

* A TANGLED WEB. *

(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER XXXV.

"Audrey—Miss Hope—you here!" exclaimed Lorrmore, his dark face flashing, his eyes lighting up with sudden joy and gladness.

Sylvia looked from one to the other, but not a glimmering of the truth dawned on her.

"Yes, no wonder you are surprised. Audrey—Miss Hope—is an old friend of yours, Lord Lorrmore, so she is of mine; aren't you, Audrey?" she smiled at her.

But Audrey seemed unable to speak for a moment or two, and she gave her hand in silence to Lorrmore, whose heart rose at her embarrassment. It was the first time she had ever shown any emotion at the sight of him, and it made him hopeful.

He sat down on the couch between the two, and Sylvia at once proceeded to ply him with questions.

"Why did you not write and tell me you were coming?" she asked chidingly, "and why have you been away so long?"

"I didn't write because I didn't know until yesterday that I was coming to England so soon," he said, scarcely knowing what he said, all his thoughts scattered by the fact that the woman he loved was sitting within reach of his hand.

He stole a glance at her, and his faithful heart throbbed with love and admiration. She was more beautiful than ever, he thought; he longed to hear her speak that he might once more hear in reality the voice he had heard so often in his dreams. He had not seen her for more than three years, and yet as she sat there arrayed in all her splendor, with her lovely face downcast, the long lashes sweeping her cheeks, it seemed to him that it was but yesterday that he had stood beside her on Stoneleigh Burrows and started on the quest for Neville Lynne.

"I hope Lady Marlow is quite well, he said.

Audrey found her voice at last. "Yes, thank you," she said, and without raising her eyes; but the voice thrilled through him as of old, and he turned his eyes with a dazed, far-away look in them, to Sylvia.

Audrey took advantage of his averted gaze to steal a glance at him. He was fanned by travel in all weathers and climates, but he looked as handsome as ever and not a day older. A slight smile between her lips and her head dropped. She knew that he loved her still. A woman knows whether a man's heart is still hers after a long absence the first moment she sees him on his return. A look is enough. What had she not lost—thrown away!

Sylvia, meanwhile, had been chatting more brightly than Lorrmore had ever before heard her.

"You seem in excellent spirits, Sylvia," he said, with a smile. "And no wonder. I have read of your triumphs, and am given to understand that all London is at your feet. I quite expected to find you the personification of vanity, and I hope you won't disappoint me."

"I won't," said Sylvia, laughing. "I am almost too vain to live. Yes, I have been very fortunate, and they all praise me far too much. But this is my greatest piece of good fortune; and she leaned in front of him and laid her hand on Audrey's arm.

Lorrmore looked questioning from one to the other.

"I've found the best and dearest friend a woman ever had," Sylvia went on. "We are like two sisters, only more so; aren't we, Audrey?"

Audrey smiled and pressed her hand. "I suppose you are surprised and startled to see such warm friendship between the aristocratic Miss Hope and a poor opera-singer, my lord?" and she looked up at his dark face with a mischievous mock gravity.

Lorrmore smiled. "I am rather surprised. I know how proud you are," he said; "but I am very glad. How did you come to know each other?"

"It's too long a story to tell," said Sylvia. "Suffice it for the present that we recognized an electric bond of sympathy between us—that we came together by mutual attraction, and here we are. And now, if you will promise not to be too elated, we will tell you how glad we are to see you, and express a hope that you have abandoned the rôle of the Wandering Jew forever."

Audrey's and Lorrmore's faces flushed, but Audrey's grew pale again.

"You are looking absurdly well," Sylvia ran on, "but you are always well, aren't you? And now you must tell us your adventures. Never mind Miss Hope, she need not listen unless she likes."

Lorrmore stole a glance at the downcast face.

"There's much to tell," he said hesitatingly, as he wondered what Sylvia would say if she knew how closely Audrey was connected with his "adventures." "I have just come back from Switzerland."

The servant knocked at the door and entered.

"Miss Mercy's love, madame, and it is time to dress."

Sylvia nodded and smiled.

