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**At the Eleventh Hour!**

CHAPTER XVIII.

**A DOUBLE SENSATION.**

"No, indeed! What ghost, woman? Out with it quick!"

"De murdered gal, Tilda. She walks, dey say, every night in de Prentiss Woods."

"Um-me, good Lord! You don't tell! Who seen her, Marth?"

"My ole man for one, den; but I mus' hurry home. I aine no time to gossip, Tilda. A han'ful o' coffee-parched coffee, please, to make me a strong cup for my supper."

The cook graciously bestowed the coveted largesse out of her mistress' pantry and the cronies separated, Tilda gazing after the departing one, and muttering incredulously:

"Wilkins saw a ghost did he? Yans he saw sperits—in a bottle, likely."

So the gossip ran from kitchen to parlor. The beautiful bride was taking no interest in her wedding.

What was the matter? Had her terrible illness, that had nearly cost her her life, left her mind too weak and weary to realize her happiness? The whole neighborhood was talking of the wedding.

Every young girl invited was going to have a new gown for the occasion, and there was not one who did not take more interest in it than Lynette herself.

The bride presents were beginning to arrive, but not one had been unpacked yet, since Lynette forbid it. She had ordered them placed in the sewing room with the trousseau, and then forgot all about them.

It vexed Mrs. Lewis and Vida, this lack of feminine curiosity, and the latter said gibingly:

"I hope you will show more interest in Sally Ann's gift when it comes, for I am very anxious to see it. Of course, it will be very valuable."

Lynette looked at her reproachfully, and answered:

"It will be valuable to me, Vida, because I shall value it, outside of its intrinsic worth, as the expression of true friendship."

Vida was silenced, but the joke about the bride present was too good to keep, so Mrs. Lewis told it to all the household, and to every one she met, until she aroused considerable curiosity over the expected gift.

No one but Mrs. Lewis was let into the secret, lest the negroes should get wind of it and spoil sport by their needless gossip.

It was clear and cold, and the moon shone very bright. Everybody who was going to Lynette's wedding had been saying what pretty weather it was for the time of year, and how fortunate that the moon would be so bright on the very night of the marriage.

The scene of the ghost's appearance was less than a mile distant from Blooming Meadows, but the conspirators thought best to ride, as Lynette had never been very strong since her illness, and it would not do to keep her too long out in the chill night air. So Gratus was hidden to hide up the carriage for a visit to a neighbor's that evening.

"Lemme go long ter hold de boss es, boss," he implied.

"No; I shan't need you, Rastus. Mr. Lewis replied much to the man's disappointment."

After supper the merry quartet set forth on their mischievous mission having first ascertained from Tilda's watch the precise hour at which Wilkins, the doctory ghost-seer, was supposed to pass through Prentiss Woods on his way from work.

The gay girls carried a sheet, each and they had drawn straws to decide which should make the first impersonation. Lynette was the winner.

The scene of the ghostly appearance was the same on which the murder had been committed, under a large tree growing close to the road.

It was certainly a fitting spot for tragedy. The trees and bushy undergrowth grew thick and dark on either side on the narrow foot-path, or "short-cut," as people called it, that led from the lawn gates of Bonald Braes a lonely half-mile to the public road. There was a carriage-road, but it was long and roundabout; and the servants and pedestrians generally used the short-cut in preference to the longer, safer route.

Down through the branches of the trees, where many dead leaves still rustled in the autumn breeze, the moon-light filtered through, and lay in silvery bars across the narrow path. The stars gleamed like jewels in the sky, and a low wind soured through the scattered pines, blending the subtle melancholy of its cadence with the rush of the swollen river not far away.

As the merry conspirators, who had left the carriage at some distance in the rear, emerged upon this lonely scene, their gay voices sunk into silence, and their hearts throbbled more quickly with a sort of awe. For, after all, it did not seem so preposterous that the spirit of the dead girl should hover round this uncanny spot where it had taken its flight from the body.

"Poor Madge McDonald! so young, so pretty, so ill-fated!" sighed Myrtle, and Lynette and Vida both in sympathy.

