

* A TANGLED WEB. *

(CONTINUED.)
CHAPTER XIV.

Time passes, even in the gold fields, and the months glided by 'taking with them things good and bad,' among the latter may be reckoned the extreme heat. The cool season had set in now, and the weather and the temperature were delicious; it was neither too hot nor too cold, and Lorn Hope Camp became quite cheerful. The luck, as well as the weather, had improved, and Lorn Hope had become so important a place as to quite warrant an additional grog-store.

"If this yere place don't look out, it 'ull grow into a town, and there'll have to be a mayor and a corporation," the Doc declared.

It had not only increased in size, but in morals and manners. The improvement in these two essentials was doubtless owing to the presence of a clergyman sent by one of the London societies.

Lorn Hope, on hearing of his arrival, was at first astounded, then indignant, and lastly amused. Perhaps the camp was induced to tolerate his presence by the fact that he had brought his wife and daughter with him, the latter a shy, pretty girl with fair hair and blue eyes.

Some of the other new-comers had also been accompanied by their women-folk, and Lorn Hope was in a fair way to civilization.

"Pears to me," said the Doc, "that I shall have to send home for my dressclothes. What with the parson prancing around in black togs and gloves—who says it's a lie? I saw him!—and tip-top ladies promenading about just as they do at Margate and other fashionable places at home, this yere camp is gettin' spoiled."

Indeed, a change was palpably working, and was made manifest to the "boys" pretty obviously, when Macgregor stuck up a notice at the head of his tent; "Swearing not allowed," and followed it by a second notice that, "Gentlemen is requested to keep their knives and shooting-tools in their pockets."

But though all these changes were taking place in the camp itself, they in themselves did not effect Neville and his household of two.

He had taken a new claim higher up the ravine and moved his hut and belongings near to it, so that he was still further from the camp than before, and he saw still less of it.

And yet an alteration had taken place in him. He was no longer homesick, for one thing, and had apparently exchanged his restless dislike for Lorn Hope for some thing very near content. He worked as Meth said 'like a nigger,' returning 'home'—as he called the hut—of an evening tired out and just satisfied to eat his supper and sit and talk to Sylvia, or watch her as she read or worked.

The poet Pope remarked that the proper study of mankind is man; he should have said woman, for of all the fascinating studies to which man can apply himself, that of a young girl is the most entrancing and delicious.

In nine months Sylvia had grown tremendously. She was now a tall, exquisitely graceful girl—one might almost write 'woman'—for her wandering life with her father and the peculiar education she had received, had "fitted" her mind, so to speak, and hurried on her intelligence, and though a delightful frankness and simplicity were conspicuous traits in her character, she was as cute, as sensitive and as fully developed in that shrewdness which belongs to her sex as any woman of two-and-twenty.

She had not only grown in height but in strength. When the cool weather came, Neville began to take long walks—tremendous tramps over the hills and through the valleys made musical by the streams which, now swollen to torrents, roared between and over the immense boulder.

The first two Sundays Sylvia stayed in doors or wandered round the hut, counting the hours till he should return, and dejected by an awful sense of loneliness.

The third Sunday he remarked casually: "You wouldn't care for a walk, I suppose, Syl?"

She put down the plate she was washing and looked at him, the color coming into her face, a light flashing for a moment in her eyes.

But, woman-like, she suppressed these signs of hope and delight and shrugged her shoulders—a trick that always amused Neville.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, with a perfectly assumed indifference. "I suppose you would rather be alone."

"Oh, if you don't care," he remarked, cheerfully, and took his hat and stick. She glanced at him from under her lids.

"Well, I'll go," she said.

"All right," he responded, filling his pipe. "Don't be an hour getting ready."

She joined him in less than five minutes, looking, in her short dress and old straw hat, like a big school-girl.

But no school-girl ever walked as she walked, and Neville, who had 'sloved down' at starting, insensibly quickened his pace, finding that she could keep up with him so well.

