

## \* A TANGLED WEB. \*

(CONTINUED.)

There was the usual excitement behind the scenes when a great and extraordinary success has been scored, and Sylvia stood the center of a congratulatory crowd, and received all the kind speeches with her sweet, modest smile. She held the bouquet Audrey had dropped to her, and she sat in her dressing-room, while Mercy changed her stage costume for the plain, unobtrusive attire of unprofessional life, with the bouquet still lying before her and her eyes fixed dreamily on it.

She was pale with the weariness which is the natural reaction of excitement, and Mercy attended to her in silence for a time, then she said:

"Well, dear, are you satisfied?"

Sylvia started as if her thoughts had been wandering far away from stage-land.

"It has been the greatest and most tremendous of successes," continued Mercy. "You see how little your presentiments are worth. Nothing has happened excepting a triumph."

Sylvia smiled vaguely.

"The night is not over yet," she said. "Are they not lovely, Mercy?" and she took up the flowers and held them to her face. "And did you see her give them to me? It was almost as if she knew how I admired her, how deeply she attracted me. I wish—oh, how I wish I knew her! But that can't be," and she sighed.

"There's a gulf between the lady who sits in the box and the one who walks upon the stage. Perhaps I shall never see her again. But I can keep her flowers, at least. See—all white and pure, just like herself."

Mercy smiled.

"You have fallen in love with her, dear," she said.

Sylvia looked up quickly.

"That is it," she exclaimed.

"It is the first bouquet I ever saw you touched by," said Mercy. "It is well that they came from a woman's hand, or I should feel anxious."

Sylvia drew a long breath.

"No flowers from any man will cause me to feel as these do," she said, gravely.

Mercy smiled.

"We will wait till the hour and the man come together, dear," she said, softly.

"Yes, we will wait," said Sylvia, calmly. "But they will never come," she added, as her thoughts flew back to Lora Hope Camp, where her heart lay buried with Jack. "But I am glad it has been a success," she said, a moment afterward, and more cheerfully. "Are we ready? Let us go, then, for I am fearfully and wonderfully tired. What was that you said about my presentiment? You are laughing at me, and I deserve it. But, never mind, perhaps we shall have an accident going home," and she laughed.

They made their way to the stage entrance, where the brougham was waiting. The manager and two or three of the principal actors were waiting to assist the great prima donna to her carriage, and they stood with uplifted hats as the brougham drove off.

The streets were still crowded, and before the carriage had passed the grand entrance it pulled up.

"There must have been a tremendous crush," said Mercy. "The people have not all gone yet."

Sylvia leaned forward to look out, but fell back again, with a cry of terror.

"Oh, look!" she exclaimed.

Mercy, whose heart had leaped into her mouth at the wail of fear, looked out; but the brougham had moved on, and was going along rapidly.

"What is it? What did you see?" she asked.

Sylvia was lying back, with her hand pressed against her heart, her breath coming painfully, her face white with terror.

"Didn't you see?" she panted at last.

"No, I saw nothing," replied Mercy.

"Tell me what it was, dear. Come, Sylvia, this is unlike you. Be calm, dear."

"Yes, yes!" she breathed. "Don't be frightened. You did not see him?"

"See him? I saw no one I know. There was a crowd. Who was it, Sylvia?"

A shudder shook her.

"Lavarick!" she whispered.

Mercy started with surprise.

"Oh, no dear!" she said, soothingly. "That man is not in London. It is impossible! It was your fancy."

Sylvia drew her cloak round her, as if she had suddenly grown cold, and was silent for a moment or two, then she raised her eyes to Mercy's face with the calmness of conviction.

"The something happened, you see!" she said in a dull voice. "Mercy, it was Lavarick!"

### CHAPTER XXVIII.

Mercy would not leave Sylvia that night, but slept beside her, holding the girl in a loving embrace, and trying to soothe and reassure her. At times Sylvia shook and trembled, and at others she cried quietly; for the night of Lavarick had not only terrified her, but recalled Jack's death, so that she was tortured by fear and sorrow at the same time.

