

A FATAL ELOPEMENT

(Continued)

"I will wait until the bird leaves her nest," she said to herself, sitting down in the grateful shade beneath the spreading branches, "and keep still lest she should discover my presence."

Suddenly a shot close at hand rent the air, and Orella knew no more. When she returned to consciousness soon after, she found herself lying by the side of a brook, while the handsome young man she had ever beheld laved her face with cool, life-giving water.

"You had a very narrow escape of it that time, young lady," he said, raising his straw hat from his fair, clustering curls with a low bow, as she sat up and looked at him in utter bewilderment.

"What was it?" she asked, wondering. "I was just falling asleep when I heard a shot. Did I faint?"

"Falling asleep?" he echoed. "Well, I should say so. If I had not happened along just when I did, you would have fallen, asleep never to wake again on flowers, or snakes, or anything else. This is what came near doing the mischief. See?"

And he held up before the girl's startled eyes a blacksnake fully ten feet long, minus the head, which had been shot off. "He had charmed you so completely that he was just about to strike," he added. "I shall always thank Heaven that I happened to be passing through the grove at that opportune moment."

The girl held out her slim white hand.

"I thank you from the depths of my heart," she said. "You have rendered me a great service."

"I am Orella Forrester. I live with my aunt at Beech Grove Cottage."

"Ah, now that I look closely at you, I remember you, though I have not seen you since you were a little child. I am Bernard Yorke. My father publishes the Weekly Record down in the village."

The girl was grievously disappointed. He was so handsome, so chivalrous, so winning, she thought he must be some noble lord or duke. And he was only the village editor's son! It was certainly too bad.

"Shall I accompany you as far as your home?" he asked anxiously. "You look so white, I fear you have sustained a greater shock to your nerves than you are aware of."

"Oh, no—no, indeed," returned Orella, quickly. "My aunt does not like young men. I—I shall not mention what has transpired, and I beg that you will not, or I should never be permitted to go to the grove again and it is my favorite resort these long lonely afternoons."

"In this case, rely upon me for saying nothing about it."

"Thank you again, very much, Good-bye," she said, and again that soft little hand lay for an instant in his, his eyes looking into hers, and the mischief of a lifetime was done.

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away at once. She shall not leave the house for a single hour, unless I accompany her, after to-day. This is the sixth of June. I shall have to go over to the post office for the remittance, and within three days, Beech Grove Cottage will be vacant."

Miss Forrester went out to the barn, harnessed Kate, the old gray mare. So intent was she with her thoughts she did not see the figure of a handsome young man lying at full length in the thick green grass under the shade of a wide spreading tree.

In a flash the ardent young lover had retraced his steps to Beech Grove Cottage. Orella was sitting on the porch, looking as sweet as the beautiful June roses she held in her dimpled hands.

His boldness in opening the wicket gate and walking deliberately up the pebbled walk to the cottage and taking a seat beside her almost took her breath away.

"Come into the garden, Orella; I have something to say to you," he urged. "I have something particular to say to you. I saw your aunt going to the village. She will be back directly. I must go before she returns."

"Ah! that explains why you are here. You saw my aunt drive away," laughed Orella. "My aunt left me that large basket to fill with strawberries," she said. "If I talk to you, it will not be half filled, and I shall be called to account, and scolded dreadfully."

"I will fill the basket and talk to you at the same time. You shall sit down and fold those lily leaves of hands and watch me. Ah, Orella," he murmured, as they walked along, "can you not guess what brings me here to-day? I fancy that every bird singing and drifting in the sunshine knows it."

"Orella!" he whispered, catching her hands and holding them so close that she could not draw them away from him. "I love you! Oh, my darling, will you be my wife—mine—all mine, to love, to worship, to idolize, to reverence, to adore, while life lasts? What words shall I use, what shall I say, to convey to you the power of my wonderful love? For the first time in my life, I find words a prayer to you. Marry me, Orella, for I can not live without you—I can not, indeed!"

The girl laid her cool, soft white hand on the fair, clustering curls of the eager, passionate young lover who knelt at her feet, his whole soul on his lips and in the eloquent gaze of the earnest blue eyes studying her face. He wondered why, in that moment, she said:

"Oh! if you had but been a lord, or a duke, or an earl, Bernard!"

"I am happier than any lord or duke or earl that ever walked the green earth, with you by my side, darling!" he cried, enthusiastically. "I could be as content in a cottage with you, as in a palace with a queen for my bride. I love you so, Orella—ah, I love you so! I will make you so happy."

"I love you, Bernard," she said, but there was no girlish flush on her beautiful face, no love-light in her eyes.

A glad light broke over his fair, handsome, eager face.