It was a delightful morning. Nature was reveling in the coolness of the atmosphere and seemed all alive, and, as Neville remarked, 'kicking,' and Sylvia's heart beat in harmony with the surroundings.

"It's a pity it isn't always Sunday, Jack," she said.

He laughed.

"That's a lazy kind of sentiment, Syl. If it was always Sunday we should soon

run out of meat. How quiet it all is! It reminds me of an English Sunday, somehow. You know that in England everything seems to know that it's Sunday and ceases off. The birds don't sing so loud, and the wind drops, and the only thing that makes a row is the church bells."

He sighed involuntarily, and she glanced at him with the corner of her eyes.

"Do you wish you were in England, Jack?" she asked in a low voice.

"For some things—yes," he replied. "But if wishes were horses beggars would ride. I wouldn't go back to England unless I was rich, or, at any rate, had some money."

But I expect you'll go there before I shall. I'm saving up, look here. He stopped and looked round, as if he feared spies and eavesdroppers even in that vast solitude.

"Look here, Syl," he unbuttoned a canvas bag fastened to his belt and opened it. I'm saving up. It's slow work, and it will be some time before I can scrape together enough to send you over. But perhaps it may happen on a piece of luck all of a heap some day."

Sylvia glanced at the bag coldly.

"I don't know that I'm dying to go to England," she said, curiously.

"Oh, you don't know what's good for you," he responded. "Young 'uns never do; and you're such a kid, you see."

She drew her graceful, supple form as high as she could, and nearly reached his shoulder; but she was too shrewd to retort, and instantly changed the subject.

"Meth says that there are over so many new people at the camp, Jack."

"So I hear. I haven't been down lately—oh, for ever so long!"

"And there's a clergyman, Jack. You haven't seen him. He has brought his wife and daughter."

"I know, a pretty girl with fair hair," he said. "I met her on the plain the other morning—a very pretty girl."

Sylvia's lips grew close, and she tossed her head with its dark mane.

"It could not have been she," she said decidedly. "The girl I mean is a washed-out kind of girl, with no color in her eyes."

Neville laughed.

"That's just like a grown-up woman," he said. "Catch one woman seeing anything in another, especially if her hair happens to be another color!"

"I don't know what you mean," she retorted, haughtily. "And what was she doing on the plain?"

"You said just now it could not have been her. I don't know what she was doing. I raised my hat and she said, 'Good-morning,' and that's all I know about her."

"Oh! and there was a volume in the monosyllable. 'Do gentlemen in England always raise their hats and get into conversation with strange young ladies?'"

"Conversation! I like that. Besides this isn't England, and pretty girls are too rare in Lorn Hope for a fellow to miss the chance of a word with them."

"I wonder she doesn't stop at home and help her father," said Sylvia, with a snap.

Neville didn't reply. The subject hadn't any attraction for him, and they walked on in silence for a time. Presently they came to the river. Neville stopped and looked across at the other side of the torrent.

"I want to get over that hill," he said, nodding to the range on the other side of the torrent. "There's a valley there that I looked at from the hill-top last Sunday. It looks likely. Some of the boys tried it, but only in a casual kind of way, and since the rains a stream or two has started, and I shouldn't be surprised—he dropped his voice—"if there was gold there."

"Why not go, then?" she said.

He looked at the brawling torrent, then at her, and shook his head.

"I could get over the bowlders, but not you," he explained.

"I can go where you can go," she said, resolutely.

He laughed at her, just as he used, as a boy, to laugh at Audrey.

"You'd slip and be swept away," he said, like a straw."

She stepped back a pace and sprang in front of him onto the first bowlder and stood looking back at him with defiance beaming in her lovely eyes.

"Don't be an idiot, Syl!" he exclaimed, with brotherly candor. "Come back!"

"I will when I've got across," she retorted.

There was nothing for it but to follow her.