At that moment they heard at a long distance off, quite a melodious whistle approaching them, and all three started violently.

"Goodness! I almost jumped out of my skin!" giggled Vida; and Myrtle whispered nervously:

"So did I, girls, that's a fact! He's coming! Let's hustle behind the tree, and fix!"

The "fixing" did not take a minute. It was only to envelope themselves in a snowy sheet, holding an aperture open with one hand, by which half of the face was revealed.

Thrusting the sheeted Lynette out in front of the tree, the other two, trying to suppress their nervous giggles, awaited the approach of the whistler, now coming rapidly nearer.

"He is whistling to keep up his courage; but, my! won't his knees quake and his hair stand on end when he sees Lynette!" whispered Myrtle, in breathless anticipation.

They peered round the tree, and saw a stout, dark figure emerge into view blithely whistling "Annie Laurie."

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unwelcome to every one but her friend Lynette. But Myrtle did not care for that in the least. She knew that they feared her influence over the girl they were drifting into an unwilling marriage. She simply nodded acquiescence to Lewis' remarks, and continued frately:

"That chuckle-headed Wilkins ought to be punished for his lies. I only wish some real spook would jump out on him from the wood some dark night and scare him into fits!"

"Why don't you do it?" laughed Myrtle. "It would be rare fun."

"Sho, I hain't time to fool with the black rascal!" chuckled the farmer, who was struck pleasantly by the idea.

Myrtle was a mischievous little sprite, and the idea of frightening Wilkins, as suggested by Mr. Lewis, took hold on her mind.

"Why couldn't we girls do it?" she suggested, looking round at Lynette and Vida, and amiably ignoring her quarrel with the latter on her former visit.

Vida knew the value of her friendship too well to refuse the offered olive-branch so she assented eagerly, saying:

"It would be great fun!"

Even Lynette whose sad little face was enough to give anyone the heart-ache, brightened up and began to take some interest in the plan for frightening Wilkins. She had always been a merry girl, fond of fun, and she forgot her troubles for the moment and laughed aloud when Myrtle cried eagerly:

"Let us go this very evening, and all three of us carry sheets, appearing sepulchrally one after another from behind a tree to the astonished Wilkins."

"Agreed!" cried all, and Mr. Lewis volunteered to go along to protect them, and to witness the fun.

Indeed, he felt quite grateful to Myrtle for proposing it when he saw how Lynette had brightened up over it. To see a smile again on the lovely sad face gladdened his honest heart; that was heavy with trouble, though he thought he was doing for the best in arguing on her marriage.

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Lynette, in her sheet, started forward, into view as he approached. Vida gave a stifled shriek.

"Heavens! it isn't Wilkins, at all! It's—"

"Graham Prentiss!" cried Vida.

And then they saw him start back with upraised hands, crying hoarsely: "My God, Madge!"

"Madge! Madge! My God!" groined Graham Prentiss, in a hoarse, strangled voice of surprise, fear and horror, strangely blended.

The sound trailed off on the low wind that stirred the dead leaves on the branches, and lost itself in dismal echoes among the pines, while the man recoiled with quaking knees, upraised hands, and staring eyes from the slender white vision that in the sheen of silvery moonlight against the background of dense darkness did indeed present the supernatural aspect of some disembodied soul.

Lynette on her part, acted out the drama to perfection, standing still as a statue carved from stone before the eyes of the shuddering victim.

She was, indeed, for the moment incapable of speech or motion, so great had been her surprise on beholding in the approaching man her betrothed Prentiss instead of the superstitious negro Wilkins.

The girls behind the tree, after their first stifled cries of surprise, also remained quiet mute, watching merrily to see if the young man could be imposed on by a sheeted maiden ghost for fun.

At a little distance from them Mr. Lewis was hidden, waiting for the outcome of the joke. Surprise kept him silent when Prentiss appeared as no one knew that he had returned late that afternoon from Cincinnati.

These unseen witnesses were all amazed when they saw how cleverly their little practical joke had imposed on the man whom they had believed too strong-minded to credit the supernatural.

To be continued.

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