"Oh, my darling, how I thank you for those words!" he cried. "They lift me from earth to heaven, for those words make you my sweetheart. Those who love each other so are sweethearts. But I want something more. I want you to be something nearer and dearer. Promise me that you will be my wife, Orella!"

"It is so much to promise—so much, Bernard," she sighed.

"Perhaps it may be as you wish—some time, Bernard," she murmured.

In an instant he had sprung to his feet, clasped her in his arms, and kisses on the lovely cheeks, the lovely lips, soft rings of curling hair, and dark, sweet eyes.

"You are my very own, my darling!" he cried. "I defy anything in the whole world to part us. Ah, Orella, if you would but add to my happiness by marrying me at once—within the hour! Let us elope—your aunt will never give her consent, you know. We could go over to old Mr. Gray, be married at once, and take the train that leaves an hour later for the city. I have some money laid by. We could take a bridal trip to wherever you would like to go. When we reach the city you could write to your aunt, telling her all. It would end by her forgiving us, and wishing us joy. Oh, darling, consent, I pray you!"

"Old Mr. Gray, the minister, is very ill," said Orella. "I heard my aunt say yesterday that he would not last the week out, and there is no other minister in Woodhaven."

"I am sure Heaven will spare him to unite us," declared the hopeful lover. "He knows the grand words well; it will be no effort for him to repeat them."

CHAPTER III

Miss Forrester drew a long breath as she watched the tall, stalwart figure of the handsome, disappointed young lover disappear over the hills.

"An enemy has stolen unawares into my camp," she whispered, hoarsely. "I ferret to be watchful. Great Heaven! how nearly the plans of years came to being undone. But it is not too late to repair the mischief, if any has been done. I will take Orella

"See, the sun is setting behind the lilac branches, Orella. Come, let us walk a little way and talk the matter over."

He took the lovely white hand in his and led her out of the old-fashioned garden, on to the high road, and to gether, in the gloaming, they walked over the carpet of beautiful wild flowers, little heeding whither their steps tended.

Suddenly and quite by chance, a Orella imagined, they found themselves directly in front of old Minister Gray's cottage.

"What do you say—shall we be married here and now? Oh, darling, do not refuse! See, the old minister observes us from the window, and is beckoning us to enter. We must go in."

Together they walked up the pebbled path and entered the open door. "I am so thankful you two happened along!" said the old minister, feebly. "Pardon me for not rising to greet you. I am so very feeble, you know. My poor old wife went over to the village, and I am quite alone, with no companion save my Bible, which I keep close at hand, and is always company."

Both Orella and Bernard started as their eyes rested on a church ritual, open at the marriage service.

"My good wife and I were married just fifty years ago to-day," he explained, seeing the direction of their gaze.

Bernard Yorke suddenly leaned forward.

"Would you kindly marry this young lady and myself, here and now?" he asked earnestly, his clasped hands tightening on the girl's hand.

Orella had not promised to marry him but he seemed to take it for granted.

Before she could utter a word, the old minister held out his hand and took both of their clasped ones.

"Certainly, if you both desire it," he replied. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure. On the first day that I was ordained a minister I married a young couple—ay, before I had preached my first sermon. I resign from the ministry to-morrow, on account of my age and infirmity. I should be pleased that my last ministerial act were the joining of two souls in marriage, the blending together of two useful lives that shall ever after be as one."

As in a dream Orella saw him turn to the ritual. In a feeble, faltering voice he repeated those mystic words which thrilled her with so keen, so new a sensation, she did not know whether it was joy or pain.

Finally the minister pronounced them man and wife, charging them to cling to each other, to be faithful one to the other until death did them part.

Bernard kissed her passionately, straining her to his heart, as though he could not bear to be separated from her even for a moment, then at last he tore himself from her side and hurried toward the station.

He could not have been gone five minutes ere Orella, to her astonishment, heard the shriek of the approaching train.

"Surely Bernard has been in error as to the time of its arrival," she told herself.

The next moment, pointing and blessing like a huge thing of life, its fiery eye glaring ominously, the train dashed up to the station.

Orella heard a shout, a scream, a succession of wild, hoarse cries, and she saw from where she stood that there was great confusion on the station platform.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, the train had rushed on through the gloaming into the blackness of the coming night, still Bernard Yorke did not return.

The commotion around the railroad platform seemed to increase.

Fully half an hour passed, and yet Bernard Yorke did not rejoin Orella, though she waited ever so patiently at the trysting place.

CHAPTER IV

To some people there is always a warning in the sudden depression of their spirits, a heaviness at their heart of coming danger which they can not shake off. So it was with Orella. A terrible fear crept over her as she waited at the trysting place for the return of the handsome young man whom she had just wedded so romantically.