She sprang like a mountain goat from bowlder to bowlder wavering for a moment as her feet touched the stone, but maintaining her equilibrium in a manner that surprised him. Had he been, say, five years older, he would have been charmed by the grace of her movements and attitudes, but being a big boy, and regarding her as a sister, he was only annoyed at her hardihood and fearful lest she should fall. His fears increased as they proceeded and reached a space which looked formidable and impassable.

"There, what did I tell you!" he exclaimed. "We shall have to go back."

"Would you go back if you were alone?" she asked.

"No; I should wade," he replied. "But you can't because you are a girl, and girls aren't built for wading."

"It's not very deep," she said, looking down at the water, and she stepped down on the rock in a preparatory way.

"Here," he said, "don't be foolish!" and before she could prevent him or expostulate, he had got his arms around her. She resisted for a moment, until he said: "Be quiet, unless you want to put both of us on our backs in the water."

Then she grew passive. He had to make his way slowly and gingerly, and though her weight was as nothing to his

herculean strength, he was bothered by her hair, which blew across his face and wound itself round his neck.

But they reached land safely, and when he put her down he saw she was pale.

"By George! what a funk you were in. It serves you right, young lady."

"I was not frightened. I was not!" she retorted, her face flushing, her eyes flashing.

"Oh, all right!" he said, refilling his pipe. "But I tell you it was a narrow squeak."

"It was you, then, who were frightened?" she said, with a scornful or affected look.

"I'm not made of sugar and likely to melt—like the parson's daughter."

Neville laughed again.

"Is she made of sugar? She's sweet-looking enough," he said, carelessly.

They mounted the hill and Sylvia kept step by step with him, and they dropped down the other side and Neville looked about him, kicking at the rocky soil and staring at the holes which the prospecting party had made and quickly deserted.

"There's gold here!" he said in a low voice, as if he were afraid that the birds of the air should hear him and carry away the pregnant assertion. "I'm sure of it. I'll tell you what I'll do, Syl: I'll come here to-morrow with the tools and try it. I'll start early and come back after dusk. If any one comes up to the claim of the hut, you can say I've gone off shooting. They'll find me out in three or four days at most—gold's the one thing on earth you can't keep secret—but three days' start will be something."

"How eager you are about it!" she said, as they sat down and Neville took from his pocket the packet of bread and meat which he had brought for their dinner.

"Am I? Well, it's for your sake, little 'un," he said, simply. Her gray eyes grew moist.

"Forgive me, Jack," she murmured, "but—"

"Well?" he said, intent upon cutting his sandwich with his bowie-knife.

"Well, I'm in no hurry to go—to leave Lorn Hope and—Meth—"

He laughed.

"I dare say. Only give you a chance of getting out of this hole and seeing England, my lady."

She said no more, and went on with her lunch; but his words had spoiled her appetite, notwithstanding their long walk, and in a very few moments she rose and wandered to the small stream which trickled down from the hill. She came back presently and stood beside him as he lay full length, smoking his pipe and dreaming diggers' dreams.

"Jack," she said.

"Well?"

"Look here," and she held out her open hand. It was full of gold dust and yellow fragments.

He was on his feet in a moment.

"Where—where did you find it?" he demanded in an excited whisper.

"On the edge of the stream."

He ran off to the point indicated by her finger, and was down on his knees in a moment.

"Here?" He beckoned her. "Syl, I was right—the gold's here! This stuff has been washed down by the stream out of the hill. The place teems—just teems with gold! Hurrah! Hush! don't speak!" He looked eagerly, suspiciously. "Our fortunes are made. You shall go back to England, Syl! You shall be rich, and—and a lady, as you ought to be and are. Give me your handkerchief!"

There was no thought for himself; she noted that it was all for her.

He collected a little heap of the dust, of the tiny particles, sitting them through her handkerchief, and put them in her canvas bag.

