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TALES OF THE LINKS OF LOVE.

BY ALEXANDER SOMERVILLE.

LILLYMERE.

CHAPTER XVII.—Continued

"Glass of water only, thank you. No, not stay now; prefer to walk. Come with us, Agnes dear; take my arm for support. Mrs. Burly, you and I, with Agnes, will go a little way and converse more privately. The babe, Mrs. Burly, lives. Yes, the Lillymere babe; Edith's infant son; so I lately learned, and is now a young man in America somewhere, in Canada or in the United States. Being heir direct to extensive properties, with noble and ancient rank, and hitherto unknown to be in existence, certain formidable, unscrupulous enemies of his fortune, or life, stand between him and the inheritance."

"You astound me in gladness, Mary. What more? What more, dear lady?"

"The aged Lord Royalfort prays night and day that the boy, legitimate successor to the Earldom, may be found, and that soon; be found, and the legal title as heir established before he dies. And now, Mrs. Burly, since I know you and require kind assistance here, let me, at risk of tiresome repetition, present to your good nature the position I'm in."

"Dear lady, every aid possible, I and Bella and all the Burlys will give. Say what I, what they can do."

"Thank you. Having been the guileless, unsuspecting fiction used by Eccley opponents of Sir De Lacy and Edith's union at the time of the private marriage, my name urged on Lord Royalfort's ear as engaged by priority of time to De Lacy, his Lordship's nephew and heir-at-law, the dear, generous, but too credulous Earl opposed his nephew's alliance with Edith."

"But, Mary, you being innocent in the matter, why be so much distressed? You weep, dear lady; why weep for woes you did not occasion?"

"Had Edith not been De Lacy's love, possibly I might. And had he offered—possibly I might have accepted. And, also possibly, I might this day have been mother to a happy heir of Lillymere, one knowing no misfortunes. But standing in this position of awful responsibility now, though innocently incurred then, I, ever their friend, ever their mourner, have vowed to redress that child's fortunes. If misadventures so deplorable can be retrieved, I devote the remainder of my poor life, my considerable fortune, soul itself—even that, for on my salvation I am under a vow to look for, search, explore, plead for in whatever captivity found, plead for, liberate and restore to his rights that cruelly wronged boy."

"And the boy's mother, Lady Lillymere, died of a broken heart, you said?"

"Of a broken heart, or worse. In madness of grief she fell a suicide!"

"What proof of that, my lady?"

"Ah! Mrs. Burly, you forget: say Mary, friend!"

"But alone, Lady Mary; indulge me in this private walk to pay the honour due to social rank, and to yet higher dignity, the nobility of a beneficent woman, in good works illustrious."

"I thank you, but fear your kindly indiscretion, Mrs. Burly. Habit and a generous temper have given you a tendency to be too kind. At a proper time I might expect the courtesies due to rank; but oblige now, and for a long while to come, by calling me friend, and Mary. You asked about proofs of Lady Lillymere's death; I only know what the Royalfort and Eccley families believe; they being instructed in everything by the law agents—the Schoolars, that the poor thing frantically leapt into the Menai tide near Bangor, and perished."

"Perished? No, dear lady; the event was calamitous; but it was not suicide, nor yet death. In eager adventure to rescue from peril a poor little lamb, which on the bank of the Menai had strayed and fallen down to a ledge of rock from whence it could not return, and where Edith, in her wanderings, heard it pitifully bleating, she fell over the precipice, plunging in the deep, rapid tide of Menai, the lamb in her arms. Fishermen in their boats rescued both lady and lamb, and carried them to the warm house and heart of Miss Verbena Robins, the Welch angelic creature who, in the hotel and beautiful gardens beside Telford's Fairy airy Chain Bridge, presides as Port in Paradise, she and the lovely Miss Joneses. There, in solitude unknown to the world, the lady and lamb were a long while nourished and cherished."

"You amaze me in gladness about Edith, as I, a little ago, amazed you in gladness about Edith's boy. But, alas! both are yet far from us. What became of her?"

