

The Tangle of Fate

CHAPTER IX.

"Oh, Lin, dear Lin, do not look at me so coldly!" cried Bonnie, looking up at him from her chair with dark, appealing eyes.

"Why have you deceived me so?" he asked, sternly.

"I have not deceived you. I am no man's wife," she repeated, firmly.

"Where, then, is Miles Westland, the man you married that night at the old mill?"

Bonnie shuddered as that question left her lover's lip, but she had her answer ready.

"I did not marry him; I was not at the old mill that night."

"Bonnie!"

She shuddered again, and her lashes drooped to her pallid cheek.

"Bonnie, do not stain your soul with any more falsehoods. You were there that night, as your sister said. Look, here are the prints of your presence."

He drew from his breast the simple treasures he always carried with him—a blue ribbon from her hair, and a little white handkerchief daintily bordered in lace, and bearing in the centre her simple, pretty name:

"Bonnie Dale."

A low cry of despair left her white lips as he held the tell-tale proofs before her, then mechanically restored them to his pocket.

"You will confess now?" he said, bitterly.

"Oh, no, no! I have nothing to confess. Oh, Lin, trust me, believe in me, no matter what you see. Do not look at me so unkindly; I love you so dearly, so madly, my darling, that I would rather be your slave than be parted from you! Oh, take me with you, take me with you, and save me from despair!"

"Bonnie, you forget yourself—you have no claim on me—you belong to Miles Westland!" he answered in a tone of mingled anger and despair.

Good heavens to think how beautiful she was, and how false. Those lips that he had kissed so passionately belonged to another, those rosy lips and that golden hair.

"No, no, no! I belong to you alone! Miles Westland is dead!" she cried, wildly.

"Dead!" he repeated, startled.

"Ah, no, no! he is not dead, he is alive. Oh, what am I saying? Do not mind me, Lin, my trouble is driving me mad, and I—I say things—that—that I know—nothing—that—that I fatter, in terror."

"Then do not try to excuse yourself any more," he answered, sternly. "Hush, there is no more for you to say, Bonnie. You cannot deceive me any longer. You have lied to me, for I read guilt in your shrinking eyes and trembling voice. And that man like told the truth. I saw it in his face. God alone knows why you wished to marry me when you already had a husband, although he has so strangely disappeared. Perhaps your feeble fancy turned from me to him, perhaps it was because I am rich, I cannot tell, but I know, that you are a wicked, heartless girl, and that you have destroyed my faith in womanhood, for if you, with that angelic face, can be a sinner, what must I believe of the rest!"

A mean of anguish came from her lips, but he went on in that voice of blended wrath and sorrow:

"Let your friends take you home to your father, Bonnie, for in a few more minutes I shall be gone from you forever. May God forgive you for your sin, and help you to repent and be a better girl. I will try to forgive you in future years, when my pain shall grow less bitter. God bless you, God help you, poor girl!"

The whistle of the approaching train sounded. He tore open the door, and was gone.

When the door closed so harshly between Bonnie and her handsome lover, she started up with a cry of despair, and with eager arms outstretched, as though to hold him back. But in a moment a keen sense of her loss rushed over her, and, with a moan of anguish, her arms fell to her sides again and she dropped upon her knees by the side of her chair.

"Oh, my God—!" she began, but her voice failed, her throat was stiff and aching. "God will not let me pray to him," she thought, in terror, remembering the faltering she had uttered.

They seemed to set her apart from God as the vessel of sinners.

"But oh, Heaven, how could I speak the truth? How could I confess how Miles Westland died? They would not believe that it was an accident—they would think I pushed him into the pool because I wanted to be rid of him!" ran her confused thoughts, and in her terror of being thrown into prison and perhaps hanged for murder, she did not dare confess how it all had happened.

"But I can never, never, never go home again to Finley Pike's story to the Harpers. They will tell everybody what he told them. People will think it so strange that Miles Westland did not come back—and what if they search—the pool?—no, no, I can never go back! I will run away!" and Bonnie rose up, her great dark eyes all drowned in tears, and drew her cloak around her, fastening it at the throat with trembling fingers. There was a side door to the little room that seemed to open upon the primeval forest. Bonnie opened this door softly, fled down the three steps, and was soon lost to sight among the trees.