"We must go," he said. "It will not do to hang about here too long; some one may see us. Come along. To-morrow,"

But Mr. Brown had been long enough in the camp to know that it was not always convenient for the diggers to receive visitors in-doors; for one thing, there was not, as a rule, seats enough.

"Thank you; it is very pleasant out here," he said. "This is—"

"My sister," said Neville.

Mr. Brown held out his hand and Sylvia put her little brown one in it. She did not offer to shake hands with Miss Brown, but stood eying her under her long, dark lashes.

Now, Miss Brown was not only pretty but very nicely dressed, and in her Sunday frock and natty hat, under which her light yellow locks were carefully and smoothly braided, she looked the pink and pattern of neatness.

And poor Sylvia, conscious of her old brown dress, with its rents and patches, with the bottom of the skirt hanging limp with water, of her battered old hat and flowing hair, felt the difference between the well got up young lady and herself very painfully. She did not know, being without vanity, that her loveliness was like that of a magnificent rose compared with Mary Brown's daisy-like prettiness. After the manner of her sex she only saw the difference in their clothes.

Miss Brown seemed rather afraid of this brilliant beauty, but she managed at last to murmur:

"You have been for a walk with your brother?"

"Yes, said Sylvia, with cold civility; 'with Jack,' she added. It jarred upon her to hear this soft voice calling Jack her brother."

Miss Brown glanced shyly at Neville.

"It must be very lonely up here so far from the camp?"

"No, it isn't," said Sylvia, so abruptly as to bring the color to Miss Brown's face. "We are never lonely; we like it."

This sounded like a pretty plain hint that Miss Brown's company was no longer desired, and that young lady shrunk into her shell again and looked timidly at her father.

early. I shall be at work. Give me three clear days!"

He was excited, flushed, palpitating with sanguine hope; but she stood calm and cold and unresponsive, as she had been at the claim nine months ago.

"Let us go, then," she said, at last, and she shuddered up at her with astonishment.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing; only—don't laugh, Jack. I don't like this place. It is so still and solitary, and—"

She turned her head away.

"Lord! isn't that like a girl!" he exclaimed, securely fastening the bag to his belt. "What's the matter with the place? It's a regular—what do you call it?—El Dorado!"

"It's—it's hateful!" she burst out, then quieted down. "Come, Jack, it will be late before we get back."

He obeyed at once, but all the way he talked in a suppressed voice of the wealth they had discovered—not they, but she.

"It's your find, Syl," he said.

"Remember that when you are over in England. It's your own money, and there's heaps of it. If it wasn't Sunday—and he looked back wistfully.

"Sunday!" she echoed. "Jack, didn't you say that it's unlucky to find anything on Sunday? You did, I remember, and—and oh, there is going to be no luck in this!"

He laughed.

"Well, for a first-rate, unadulterated croaker, commend me to you!" he retorted. "It's only unlucky when you work on Sunday, and you can't call just picking up a handful of gold-dust work."

Sylvia said no more, and was very quiet indeed all the way home. When they came to the river she stood still and allowed him to take her in his arms. He felt that she was breathing rather hard, and with masculine stupidity put it down to fear.

"Just keep your hair out of my eyes, Syl," he said, laughing. "It's so thick that it blinds me. You've got wonderfully pretty hair, Syl."

He held it back with his hand, and her eyes lighted up at his praise.

"It's like a horse's mane," she said.

"Yes, in quantity, but it is ever so much softer. There you are! Here, give me your hand. Hold hard!"

They walked homeward quickly; and Sylvia did not seem at all tired. As a matter of fact, she was in the most perfect health, and would have astonished a fine London lady.

As they came in sight of the hut, she stopped suddenly and caught his arm.

Her quick eyes, trained by looking at the long distances in the clear air, had seen two figures seated outside the hut.

"There is some one there, Jack," she said.