"Possessed of some little fortune, and having no desire to re-enter the world's social life, Edith selected and purchased other lambs and became a shepherdess in Wales. But a desire to wander prevented long stay in one place. As her flock grew it was divided and lodged in hired pastures with different farmers in Wales, England, Scotland, Ireland, and Isle of Man. Attended by two faithful colley dogs, Simon and Janet, with a lamb in arms, several sheep following as children, she herself dressed in scarlet cloak and grey or white skirts, straw or felt hat, with sheep crook on shoulder, travelled the country, mostly in lanes, over moors, and by lonely roads. First the sheep left with farmers to be pastured were paid for as lodgers. But soon the wandering shepherdess came to be looked to as almost a spiritual visitant. Through the mysterious secrecy of origin—hardly any knowing from whence she came, her piety and tenderness attached, by reputation, to the lambs she carried. Every flock prospered in which one or more of the Mystic sheep found a home,—that is the name they are known by. None were sold to be slain, but were always in demand as private gifts. They are sought for at prices almost fabulous to go to all parts—America itself, to purify by talismanic influences other flocks. This is effected with much privacy; farmers or flockmasters not caring to be thought weak minded and superstitious. We rear the Mystic sheep in large number for export, at Millington."

"Stop, stop, Mrs. Burly; of the sheep hereafter. First of Edith—Lady Lillymere, where is she?"

"If you have not personally met her, Mary, newspapers may have come under notice, telling of the unknown woman, the wandering shepherdess?"

"I have not seen this person, but may have read, think now I did read of a poor demented wandering creature called a shepherdess."

"The wandering shepherdess is no other than the bereaved, cruelly wronged Lady Lillymere."

"What proof have you, Bella Ellaby—Mrs. Burly, I mean, that the shepherdess is Lady Lillymere?"

"I knew her personally as Edith Ogleburn; knew her as Lady Lillymere; saw her married at Springfield, parish of Greta; and know her as the wandering shepherdess; saw her but two hours ago."

"Two hours ago! Where?"

"In a pasture field at Millington. There, or on the Green near the Joseph Paisley Hostelry, where she was married, she may be seen most days. Sitting or walking, with the crook in hand, a lamb in arms, attended by a small flock; of which grey-faced Andrew is patriarchal father, now almost blind and very lame, poor old sheep. Aged Menai, quite blind, is the mother—the same ewe lamb Edith rescued and fell over the cliffs with in Wales. With that little flock, she leading the lame, aged and blind by ribbons attached to her crook or garments, and the colleys, Simon and Janet, faithfully defending all, the shepherdess, often gazing to the mountains, or the sky, awaits the coming of — she knows not whom."

"But expects the coming of some one, does she?"

"Yes, Mary. She looks to the West at sunset inquiring in tones of whispering fervour, 'Will he come to-morrow?' In the morning the lone creature is waiting for day-break; and as the sun rises, she, with one arm holding the crook, in the other arm a lamb, gazes on the eastern horizon, speaking in whispers of tremulous emotion:—'Hush! hush! He is coming!' Then sings in wildly carolling, joyous song—her voice ravishing in sweetness and power, such disconnected words often repeated, with variations in music, also repeated, like song of lark or thrush; the words mere fragments, as:—'From the West, from the West, the sun is returned, to tell me he saw my darling. He warmed my babe and gave light to his eyes, my boy, my joy, my darling!'"

"In the day, she makes or repairs her own, or other dresses. Always working with needle, and mostly singing. She addresses, talks and sings to old Andrew, the patriarchal sheep, who bleats in return; or to blind Menai, the mother ewe, who also bleats. Or she gathers flowers, making garlands for children, and the lambs. At even she sings fragments, such as:—'Oh, to go West, to go West with the sun! And the morrow morning come home. To warm the grave where angels are watching, awaiting the time I come. To awaken him to life, take him on my bosom; my son, my babe, my lamb. My babe, my boy, my life, my joy! And sail on the sunbeam home.'"

"Such are fragments of her songs, but they vary nearly every day."

"Do people gather around and listen? Or, do bad children or fools molest her?"

"None molest her; oh, dear no. No bad children where she is; all are good; all striving who to be kindest and share her embraces. As to fools, they cease to be foolish in her presence. Even a reprobate coming in sight of the shepherdess is silent and respectful. On loneliest roads at night, if belated, no traveller insults or disturbs her. The words of her outgushing melodies are now little heeded, having no intelligible sense. But if her lost

son be indeed alive, and out in the West, over the Atlantic Ocean, then the song of Edith has a meaning."