In the meantime the Harpers, who had been talking over the matter with the others, had decided to take Bonnie back to her father and tell him the story of her marriage to Miles Westland as related by the preacher. They were quite indignant with the young girl, and would not listen to Mollie Miller, who declared that there must be some mistake; she did not believe that Bonnie Dale was false and wicked.

"I am sorry I ever had anything to do

with it," declared James Harper, who of course sided with his wife.

He rose, saying that he was going to take Bonnie Dale back to her father, and then neither he nor his wife would have any more to do with such a wicked girl.

But when they went into the little parlor where they had left the young girl, she had disappeared, and their search failed to find her.

"She has gone off with Lin La Valliere, in spite of us!" exclaimed Mrs. Harper. "No, she has not, for I saw him get on the train alone. She is just hiding to vex you," said the preacher.

But all their search failed to find Bonnie Dale, and after a few hours, thoroughly alarmed and hopeless of success, they started home, feeling very nervous over the ill news they had to carry to Farmer Dale about his favorite daughter.

Great was Imogen's joy and triumph when she learned how the runaway match had turned out, and when the Harpers spoke of Bonnie's denial of being at the old mill, she hesitatingly exclaimed:

"Bonnie was certainly at the old mill that night, for Mr. La Valliere and I were there the next morning, and we found her lace handkerchief and blue hair ribbon on the floor of the mill. But when I asked her about it she denied it and grew quite angry, and I remember that she was sadly frightened when she came in the night before. She cried and wished herself dead. I should not wonder. Imogen added, spitefully, though she did not believe it herself, "If Bonnie had murdered Miles Westland that night, and that's why he never came back!"

Then she caught the startled gaze of the Harpers and the reproachful one of Mollie Miller, she cried, quickly: "Oh, what am I saying? I did not mean it. Of course Bonnie would not hurt a fly! But it is very strange what became of the schoolmaster, and strange that she denied being at the mill that night! Oh, what will papa say to this terrible disgrace!"

The Harpers were so excited over what Imogen had said that they did not wait to break the news to their neighbor.

They left that task to Imogen, while they hurried away to set the scandal going. Like all quiet country neighborhoods, a bit of gossip was very welcome, and this proved to be a perfect bonanza.

By night the country for miles around was agog with the news that Bonnie Dale had turned out to be a perfect fiend in disguise. She had married the missing schoolmaster, and then killed him and hidden his body in the pool. She had cut her poor sister out of her lover, and would have married him, also, if Finley Pike had not betrayed her to Mr. La Valliere. Then she had run away for fear of being hanged for her crime.

So the busy tongues of gossip wagged, and the few who believed in Bonnie's innocence scarcely dared speak in her defence, so well they feared the storm of the unguilted. The men, headed by Miles Westland's uncle, planned to drag the pool and river the next day. Never since the war had Nicholas county had such an excitement, such a sensation.

Meanwhile Bonnie's father, who had received the news of her elopement with stoical calm, had fallen in an apopleptic fit when Imogen had blurted out to him the terrible news brought by the Harpers. He had never uttered a word since, and it was feared that he would die of the terrible shock.

A pall of gloom had fallen over the old home that Bonnie had made so bright and joyous. In the kitchen old Grey went about her work with dim eyes, she had shed so many tears since the day when her pet, pretty Bonnie, had been stolen from her. In her room to punish her for stealing her sister's lover, she had protested her belief in the girl's innocence when Imogen had told her what was said about Bonnie, but the handsome brunette had only uttered a long-drawn sigh and gone out of the kitchen with a word.

It cost Imogen a great effort to preserve a calm face before others, for her heart thrilled with joy at the turn of affairs had taken, and she lost no time in writing a penitent letter to Lin La Valliere, in the hopes of winning his heart in the rebound.

CHAPTER X.

Panting and trembling like a hunted doe, poor Bonnie ran along in the shelter of the trees until she was out of sight of the preacher's house, then, with a desperate purpose, she made her way to the station.

The express train had already gone, carrying Lin La Valliere with it, but a freight train stood on the track, and watching her chance, the unhappy girl darted into the open door of a car half filled with boxes.

Crouching down, with her desolate golden hair bowed low, Bonnie hid herself like some poor, hunted criminal. Presently a man went in, went out again, and shut the door. The whistle blew, and soon they were rumbling along the road, and Lin La Valliere was no longer to be seen on that journey both had looked forward to so fondly—the journey that was to have been their bridal tour, but now they were widely severed, even although the freight car, with its poor little hidden passenger, was following fast in the wake of the Pullman car where Lin La Valliere reclined among the cushions, a prey to bitter retrospections.

