

At the Eleventh Hour!

CHAPTER XV.

Myrtle's Resolve.

"I ought to be glad certainly, seeing what a life I have led here since you and aunt came."

"We have not got along as well as we might, have we? And do you know I am very sorry for it now?"

Lynette's red lips curled in scornful incredulity.

"You don't believe me, dear, but it is true," said Vida, whose voice grew soft and purring. "You cannot think how I missed you while you were away, and how it pains me now to feel that you will soon leave us for another home."

Lynette answered, with a short laugh:

"If you care as much as you say, Vida, help me to rebel against the marriage, and I need not go. I'm beginning to hate Graham Prentiss, and I begged Uncle Jack to let me break my promise, but he refuses in bitter anger. Perhaps if some one sided with me, he would listen."

Vida coughed with some embarrassment.

It would be such a pity to break off that lovely match, and—I know beforehand that your uncle won't hear anything I say against it—but, Lynette, only let us be friends, since this is our last week together, and I will do anything you wish."

"Vida, what game are you up to now? You know I don't credit such a sudden change of sentiment," Lynette exclaimed pettishly.

"I deserve this, but it wounds me," sighed Vida, hiding her eyes in a bit of lace and linen.

"I don't mean to wound you, Vida. God knows I need friends in this moment, if ever. Pardon me if I have wronged you in distrusting your professions," Lynette exclaimed, suddenly warming to the schemer, and frankly extending her dimpled hand.

Vida clasped it closely, with profuse expressions of regard, and then Lynette said anxiously:

"Tell me of poor old Sally Ann Sims, that kind old soul! Is she any better?"

"No, indeed. When Doctor Austin passed here this morning he told Aunt Gillian that unless a great and sudden change took place for the better, the old woman could not last till to-morrow."

Tears sprang to Lynette's eyes as she exclaimed that she must go and see her kind old friend before she died.

"Let us go after dinner, for I, too, am anxious to see her," said Vida, without explaining that she was curious because the old nurse said that the sick woman was always calling for Lynette to come.

CHAPTER XVII.
A FRIENDLY VISIT.

Lynette acquiesced indifferently in Vida's offer to accompany her that afternoon on a visit to the dying woman.

When she saw the two young girls in the cart she came out to the gate, and Lynette said anxiously:

"I wish very much to see my old friend Sally Ann. Can we go?"

"After a while, if you please, miss, but she's just fallen into such a sweet asleep it's a pity to wake her. Can you come back in an hour or so, please?"

"Certainly," Lynette replied; and as they drove on Vida reminded her of the invitation that had come over and see the new things that Graham Prentiss had sent from Cincinnati.

"Do let us go. It will please the old lady so much!" she exclaimed. Lynette assented carelessly, rather to keep from offending the kind old woman than out of any curiosity to see the fine new furniture.

What did she care for it all—the gay trappings of wealth that Graham Prentiss had bought to try to bribe her woman's heart and fancy? In those days she hated everything.

Mrs. Moore, the kind old lady, watched her with surprise, she was so indifferent to everything; and

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man, little dreaming how much relief it gave her to learn of her ready consent, for he began to be troubled by an uncomfortable presentiment that his niece was liable to "do something desperate"—the "something," to his mind, meaning suicide.

As he went about his homely farm work the sad face of Lynette haunted him, and her voice rang ever in his ears with the passionate intonation:

"You'll be sorry for this, Uncle Jack!"

Although he was not an imaginative man, he found himself brooding miserably over the thought of how Lynette would look when taken dead from the river, her sweet eyes closed forever, her face all marble-white, her bright hair wet and dripping, her sweet voice stilled, her young life gone out in the darkness of death.

"It is horrible, horrible! I wish Edgar Lewis would hurry up and come home to his sister," he muttered nervously, in his anxiety.

His uneasiness communicated itself to his wife, and in spite of her harshness she had a guilty consciousness that if Lynette came to an untoward fate she would have helped by her cruelty to bring on the calamity.

So it was a relief to her mind also to see Vida's company accepted so readily by Lynette when she set out in the dog-cart for her visit to Sally Ann Sims.

"I never could understand the secret of your fondness for that homely, humble old maid!" exclaimed Vida as they drove along through the bracing October air.

"Perhaps it lay in her fondness for me," returned Lynette musingly, then added: "Sally Ann was always kind to me ever since I can remember."