"You see, Mercy is still my guardian angel," she said. "She watches over me almost every hour of the day. I am sorry she is not here to see you, she is not very well, and I have made her rest; she will be so glad to hear you have come. I must run away and put my cloak on. You will come to the opera tonight, Lord Lorrmore?"

He looked down at his suit of gray tweed.

"Oh, you can go into the pit, as you are not dressed," she said, as she ran to the door.

Audrey rose with her. "I—I will come with you," she said, "and help you dress, Sylvia."

Lorrmore's face fell and he put out his hand imploringly.

"One moment, and—Miss Hope," he said, with repressed agitation.

"Oh, pray stop and keep him amused for a few minutes or he will up and go to the other end of the world perhaps before I get down again," exclaimed Sylvia, laughing.

Audrey sunk back into her seat and Lorrmore rose and took a turn up and down the room, as if to steady himself; then he came and sat beside her again.

"Audrey," he said, and his voice trembled, "though I came back to see you and only you, this meeting is so sudden and unexpected that I can scarcely believe it is really you sitting so near me. I am afraid that I have startled you, that—Audrey, you—you are not sorry to see me!"

He broke off, for her face had grown paler and her manner more constrained, as if she disliked being alone with him, he thought.

"I am very glad to see you, Lord Lorrmore," she said; but there was no gladness in her voice, he noticed, and his heart fell.

"I am afraid that you will not be very glad when I tell you that I have come back unsuccessful and without any good news of any kind for you," he said, as regretfully and humbly as if it were his fault that he had not brought Neville Lynne home in his pocket.

"I have not found your lost friend; I have not even been able to hear of him. They say that the world is a very small place. I think there is scarcely a likely place that I have left unexplored; but he seems to have disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed him up."

"It is very strange," said Audrey in a low voice, but almost coldly.

Lorrmore was rather astonished at her apathy. The least a man who has been scouring the habitable globe for nearly three years to please a lady has a right to expect is that the lady should display some interest in the result of his wearisome mission; but Audrey did not appear to feel anything of the kind.

Lorrmore, if he had not been so passionately in love with her, might have felt hurt at the absence of even thanks; but whatever Audrey said or did, or thought, seemed just right and perfect in his eyes, and he went on:

"I dare say you wondered that I didn't write to you?"

Audrey's lips quivered, but no sound came.

"Heaven knows I wanted to write to you often enough, but I thought that you might think that I was bidding for your sympathy, and—and so I kept silent. You see, I hoped to bring your friend back to you, but I haven't, and—and, Audrey, I haven't any right to go on—no right to tell you of what lies so near my heart."

She did not forbid him to continue, and, of course, he went on:

"When I started, Audrey, you said—no, you didn't say a word—but I thought, I hoped that if I were successful you might perhaps feel that I had done my poor best to prove my love for you; not that it wanted any proving, for I think, Audrey, that you have always known that I have loved you, and that you might—I mean—"

He broke down, stammering like a school-boy, and leaning forward, took her hand and held it though it struggled feebly in his grasp.

He stopped abruptly, for something in Audrey's face told him, swiftly as the lightning flash, that there was some one else.

He stood looking at her, his eyes fixed upon her, as if he feared to put the question that must still be put.

"There is some one, isn't there, Audrey?" he said in a low voice.

She did not answer, at least in words; but her head sunk low and her face grew hot as if with shame.

"Who is it?" he asked in a voice he tried to keep steady.

Audrey tried to lift her eyes to his, but it was as if a heavy weight hung on her eyelids.

"I am engaged to Jordan Lynne," came in a whisper at last.

Lorrmore started, and a terrible change came over his face. His Spanish blood—what little there was of it—would have fired if she had mentioned any other name, and his heart would have winced; but the name of Jordan Lynne set his blood on fire.

That man to be her husband! The beautiful, pure-hearted Audrey! The wife of Jordan Lynne—the woman whom so many good men and true loved, perhaps almost as well as he, Lorrmore, loved her! The thought almost drove him mad.