In spite of the sorrowful anger with which he had parted from Bonnie, and the angry resolve he had made to forget her at once, his thoughts kept going back to her in a passion of pain and pity.

"For she loved me, there can be no doubt that she loved me. The pity of it is that she sinned for the sake of that love! She was ready to forswear that waist model for my sake! He persuaded her to marry him, and for the romance of it she consented, then when she met me she realized what love really was, and, thinking she would never be found out, would have married me, poor little childish sinner, without counting the cost of her folly!" ran his half-excusing thoughts.

He pictured her in his mind going back with the Harpers and her school-girl friend to her old home to be scolded by her angry father and flouted by jealous Imogen. What a new strange life would begin for pretty Bonnie, the wilful pet. How could she bear it! Perhaps her young husband, who had been gone so long, would come back and take her away. But would he forgive her when Imogen told him what she had done? Poor Bonnie, look at her fate in whatever light he would, it seemed a dark one.

"And she sinned for love of me, poor child!"

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The pathos of it almost broke his heart, and he said to himself, bitterly: "Although she has wrecked my life, I cannot hate her; she was too sweet and fair, I can still feel the touch of her little hands, and the pressure of her lips on mine. Oh, how sweet they were. And she told me I was the only lover she had ever kissed. False little Bonnie, when those lips belonged to another!"

The train rushed on over the wild, rocky land, and with every mile his heart sank heavier at the thought that he should never see her again, the little beauty who had charmed him so.

"Life will never be the same to me," he sighed.

"But the links are broken, All is past; This farewell now spoken Is the last."

Hours went by in bitterness and pain, while he tried to shake himself free of the fetters that bound him—the sweet voice, the little hands, the putting lips, the golden hair. In vain, all in vain.

"Sweet is true love Though given in vain, And sweet is death that puts an end to pain; I know not which is sweeter, No, not I!"

Hours after he seemed to wake from a painful dream to find that night had fallen and the stars were coming out.

"What if I stop off and see my cousin," he mused, suddenly. "He was ill when I heard of his last. But now, I am too wretched now. Another time will do!" and that hasty decision altered the course of his whole life.

The train stopped momentarily at a small, Virginia station, and when the conductor shouted the name of Lloyd, Lin La Valliere leaped from his window and looked hurriedly across the hills to the lighted windows of a stately mansion that stood on an eminence about a mile away.

"Poor old fellow, I suppose he is as crabbed as ever. I could not possibly endure his complaints now, but in a few weeks I must certainly run down from Washington and cheer him up!" he mused, and then the train rushed on its way, and he gave himself up to his better thoughts of his lost Bonnie. But in a luxurious chamber very tastefully furnished an aged man, tossing restlessly on a bed of pain, called, querulously, to a play-faced woman sitting by the fire-side.

"Was that the train from Washington?"

The woman, who was a sick nurse, looked around, and answered, placidly: "No, Mr. Lloyd, that was the train going to Washington. The other one passed while you were asleep."

"So that younger rascal disappoints me again! I may die, for all he cares, and the sooner the better, no doubt, for him, so that he may have the spending of my money!" grumbled the invalid.

"Perhaps he will come to-morrow!" replied the nurse.

"Oh, I may die, for all he cares, and the sooner the better, no doubt, for him, so that he may have the spending of my money!" grumbled the invalid.

"Do not excite yourself, Mr. Lloyd, if you please, or you will have another bad night. Perhaps your letters have miscarried. Perhaps Mr. La Valliere is ill. Do try to excuse him."

"I won't, madame, and you needn't try to persuade me. He does not care that I am ill, dying! Yet the young scamp expects to get the spending of my money when I'm gone! Do you think I will bear with meekness this neglect? No, unless he shows his face here to-morrow, I'll have my lawyer in and cut him off with a shilling!"

"But what will you do with all your money, Mr. Lloyd?"

"Don't you suppose I have other relations, you silly woman!"

"I know that they are very distant ones, sir."

"No matter how distant, if I like to make them my heirs; so shut up, ma'am, taking up for that heartless boy that never comes near me hardly, old and feeble as I am!"

Placid Mrs. Baldwin only smiled at his irascibility, and replied:

"All I've got to say, Mr. Lloyd, is that you were very silly to stay an old bachelor all your days, and come to your death-bed with no wife and children to comfort your late hours."

(To be Continued.)

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