

# At the Eleventh Hour!

CHAPTER XVII.  
A FRIENDLY VISIT.

All this rushed over the girl's mind now, and she choked with real emotion as she met the weak, affectionate gaze of the sick woman's eyes.

"So glad—you've come—Lynette," she breathed faintly; and the nurse exclaimed gladly:

"That long nap did her a sight of good. She looks better, her voice is stronger."

"Then I may talk to her a little!" queried Lynette, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"If only you don't excite her, Miss Lewis," the woman answered respectfully.

Lynette again took the sick woman's hand in hers, pressing it gently, as she murmured:

"It grieves me very much to see you ill. I should have come to see you oftener, but they told me it was best not to excite you."

"Yes—I was often my head so long—they say," the woman responded feebly, but still with such perceptible strengthening in her tone that 'Gusta Grimes made a furtive gesture to Vida, as if to indicate that it was a bad sign, this apparent sudden improvement.

Lynette did not notice the gesture. She listened for the weak voice to go on.

"I've been a-waiting to see you very much, honey," continued Sally Ann, looking fondly at the beautiful girl, and continuing: "Gusta tells me as how your wedding-day's mos' here—next Thursday."

"Yes," Lynette almost gasped, and she grew paler than the sick woman as the word left her lips.

Sally Ann rested a minute, then resumed:

"Lhas a bee-u-tiful bridal-present for you, honey."

"For me? That is very kind," murmured the girl, with stiff lips.

"It's bee-u-tiful!" repeated Sally Ann, with gentle pride; "but I ain't a-going to give it to you yet, honey, a-cause I want to come to your wedding—er I gits well enough, an' I'll bring it with me when I come."

"Lord-a-massy!" muttered 'Gusta Grimes, in amazement, and she made a sign to Vida, with her finger downward to the earth, as if to indicate that the sick woman would be in her grave by Thursday.

Sally Ann did not see the gesture, but she caught the tone, and replied to it rather sharply for one so weak:

"You think I'm going to die, don't you, Gusta? But I don't believe it myself, nor I ain't never believed it not when I was at my sickest! I don't believe my time's come yet, and I feel better now, so if I keep on improving, I may git to the wedding yet."

Her dim old blue eyes brightened.

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At the thought, but 'Gusta Grimes was shocked at what seemed to her like levity in the face of death.

"Seems like flin' in the face of Providence," such talk, Sally Ann, said flatly. "You been nigh on t'end of the grave, an' u' had t'ended you so t'at I, you might t'ossed over, that's a fact. And ev' now there ain't no telling what may happen, so I says to you, as I've said before, you ought to be makin' your will if you got anything you want to leave anybody."

"Oh, don't distress her, please," pleaded Lynette gently.

"Sho' I don't mind 'Gusta,' muttered the sick woman, with a faint smile; and as she swallowed a soothing draught the nurse administered, she patted the hard, tollowed hand that held the cup, and continued:

"Thanky, friend. I know your goodness has saved my life, and, though I don't feel like I'm goin' to die, it's easy enough makin' my will while Miss Vida's here as witness."

Vida, seeing that her presence was known, moved closer to the bed, and the invalid said:

"I hain't got much to leave, seeing as the lease on the house and lot dies with me, so I don't s'pose it's any use to put it in writin'. You'll testify to my verbal will, won't you, Miss Vida?"

"Yes, most certainly," assented Vida cordially.

"Thanky kindly, miss. I hain't much to leave, only my household goods, and them I gives entire to 'Gusta Grimes whens'er I dies, now, as a gesture, for her goodness in nursin' me, our long friendship, there's u'ny one thing I keeps back."

"Well," said Vida, as her eyes turned tenderly on Lynette's tearful face, and Sally Ann replied:

"This little neck box in the corner o' my trunk. 'Tis a s'ome-tyin', trinkets in it, and I wants Lynette to have the box and all, jest as it stands. The wedding-gift is in there too, and a house she will like it."

Vida's lip curved with a slight smile as she thought:

"It's a brass brooch and earrings most likely. What fun I shall have teasing Lynette when she comes into her legacy!"

"Gusta Grimes and Lynette were both sobbing softly now, and Vida said:

"I will see that your wishes are carried out, Sally Ann; but I hope you will live many years yet before I have to be a witness to your last will and testament."

"I expect I will, miss—thanks to 'Gusta's fine nursin'," returned the invalid, with a resolute will to evade old death as long as she could.

She lay quiet then a little while, and breathed heavily after the exertion she had made in talking.

"Bless her kind heart, how pert she was, w'n't she, now. I never expect to hear her talk out so fierce again. I hope the Lord's massy will spare her yet," whispered the kind-hearted nurse.

Lynette answered only by a little sob of sympathy, and as the sick woman had closed her eyes wearily, Vida suggested going home.

"Come again an' see me, honey. Don't you cry now, for I ain't dead yet, nor by the good Lord's massy, ain't goin' to be yit a while. I'm hopin' to see you married, an' I nuss your chillen, Lynette, like I did your mar's. There now, and you needn't blush at it."

