

# At the Eleventh Hour!

CHAPTER XII.

"Every Man Has His Price." They looked at each other, and both laughed hoarsely ere Prentiss said:

"Well, this woman must be bought to swear that she identifies the prisoner with the face in the locket."

"All right, sir."

"You must manage to see her privately, Ball, and arrange the terms of the deal!"

"I can try it, Mr. Prentiss; but you mustn't forget I am running a terrible risk. My pay will have to be big."

"Haven't you bled me deeply enough already, second?"

Jason Ball shook his uncombed mane fiercely, and his eyes gleamed menacingly as he muttered:

"I don't relish no such names, sir, though there's a worse one I might call you by!"

"Tut, tut, a mere pleasantry on my part, Ball, and you needn't be so touchy. You shall be well rewarded for your work, though I fear I shall not have an acre of Bonnie Braes left when I get out of your clutches."

"I've done you a handy service, Mr. Prentiss."

"I don't deny that; but I am paying dear for it, all the same. But let us not quarrel over your terms now. All that shall be made satisfactory. The main thing is—will you do the work?"

"See Mrs. McDonald?"

"Yes."

"I'll see her, sir. I promise you; and if she can be brought to reason by a bribe, she's your woman, and will help to lead the governor—ha! ha!—to the gallows."

"That is well. But be very cautious. It is, as you say, a risky job to manage the old woman."

"But you can depend upon me to fix it all right, sir. And now I'll be going, for I have no time to lose. Good night!" and he shuffled out of the house into the gloom.

We must now return to the prison, where the little group of friends were anxiously awaiting the answer of Mrs. McDonald to the lawyer's question that had voiced the impatience of every heart.

As the words left his lips, the old woman gave a nervous start of keen perturbation.

"You have been looking at the prisoner several minutes, now. Surely you are prepared to give a decision," added the lawyer.

"I—oh, sir," she began, then jerked off her eyeglasses and nervously wiped off some moisture that had seemed to obscure her vision. Replacing them, she looked again searchingly at the prisoner.

Belcourt, on his part, smiled encouragingly at the nervous old creature, with a beam of good nature in his splendid dark-blue eyes, and tenderly patted his mother's white hand as it rested confidingly on his arm.

No uneasiness showed in his face or manner. He had no more fear of the old woman's verdict than he had of falling down dead the next moment at her feet. He had within himself the consciousness of innocence.

He knew that he had never even seen Madge McDonald, so why should

she expect to be recognized as the original of a picture she had owned. He met the old woman's glance with perfect composure and a flash of sympathy, feeling sorry in his heart for the poor creature so cruelly bereaved of her child.

So for a minute longer the scrutiny lasted, then the woman recoiled from Belcourt with a stifled cry of horror that struck coldly on every listening ear.

Bracing herself against the wall, she glanced feebly at the astonished prisoner, crying in a hoarse, strangled voice of fierce emotion:

"It is he—the monster! Poor Madge's destroyer! Take me away—away!"

Lawyer Price sprung to her side, and, grasping her arm, exclaimed remonstratingly:

"You do not know what you say! You cannot have recognized in this innocent man the original of the picture your daughter showed you!"

Cowering in his grasp, she whispered with weak defiance:

"Leave go! I have no right to touch me!"

"That is true," he replied more calmly, dropping his hand from her arm, and adding: "But good Heaven! you cannot not mean what you say! Look again at this man, and you will see that you have made a mistake. He never saw your daughter in his life!"

Most unwillingly and reluctantly, she looked again at Belcourt, who smiled at her, and echoed Mr. Price's words:

"You have made a mistake."

But she muttered, almost fiercely: "I am not mistaken. You are the man in her locket. You have murdered her—my poor girl—and I hate you—hate you! Oh, take me away from the sight of the wretch!"

"Mother!" cried Belcourt, and turned to catch her in his arms as she fainted.