He knew—felt—that the man was a villain, just as Neville and Percy Hale and Lord Chesterdown felt it. And this smooth, subtle Sir Jordan was to wed his Audrey! He could not speak; his handsome face grew black, his eyes glowered down upon her as she sunk from his forehead, and his tall form seemed to dilate and tower over her like that of some indignant and outraged god.

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He broke down, stammering like a school-boy, and leaning forward, took her hand and held it though it struggled feebly in his grasp.

"Audrey, is there any hope for me? I don't want to trade on this search business; it was nothing, after all, except the being parted from you so long."

At this piece of masculine simplicity the tears began to gather in Audrey's eyes. "I don't want to take advantage of it in any way. I'd go through it all again to please you, even if you told me that there was no hope for me—for I love you, Audrey, ten thousand times better than ever, it that were possible. You see, I have spent the last three years thinking of you. In frost or heat, in city or wilderness, your dear presence has seemed to be with me. Sometimes I have dreamed—and when I did not dream of you?—that you were actually near me, and hear your voice—actually heard it was only a dream, then I felt bad and wanted to come posting home."

A tear rolled down Audrey's cheek and fell upon her tightly clasped hands; but she did not speak, though she knew that by the song of the curlew on some moonlit river, so sweet to a woman's ear as the voice of the man she loves pleading for that love, and Audrey could not bid it cease.

"Sometimes," he went on, "I have tortured myself by thinking that you had forgotten me, that some other and better man had won your love, and that I should come back and find you were his wife. My heart leaped when I heard Sylvia call you by the name I have whispered to myself in the silent night, and I knew that you still were Audrey Hope, and that I was still free to love you."

A tremor seized Audrey, and she tried to stop him; but she could not speak.

"It was Sylvia who told me that I ought to come back and try for the heart of the woman I loved, little thinking that it was you of whom she was speaking. Did I do right, Audrey? Is there any hope for me, or ought I to have stayed away and ceased to trouble you?"

Her hands untwined convulsively, and he seized the opportunity to take the one nearest to him again. It was burning hot.

"Tell me, Audrey," he said in a low voice; "whatever the verdict is, I will try and bear it. If—what I want can not be, I will go away and trouble you no more. Audrey, will you be my wife?"

She turned her face from him that he might not see the awful longing in it—the longing to throw her arms round his neck, to hide herself in his strong arms and give him love for love. Perhaps, with a lover's intuition, he read her heart, for he put out his arms toward her; and "No, no!" broke from her trembling lips.

Lorrmore's arms fell to his side and his face paled.

"It is 'No' he said, almost inaudibly. "That is your answer, Audrey?"

His head drooped, and he put his hand up to stroke his mustache to hide the tremor of his lips.

"Well, I must bear it! I—I am sorry that I have troubled you, Audrey. I might have guessed why you shrunk from me when I came in just now."

"No, no!" she said.

He shook his head sadly.

"Yes, you did. I saw it, but—Well, I went on hoping. It is hard for a man to give up the hope that he has been nursing for years—the hope that he has been nursing him going when everything seemed against him."

He was silent for a moment, gnawing his mustache, then he glanced at her and saw the tears rolling down her face—the face he had loved to picture to himself as bright and happy—and his heart smote him. He called himself a brute, to worry this radiant beautiful creature who was born to wear a smile, and go through the world as sorrowless as some tropical bird.

"Don't cry, Audrey," he said, gently. "It does not matter. I—I shall get over it. Battered fellows like I have had to bear this kind of thing, and I am not going to make you miserable by my eyes about you with a handkerchief to my eyes."

I will accept my dismissal at last. I—I think I will take myself off now. Tell Sylvia I have got to hear how you and she became such friends. By the way, tell her I will come and hear her sing some other night, and—and good-bye, Audrey. I hope you will be happy whoever you marry."

He stopped abruptly, for something in Audrey's face told him, swiftly as the lightning flash, that there was some one else.

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She did not answer, at least in words; but her head sunk low and her face grew hot as if with shame.

"Who is it?" he asked in a voice he tried to keep steady.