But Lynette was not blushing. She was cold as ice and white as snow when they hurried from the bed-room out into the gloom of the waning afternoon. The sick woman's words had touched a chord in her heart that vibrated with shuddering horror.

It came to her with renewed anguish that her wedding-day was five days distant—five brief days. After that

day she would belong wholly to Graham Prentiss.

In the midst of laughter, and feasting, and jollity, she would have to plight her troth to him, then he would hurry her off for a few days to Bonnie Braes, where they would remain until after the election—then off for a Northern tour and Europe, and not return until next spring.

Had another man—had Stephen Beacourt—been the prospective bridegroom, Lynette would have been captivated. Like almost every pretty young country girl, she was eager to see the charmed world that lay outside the boundaries of her mountain home. Such a tour as Prentiss had planned would have been considered heavenly by a bride who loved him.

Alas! Lynette did not love him. Worse still, she was madly in love with another man. She contemplated her future with such terror as one might contemplate a descent into Hades.

Although previous to her engagement to Graham Prentiss, Lynette had had a friendly liking for the young man, she had experienced a strong revulsion of feeling. She disliked and feared him; the thought of him as a husband thrilled her with a feeling of abhorrence. To go away with him alone on that long wedding journey, away with him all she knew and loved, to return with him to Bonnie Braes and take up her home with him the mistress of the place, the mother of his children, it would be unendurable. She sat speechless by Vida's side all the way home, pale and statue-like to outward seeming, but on fire within, consumed by the violence of her own thoughts.

At supper Vida was very bright and gay, but Lynette scarcely spoke. She paid no attention to the description of the fine new furniture at Bonnie Braes. She said not a word when chaffed about the wedding-gift she was to receive from poor old Sally Ann, but preserved a silence more alarming than an outburst of anger.

CHAPTER XVIII.  
A DOUBLE SENSATION.

This next day Miss La Mode sent home the wedding-gowns, nothing very elaborate—the family could not afford it—but all of nice quality and in good taste.

Miss Halliburton had selected all since Lynette refused to have anything to do with the trousseau.

Now everything was ready for her packing. The sewing room was given up to the finery, the chairs and table littered with it.

"Will you come and look at them dear? Everything is so pretty, and I want you to praise my taste!" cooed Vida.

"I thank you, but I do not care about it—just yet," Lynette made reply indifferently.

It was the same answer she had given to the proud, fussy old cook when she begged her to come and see the long row of beautiful wedding-cakes in the pantry.

The old woman went out hurt and disappointed, and said to her cloying Martha:

"Miss Lin is so changed since her sick spell, dat she don't act like the same gal. 'Pears like she don't tek no in'rrest in nothin'."

"Just what I says to my ole man las' night when I went home after fain' de wedding-linen at t'week. Says I 'Miss Linnet don't tek no pride in her nice fings; nebbel come in de laundry ter see ef I was doing up her fings nice er not.' Most young gals would 'a' bin in and out every minit."

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fuss'n' and stew'n', and want'n' dis and dat done ober ag'in. My ole man, he says:

"Sho', Marth, she ain't boderin' you, becaus she knows you gwine to do 'em up t'bout asie, anyway."

"But, says I, 'Taint dat, ole man; it's craze Miss Linnet ben a changed gal ebbor since her sick spell, and I'se feared dat pore fings jest gong off in a decline, or somethin', like, dat she looks so sad an' pale always, not like de bouncin' beauty dat used to be so gay an' saasy all de time."

But Wilkins, he jest smokes on and says: "You're scart at nothin'. Miss Linnet she gwine come out all right after she get married an' settled."

"I hopes so, I'se suah; but, Marth, I nebbor seed a solemcholy bride afore in my life. Wouldn't chuse her own wedding-cake, wouldn't look at de wedding-cakes, ar' all de wuk I put on 'em, frostin' an' all! 'Deed me, I nebbor felt so alighted in my life, I'se suah! Says she, so soft, and sweet, an' sad-like:

"'Tand you, Aunt Tildy, I do not care about it jest yit.' Jest yit, mind you! Her own wedding-cakes, and not want to see 'em! Marth, does you mind her, how gay and saasy she was dat day when you was here helpin' wid de apple-butter, and she was helping gedder de s'ples in de orchard and w'il pore old Miss Sally Ann, dat's a lyin' at de 'pin o' deat' now? Dat were a great day, wa'n't it? De gal was foun' drow'n' in Prentiss' Woods de same day, and likewise Mr. Belcote, de gunner, came to cal on us."

"'Twa'n't two weeks ater dat he were s'cared for murder, de grand wilyun!" added Marth.

"And what a pity, wa'n't it? For he was a most b'at'ful man," chimed in Tildy. "And he had de dwadecious impence to be a-courtin' our geerl, Miss Linnet, de very day he was took up for murder. Lucky it happened so soon, or he might 'a' married her, too, dat 'ceit'ful raskil."

"Oh, speakin' o' dat murder, has you heard about de ghost?" half whispered Marth in an awestruck tone, as she lighted her pipe and pulled her shawl over her head, preparatory to a jaunt home through the woods.

(To be continued.)

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