooster."

And, taking him by the arm, he escorted him along the path where he came suddenly upon the others of the party standing in a little group around Graham Prentiss, who had soon recovered from his strange seizure on hearing Mr. Lewis's repeated explanation that it was nothing but a joke.

But no doctor was needed now, for he was joining in the laugh against Wilkins as the girls related the story of their adventure with him.

"Although the laugh is quite against me," he owned, "but perhaps you never knew that I am rather superstitious. It is a weakness I always concealed until Lynette's joke surprised me. Besides, I am very nervous now, having been sick ever since I started from Cincinnati last evening."

Aunt Moore did not think I ought to go out this evening, but I disregarded her pleadings, and thought I would walk to Blooming Meadows. Ah, Wilkins, you rogue!" glancing around as that worthy shambled into sight. "So you have got my rooster in your sack. Well, I hope you and Marth will enjoy the pot-stew."

"Tanky kindly, boss. I knowed you wouldn't keer 'bout er'pore it! Rooster! nohow ez agerwated me so much flyin' up on de fence an' 'crown' so loud ez ef ter say: 'Aine I fat an' sassy? Wouldn't you like to eat me?'"

God night ladies and gentlemen! I aua' git, or Marth, she'll pull all de wool off my ole black head."

"You go along with him, 'Rastus," said his master; "and mind, not a word from either of you about what passed to-night, or I'll scalp you both."

"Yaas, sub—yaas, sub," answered both at once. Then they disappeared in the woods.

Mr. Lewis turned bay to Prentiss, saying cordially:

"We came in the carriage, and we can take you back with us if the girls

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don't mind crowding a little."

The lover looked at Lynette's face. It was cold and impassive, and she had barely spoken to him at all.

A sort of defiance kindled in him at her indifference, and he exclaimed:

"Yes, I will go with you, even if I do crowd the girls. Lynette deserves some punishment for giving me such a scare."

But when they were all getting in, Lynette and Myrtle maliciously managed to crowd him between Vida and the farmer. He could only protest laughingly, that it was not fair, for he knew he must be on his good behavior now to offset the shock he had given her to-night.

He spent two hours at Blooming Meadows, and when he went away he told himself that in spite of Lynette's coldness she had not offered to break her engagement. The wedding would be sure to go on on Thursday.

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