Neville instinctively felt for his revolver; but as he drew nearer he saw that the persons were the clergyman and his daughter.

"Oh, it's Mary Brown and her father," he said.

"Mary? You have her name very pat, Jack," she said, rather sharply.

"It's an easy name to remember," he responded, indifferently.

The two visitors rose and met them, and Mr. Brown took off his soft hat.

"We are out for a stroll, Mr.—"

He paused, as if wishing to hear Neville's name.

Neville flushed slightly.

"I'm called Young 'Un," he said.

He had concealed his name too long to blurt it out to this stranger, mild and benevolent though he looked.

"Mr. Youngton," continued the parson, innocently, "and we came upon your house. We stayed to admire the view—yabov—and my daughter suggested that it would be only courteous to wait your return and beg your acquaintance."

He waved his hand toward his daughter by way of introduction, and the girl raised her eyes and blushed as she bowed.

Neville took off his hat again.

"Will you come in?" he said.

But Mr. Brown had been long enough in the camp to know that it was not always convenient for the diggers to receive visitors in-doors; for one thing, there was not, as a rule, seats enough.

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But Mr. Brown had got into conversation with Neville, and like a good man intent on doing his duty, was leading up to 'I hope we shall see you at the services in the church then, Mr. Youngton,' and was so engrossed with this splendid specimen of young manhood that he did not notice how badly the two girls were getting on.

At last he made a move, and they took their departure, and Neville, who had enjoyed his talk with a gentleman—the first he had met for many a long day—mechanically walked with them. Sylvia stopped behind and stood looking after them, then went into the hut, and, plumping down beside the table, hid her face in her hands.

Before Neville had gone very far he missed Sylvia, and stopped short.

"I must not leave my sister alone," he said.

"No, no," said Mr. Brown. "Then we shall hope to see you at the service next Sunday, you and your sister?"

"Oh, yes," murmured Miss Brown. "I hope you will bring her; she is so beautiful."

"Yes, isn't she?" assented Neville, just like a brother. "I'll bring her. Good-night, Miss Brown."

His strong hand clasped her small one, and she blushed and smiled timidly up at him.

"That young fellow is a gentleman," said the parson. "What singular characters one meets in these wilds. Now, I wonder why he is here? He has a history, I am sure."

Miss Mary wondered too, quite as much and more than her father, and all the way home, and through some part of the night her head was running on the handsome young fellow who lived all alone up the ravine with his sister.

Neville ran back to the hut and burst in, but not so quickly that Sylvia had not time to spring up and hide traces of what looked suspiciously like tears.

"Nice people those, eh, Syl?" he said, cheerfully. "Lord! I'll tell you it is since I shook hands with a gentleman. The girl seems quite pleasant, too; she'll be a companion for you, Syl. Quite an acquisition to Lorn Hope, by jingo! And I say, Syl, I've promised we'll go to church next Sunday. Fancy a parson and church at Lorn Hope!"

"You can go, Jack," she said, softly. "But I—"

and she glanced down at her dress.

Neville caught the glance and understood it and his heart smote him. He had been so engrossed by his search for gold that he had forgotten such a trifling detail as Sylvia's wardrobe.

CHAPTER XV.

He said nothing at the moment, but the next morning he walked down to the camp and purchased some merino and a hat, as much like Mary Brown's as he could get, and carried them home.

"Look here, Syl," he said, putting the parcel rather shyly on the table. "Here's something for a new dress and a hat, I couldn't get a dress ready-made, you know, but I expect you'll be able to build one—you're clever enough for anything."

Now, she would have received the present stiffly enough, but the praise that accompanied it melted her.

"Oh, Jack!" she said in a low voice, and bent over the stuff. But that was all she said. She carried the precious parcel into her own room, and gave him his breakfast.

All through the meal Neville was in a state of suppressed excitement.

"I'm going over the hills," he said. "I shall go round by the wood and keep out of sight, and if any one comes, tell them I