"Jordan Lynne!" he said, "Jordan Lynne! It is not possible!"

He waited as if he expected her to tell him that he had mistaken her, then he drew a long breath and looked round for his hat, caught it up and, all unconsciously crushed it in his hands.

"I take that back. I can't wish you happiness. It would be useless. Jordan Lynne! You are going to marry him!" and dashed from the room.

Sylvia was just coming in, and he ran against her and sent her slight form spinning against the wall. Then, as she leaned there laughing, he seized her by the arm, and, instead of apologizing, cried in a low but terrible voice:

"Good-bye, Sylvia; I'm going."

"Going where?" gasped Sylvia, thinking he had taken leave of his senses, and not knowing whether to laugh or to be frightened at his darkly furious face.

"Where?" he said. "To the devil! Good-bye. For God's sake, save her if you can!" and, wringing Sylvia's hand, he dashed down the stairs.

Sylvia stood staring after him for a moment, then she went into the room and found Audrey lying on the couch with her face buried in the cushions.

"Oh, what has happened?" she exclaimed. "What have you said or done to him? I never saw him like that before."

"I've only bro—broken his heart!" wailed Audrey.

"Only?" said Sylvia. "How have you done that?"

"Oh, can't you guess? It was for me that Lord Lorrmore has been wandering all over the earth."

"I thought it was for a man called Neville Lynne," said Sylvia, without any intention of being witty.

She was a little confused and bewildered.

"So it was," said Audrey; "but it was I who sent him."

"Oh!" exclaimed Sylvia, flushing as she recalled all the hard things she had spoken of the unknown lady whom Lord Lorrmore loved, little thinking that she was Audrey. "Oh, dear! oh, dear! then it was you? I—I'm sorry I said what I did the other day."

"You need not be. I deserved it all, and more," said Audrey, with a sob. "It was cruel and heartless, but I did it all in a moment, and almost without meaning it, and before I could stop him or take it back he had gone. Men are so—so quick and sudden, especially this one."

"Yes," said Sylvia in a low voice, "and it is well for us women sometimes that they are," and she thought of the way in which Lord Lorrmore had saved her from Lavarick.

"But why are you so unhappy dear? Is it because he has not found Neville Lynne?"

Audrey shook her head without raising it from the cushion.

"No, it is not that. I don't care what has become of him now. I don't mean that."

"After all," he said to himself, with a sigh, "I have seen the old place. It's very unlikely that once I've left it again I shall ever see it more. Why should I stay and make myself known to—Jordan and Audrey?"

I should only become an object of charity and pity. No, I'll be off! There must be work somewhere or other for a man with strong arms and a will to use them."

It was on Friday evening when he communed with himself after this fashion, and he was sauntering along the lane which led past the Grange to the Burrows. He stopped and looked through the gate at the corner of the house, which he could just see, and thought of Audrey and then of Sylvia.

There were two women for whom he would cheerfully have laid down his life, especially now when it seemed of very little use to him, and he should in all probability never see them again.

"Dear little Sylvia," he murmured. I wonder where she is, and if she is happy? I wonder, too, if she has quite forgotten me? They say that if you love a person ever so much you forget them when they're dead. I hope she hasn't quite forgotten me. I should like her to give a thought now and then to the old days at Lorn Hope. How happy we were out there in the wilds with old Meth and the 'claim,' and how pretty she used to look with that wonderful hair of hers getting into her eyes as she sung like a nightingale while I worked. Yes, we were very happy. I didn't know how I loved her then, not till we parted never to meet again."

"Something rose in his throat, and a mist gathered before his eyes as he went on:

"Perhaps we shall meet again; who knows? She'll be among her titled friends and—and will never guess that the seedy individual, who'll be sure to sink out of her way, is her old friend Jack, her 'brother,' with whom she was so happy long, long ago! All the better if she doesn't. I'm a failure—a right down failure and it's only proper that I should make myself scarce. One more night, and then goodbye to Lynne. I'll work my way back to Australia, and have another try at it, though God knows I haven't the heart or the desire for the gold now. All the heart died out of me when I lost Syl!"