Five, ten, another twenty minutes passed, still he did not return from the depot whence he had gone to purchase the railway tickets. Orella grew frightened at remaining so long at the fork of the roads, and after what had happened she dare not return to her aunt Abigail, whom she felt would shut the door in her face.

As she strained her eyes in the direction of the depot, she saw two dark figures approaching. As both forms appeared to be short and stout, she knew that neither of them could be that of Bernard Yorke. Orella drew back behind the friendly shelter of a wide spreading bush, which she knew would entirely screen her from view until they should pass.

They were talking earnestly and excitedly, and quite by chance stopped to light a cigar directly in front of the bush which screened her.



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the hasty marriage, and the elopement, which came to such a sudden and fatal ending with the terrible accident that had happened to Bernard Yorke, which would leave him the most pitiful of cripples for life, providing he lived through the amputation.

With a bitter cry, she pressed her hands over her eyes to shut out the picture. The agony of each moment seemed endless. What should she do? Ah, if she only knew what to do! Like a wounded bird which flutters back to its own nest to die, the girl turned her footsteps toward Beech Grove Cottage.

She had not gone far on the high road when she met her aunt.

"Is this indeed you?" cried Miss Forrester; and to Orella's great surprise, she did not scold her or inquire minutely as to where she had been and what had detained her. "I have been looking everywhere for you," went on her aunt, excitedly. "I have such wonderful news so much to talk to you about. Come to the house quickly."

Orella's heart sunk within her. Had Miss Forrester heard all? She never afterward remembered how she reached the cottage. She marvelled much at Miss Forrester's exuberance. She never remembered to have seen her in such high spirits before.

She tried to tell her what she had done—that she had just wedded, and her young husband had met with a terrible accident which would result in his losing both his limbs—that if his life was spared, but the words froze on her lips, leaving her speechless, stunned with fright. She had seen Miss Forrester's anger aroused on one or two occasions, and it was so mighty, so tempestuous, so overwhelming, she never wanted to see another exhibition of it.

"Sit right down here on the porch!" cried Miss Forrester, excitedly. "I can not wait until I get into the house to disclose to you the wonderful news."

Orella did as she was bidden; but Miss Forrester did not notice that she fairly groped her way to the nearest chair, and sunk into it like one half fainting.

"You have always been aware that yours was no ordinary existence," pursued Miss Forrester, with much animation. "I have taken great pains to instill that into your mind from your earliest infancy. I have talked to you, read to you day by day, of noble ladies. I have coached you continuously regarding their mode of life. As to your own life, you have known but little. I have studiously declined to discuss it with you. You simply knew that you were my niece, and that we received remittances of money twice a year and on this we lived comfortably. I went to the post-office to receive the semi-annual allowance this afternoon. It contained, beside the remittance, a letter. The hour has now come in which I am compelled to disclose to you the wonderful story of your parentage, which is surely stranger than any tale of fiction that was ever told. Are you listening closely to me, Orella?"

The girl's lips moved, but no sound issued from them. Miss Forrester did not wait for her answer, but continued.

"I am not your aunt, as you have been led all these years to believe. You were placed in my charge when but a few hours old, the circumstances which led to it being most peculiar. In order that you may fully grasp the peculiar situation, I must begin with a narrative which it is of importance to first relate, as it has much to do with the story of your birth. In a beautiful garden spot in England—I shall not mention the name of the place—there lived a few years ago a noble lord, one of the most famous and proud in England—Lord Rupert Overton—and his only son and heir, handsome Karl.

"Next to the old lord's pride came his love for his only son. I sternly advised, for the stern old lord's intense pride was well known. His one great desire was to see his son married; but after careful observation of all the noble young ladies in England, he came to the conclusion that there was not one of them good enough for his heir. A princess of the royal blood it must be, or no one, he decided at length. It was then that the lord saw the beautiful Princess Beatrice Eversleigh, and he said to himself, 'I have found, at last, the young lady whom I wish my son to wed.' Then and there the trouble began. He soon found out that, though handsome, laughing Karl had always been so tractable in his hands before, when it came to marrying the young man had a decided will of his own, and to add to his horror, he discovered that Karl was not even heart whole and fancy free. He loved a poor girl, the daughter of a carpenter, and had already asked her to be his bride. There was a terrible scene. The old earl declared that the baronet's daughter should never set foot in his palatial castle, which had been the ancestral home of lords of noble birth for generations back. He would lay it in ruins first. Nor should handsome Karl inherit one farthing of his vast wealth.

"This threat did not influence young Karl. 'I can live without your wealth, father,' he answered. 'I would rather have sweet Celly than all the wealth of the universe.' (To be continued)

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