"Conduct me, please, to the house where Edith and De Lacy were married."

"They at once went on that journey, going past a small grey stone building with belfry, the Parish Church of Greta, and a road leading to Netley's Hymeneal Hill; that personage in broad brim and black garment standing by his gate on the watch, frowning at Mrs. Burly, lest a customer escaped him. They went to a row of houses half a mile farther, facing to the Green. That was Springfield. An aged woman, nearly deaf, turned out boxfuls, bagfuls of loose papers—the documentary records of seventy years of Greta marriages. But on learning which paper was required told that it was destroyed."

"Two strangers came years and years ago, one was a tall, whiskered man; they selected the Lillymere paper, and offered money: first, one, two, and up to ten guineas. We refused to sell at any price, but offered a copy for a guinea. They did not want a copy but the thing itself."

"Did they get it?" Lady Mary anxiously demanded.

"No. They pretended to overturn the table by accident into the fire, burning the Lillymere document and many more. Then threw down ten guineas as compensation, saying:—'If that paper be inquired for, you can make oath in any court of law that if such a thing ever existed—which, so far as you know, it never did—it may have been consumed by an accidental fire in your own house.'"

"After this," Lady Mary remarked, "we need search no more. I feared that we should learn that documentary evidence of the Lillymere babe's legitimacy had been destroyed. And it was done, as I expected, by the gipsy, Oliver Eccley alias Irlam, and Adam Schoolar."

"What will you do next, Lady Mary?"

"Go to America and find the boy. And you, dear Miss Agnes Schoolar, will now return to London, and conform to your father's immovable demand that you marry Adam. It seems a comfortable family arrangement for all concerned. Do, sweet Agnes, return home."

"Never, never, to marry Adam. I cannot, cannot, and never shall be bride to Adam Schoolar. Let me continue with you, Mary. Let me be your companion to America. Do, Lady Mary, let me go with you!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

ARRIVAL OUT OF A HUNDRED MAIDENS.

"Would your ladyship choose to meet and converse with the shepherdess?"

"Not yet; I fear the experiment might be painful to both, to her more than painful. When I have recovered her lost son, restoring him to his place in society as Earl Royalfort's successor, I may with more satisfaction meet the shepherdess—Edith—Lady Lillymere. The dear void in Edith's being remains unfilled. As a supposed contuboy to the causes of the deep dread vacancy—most unjustly supposed, she once associated me, and still may. I prefer not meeting Edith yet. But, good Mrs. Burly, please inform the shepherdess of my true relation to her, of my friendship and fidelity in all times past."

"Sure am I, Mary, of the friendship and fidelity you bore her."

"Yes, Bella Ellaby—Mrs. Burly I should say; even when De Lacy Lillymere gave the love to her which I once thought might have been mine, I repined not, but had a light at my heart testifying to pleasure felt at her expected happiness."

"Mary! the gracious, sweet unselfishness of your nature!"

"Bella Ellaby, I struggled with nature. The natural woman in me perceived a happiness going to Edith, not coming to me. By conquest over the natural woman I felt a vicarious satisfaction for her, though an emptiness, a want of something to fill emptiness within myself. The love of man I could look for no more. The love of man could never be accepted by me. I sought and found the light of a higher love. The height to which it has reached, the ineffable content it has procured me has been real. Real, yet not uniformly continuous. It has diminished; to my horror has seemed to go out on occasions. But I know now how to rekindle the glow; did not always know."

"Your condescension, Mary, in confiding personal experiences and long silent thoughts to me is very flattering. I quite comprehend why, in station of life so distant, am made confidante in this matter. In proper time the shepherdess will receive the explanations your ladyship may please to confide to me." They parted.

Lady Mary Mortimer and Agnes Schoolar returned to London. In a brief interview with the elder Schoolar about Agnes, Lady Mary was informed to some extent, but not to the full imminent urgency, of arrangements in finance which made the marriage of Agnes and Adam a necessity. The Schoolars had become involved with Hook Crook & Co., a speculative banking firm lately collapsed. Adam led his firm to that dark pit, but had

individually receded from the speculation and from the law partnership a rich man, leaving the senior Schoolar and family on the verge of ruin. Agnes was promised to him before she knew her own sentiments, and he now demanded her hand. Not that he cared much for the beautiful young thing personally, but she had treated him disdainfully, and he suspected her desire to see once again, and always again that discarded clerk—the "beggar's brat, young Lud," or, as he was termed, Tobias Oman.