The shock had been too great for her love and pride: and at they laid her, white and unconscious, on the prison cot, her unhappy son almost wished that death had removed her from earth ere that fatal hour.

Old Mrs. McDonald was led out to the carriage that had brought her there. Whimpering and sobbing in a distressful way, she entered it and was driven away, followed by angry glances, for all believed that she had made a terrible mistake that was destined to cost the prisoner very dear.

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sparkled in his snaky black eyes, awakening a strange repulsion in Lynette. A choking sensation of despair made the heart sink in her breast, and she felt in spite of herself she was beginning to hate the man she had promised to marry.

Day by day, from languid, indifferent liking, her feeling for Graham Prentiss had changed to inexplicable dislike, shuddering repulsion, and now active hate. Yes, hate, for his opposition to Stephen Belcourt had roused resentment, anger, and now hate. It seemed so cruel, his persecution of a man who, though charged with a terrible crime, was at least not proved guilty.

Looking at Prentiss with flashing eyes, heaving breast, and heightened color, she exclaimed:

"You seem to rejoice in this new link in the chain of circumstantial evidence against poor Stephen Belcourt!"

He frowned darkly, then forced a smile, as he answered:

"No, no; you misjudge me, Lynette. I do not rejoice, but I am not surprised, for I have never doubted his guilt; and as I am not a silly sentimentalist, I shall be glad to see him punished for his crime."

Warming up to his subject, he proceeded:

"My sympathies are all with that poor girl so cruelly murdered under cover of night and darkness, when there was no human being by to take her part against her wicked husband."

"I thought Jason Bell had sworn to hearing and witnessing the interview in which she was killed," she interrupted coldly.

He flushed angrily, and retorted:

"Yes; but the murder was so sudden, he could not interfere, and he ran away from the spot. But let us drop this unpleasant subject, which I fear I ought not to have introduced. Will you and Miss Halliburton drive this afternoon?"

Vida said quickly:

"Oh, do let us go! It is so beautiful outdoors, and the dreary weather will soon be upon us."

Lynette agreed carelessly. She knew he would stay and talk if she refused, and she preferred the drive.

They rode again, this time through the woods, with their gorgeous autumn coloring, and Lynette pretended to be so absorbed in the changing view that she did not care to talk. When they returned, she said pointedly that she could not ride with him to-morrow. She would be busy helping Aunt Jill with the preserves.

That night there was a heavy rain that beat the leaves down from the trees and swelled the river to a rushing torrent. Lynette lay awake on her bed, and listened with a sort of fierce sympathy to the sighing of the wind and the rush of the rain, feeling that it chimed in with her mood.

The next morning the sun came out brightly, and shone on the desolation wrought by the storm—the denuded trees, the rain-beaten chrysantheums trailing over the walks, the general aspect of dreariness—but by noon it clouded over, and the sky grew dull and gray, with hints of snow.

Lynette, in a big gingham apron, had been peeling pears in the wide, clean kitchen all the morning, and a neighbor had come in and said that poor old Sally Ann Sims was down with the fever.

"Who is tending the poor old soul?" inquired Mrs. Lewis.

"Why, 'Gusta Grimes is there."

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"Then she'll do very well. Old 'Gusta is the best nurse in the neighborhood."

"I'll go and see her this afternoon, and take her some currant jelly," said Lynette.

So it was that she came out alone in the gloom of the dreary day, and went down the river-bank to watch the muddy torrent swirling past with its freightage of dead leaves. Like dead hopes floating down the stream of time. She put down the little basket and crouched down on a flat, gray rock, with her chin in the hollow of her hand, and stared with big, inscrutable brown eyes at the rushing water.

Poor little Lynette, so beautiful, so bitterly unhappy, she felt a wild temptation to cast herself into the torrent, and let it sweep her away into the merciful repose of death.

"I am like a leaf of on river—tossed—tossed here and there by the winds of fate," she thought, despairingly.

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