She has always worked for the Lewis family, and has been well thought of by all. Then, too, she is a most worthy old woman, and, though poor and humble, merits all respect. Besides, she has had a great sorrow in her life. When she was a young girl her lover was killed in the army, and she has remained faithful to his memory ever since."

"Dear me, how romantic!" cried Vida, wondering at such constancy, but repressing the sneer that rose to her lips.

"Constancy is a beautiful trait, but how few possess it!" added Lynette gently, with a smothered sigh.

"Here we are!" exclaimed Vida, and at the sound of their wheels in the road, old "Gusta Grimes, the sick-nurse, came as usual to the door out of curiosity.

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when the girl was gone, she wrote a letter to her nephew, saying: "I don't believe Lynette cared at all for the new furniture. She would hardly look at it, and only said: 'Oh yes, I think it is very nice,' while Miss Halliburton fairly went into ecstasies over everything. Lynette seems so changed since her illness that I hardly understand her any more. I used to think she was the sweetest little girl in the world; but now she seems so strange—so sort of cold and quiet—that I don't know what to think. Can it be that she is grieving for you, Graham?"

Graham Prentiss smiled a sardonic smile when he received his aunt's letter. He knew very well what to think.

Lynette was not breaking her heart for him. Oh, no; she was grieving because she would have to marry him—because she had let them drive her into an unwilling pledge, and now she could not get free. But did her coldness, her reluctance, her despair, move him to set her free—this fiery lover who knew that the best of her heart belonged to a better man? Ah! no more than the struggles of the captive bird moves the pitiless hawk to release it from its cruel claws.

With each day he loved her more madly, if possible. He swore to himself that nothing should come between them. She had promised to marry him, and he would hold her to her word.

Less than a week—scarcely five days, indeed—intervened between now and the wedding day. He would go home to-morrow, for Vida's letter had alarmed him, and he would see that Lynette did not go out again soliciting votes for his hated rival. He had stormed with fury when he heard of it.

Oh, how he wished the time were over, the words said that would bind him to beautiful Lynette forever, and they two started on their wedding journey! Once away from West Virginia, alone together, he would teach his unwilling bride to love him. She could not go on loving a man who would be condemned for murder and very likely executed.

"Poor devil!" he muttered at this juncture; then put the thought of Belcourt away, and gave himself up to rapturous expectations.

"This is Saturday—Saturday, and next Thursday, the first of November, is my wedding day, thank the fates who have so signally favored me! The next Monday will be Belcourt's trial. Tuesday is the election; but he will be condemned and defeated."

The two girls, after an absence of several hours, returned to the cabin of the sick woman.

"Gusta Grimes came out to meet them as before, but this time she said affably:

"You may hitch up your horse and come in. Sally Ann's been awake some time, and she's expecting you."

The poor, homely creature stood and watched the two beauties admiringly as she sprang to the ground, fastened Black Beauty to the post, and came through the gate. As she looked at Lynette she did not wonder that it was said that the country belle could have her pick of all the young men in the country.

"And no wonder, for she's as pretty as a pink," thought the old woman as she led the girls into the poorly furnished neat and comfortable room where the invalid lay on a plump feather bed with white pillows and an elaborate quilt of the pattern

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Lynette's beautiful eyes filled with quick tears as she saw her old friend lying there among the pillows so wan and wasted, looking, but for dim, half-open eyes, as if Death had already claimed her for his own.

Vida sank quickly down into a seat near the door, but Lynette went over to the bed, took the thin, weak hand in her own, and impulsively kissed the cold brow shaded by the fast-whitening locks.

"I'm so sorry—so sorry!" she half sobbed, then sank into the chair that the nurse placed, unable for the moment to utter another word.

She had always been fond of the old woman, as she had said—that humble life was a link between Lynette and the dear past when her parents had been alive. She could remember the kindnesses they had heaped on the lonely spinster, with what strong gratitude and real service she had repaid their goodness.

And when they died how earnestly she had mourned them, and how dearly she loved their children, Edgar and Lynette.

(To be continued.)

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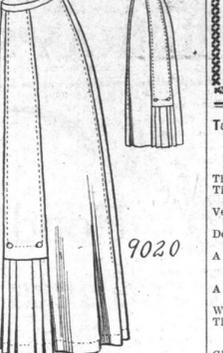
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