Wherefore the elder Schoolar having profound regard for Lady Mary's high character and station, entreated that her influence might still be extended to give such counsel as would induce his daughter to become Adam's wife, and save both the firm and family from ruin; herself from a future of servitude, or other social humiliation.

The London affairs settled in prospect of prolonged absence abroad, though nothing was hinted of the direction and objects of her travel, Lady Mary journeyed to her favourite country residence, Esterveld, Northamptonshire; Agnes with her.

Esteemed forester of Sherwood, friend of Robin Hood, no. This daughter of high aristocracy is not Lady Mary, sister of the Duke of Portland and of the late Lord George Bentinck, M.P. Lady Mary Bentinck, administratrix of a beneficence worthy of a sister of charity and lady of fortune combined, pursues her manifold works of goodness over the Sherwood Forest area of Nottinghamshire. I write not of her, but of the Lady Mary Mortimer, aunt of Conrad Mortimer, the young Duke of Sheerness. The territory of this Lady Mary's works of utility begins about forty miles from the manufacturing town of Habersham, at Esterveld, Northamptonshire. Like the other Lady Mary, she may be taken as a type of many highborn daughters of England.

The utilitarian operations of Mary Mortimer, in addition to church and school organizations, amid a dense population of rural lace workers, hosiers, and straw-plaiters, often the sport of vicissitude in markets or inventions were of a nature unknown in newer countries. It was an employment of resources and leisure demanding mental energy. It conferred in small matters a large aggregate of benefits on thousands of families; returning to the fair minister a richness of thought akin to felicity. It was an exercise of the higher nature of woman in fields peculiar to English ladies of rank and fortune. A vocation pursued and enjoyed on a width of scale, and with a quiet assiduity, unsuspected by the major portion of the world who only see or hear of British aristocracy in the London season, or read of them in gazettes of fashion.

Esterveld! Arise, oh memory! Bring again that May time amid the elms of Esterveld, when day and night I lay enchanted in fairy dreams.

The thrush, blackbird, old ouzel bird of England, linnets and finches, on every hedge-row, bush and tree, singing of their love to mates in the nest, and singing to me as the sun went down at even.

In a chamber of the village hostelry embowered in flowers, and pure as if decked for a bride, I laid me in contentment down to sleep. But lo! Melodious mysteries of night! Love-lorn nightingales singing all the hours through. And the dreamer swimming or flying in land of the fairies.

At light of day, the lark, linnet, finch, mavis, and ouzel. Larks in the sky down by the meadow; larks out by the fields where wheat was green. In the eye of the sun, larks everywhere.

Similar to that time was the May morning at Esterveld following the arrival of the ladies from London.

Amid gardens in blossom, and birds in song; plough boys whistling at the plough; milkmaids singing in the dairies; rooks cawing in the tall elms; gardeners whetting scythes on the lawn,—amid these, on that morning of preparation for a long, long journey—how long human forecast discerned not, Lady Mary Mortimer and Agnes walked to early prayer in a small sanctuary on verge of the park.

Next they had an hour of converse, vital to Agnes, in the gardens and conservatories. Then breakfast in the blue parlour, and the London morning papers. A breakfast-room so lovely that one not accustomed to it felt rapture, as if dwelling in a palace of witchery, two of the witcheries present. The one not accustomed to the blue parlour on this occasion was Roy Reuben, a literary politico-economist from London, on visit to Lady Mary by invitation.

The morning papers came in nicely smoothed; Agnes turning very soon to the romantic second column; scanning cabalistic advertisements, looking for such as might refer to fugitive daughters parted from parents who had not consulted natural instincts.

The politico-economist watched for thought or speech of Lady Mortimer. It was no slight honour for Roy Reuben to be summoned there in confidential consultation. Deferential at any time to ladies he was specially attentive now.

"Tregusias, M.P." Lady Mary's eye alighted on that name, and the report of a speech delivered on the previous day in the market-