"My dear, dear child!" Mercy whispered lovingly, "even supposing you were not mistaken, and I think you must have been—"

"No, no," said Sylvia, with a shudder. "I was not mistaken; I remember him too well. You have never seen him, or you would understand how impossible it would be to be mistaken. It was Lavarick!"

"Well, dear, granting you were right, and that it was he, why should you be so terrified? We are not in the wilds of Aus-

tralia now, but in London, surrounded by friends and police. Why, one has only to raise one's voice to collect a crowd. Lavarick can not harm you now."

"I know—I know," said Sylvia. "And yet the very thought of him fills me with terror and foreboding. I know that he hates me, why, I cannot even guess. It was because of me that he—he hated Jack and caused his death. Oh, my dear, dear Jack! It has all come back to me to-night, Mercy, and I can see Jack as he fell forward—"

A burst of sobs stopped her utterance.

Mercy pressed her close to her heart.

"My poor, poor child! What shall I do, what can I say to comfort you? Shall I speak to any one in the morning, go to the police and tell them to watch him?"

"No, no," replied Sylvia. "Do not interfere with him. Perhaps he did not see me, and yet I felt his evil eye glaring at mine as I looked out. No, let him alone, Mercy. He—may not have seen me, and—perhaps he will go away, leave London. What is he doing here? Something bad and evil, I am sure."

"Such a man is not likely to stay in any one place for long," said Mercy. "He is an outcast, and a vagabond, and they always wander and roam about restlessly. Tomorrow or the next day he may be off to the other end of the world. Yes, I think with you that it is best to leave him alone. He concluded, as she reflected that with every desire to punish Lavarick it would be very difficult to do so, and impossible, indeed, without bringing up that past, the very memory of which tortured poor Sylvia."

Lavarick was unlikely to have become a reformed character, and would most certainly commit some crime which would bring him into the hands of the police without any action on Sylvia's part.

It was fortunate that the next day was an "off" one for Signora Stella, for Sylvia was so unnerved that she seemed quite incapable of singing, and lay on the couch with her eyes closed; but Mercy knew by the restless movement of her hands that she was dwelling on the past.

In the course of the morning the manager sent to inquire, and to inform the signora, that every seat in the house was booked for the following night. There also arrived several letters from "gentlemen," containing pressing invitations to "a little dinner" at the Star and Garter, and similar places. These Mercy, who conducted all Sylvia's correspondence, placed behind the fire. There was also a visit from an enterprising photographer, who was anxious that Signora Stella should have her portrait taken in various attitudes, and share with him the profits of the sale; and he appeared both amazed and disappointed when Mercy informed him that the signora did not intend having her photograph taken.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "But they all do it—not only the actresses, but the first ladies in the land. It's the rule, my dear madame."

"Then the signora will prove a remarkable exception," retorted Mercy, with her slow, sad smile.

The next day Sylvia was better, but she still looked pale and thoughtful, and it was not until the moment came for her to go on the stage that the artist triumphed over the woman, and she shook off the sense of dread that oppressed her, and recovered her spirit and self-possession.

She received a tremendous reception, notwithstanding which she was conscious of a vague sense of disappointment, for she had glanced round the boxes and had seen that the beautiful girl whose face had so affected her on the first night was not present.

"She's not here to-night," she said to Mercy.

"She? Who, dear?"

"That lovely girl I fell in love with," she said. "I wish she were here; but I suppose it is too much to expect her to come every night I sing."

"It does seem a little too much, certainly," assented Mercy.

"What an impressionable girl you are, Sylvia!"

"I know; but it is true that I feel as if I should not play half so well tonight, because she is absent."

However, at the end of the second act she came off radiant.

"She's here, Mercy!" she exclaimed. "I saw her come in, and I felt as glad as if she were my sister, and I am sure I sung better from that moment. She looks sadder tonight," she added, thoughtfully, "and that makes her lovelier in my eyes. Audrey Hope—what a sweet name it is!—just like herself. How good of her to come again so soon!"

"My dear child, there are dozen of men and women who have come again," said Mercy.

"I dare say; but this is the only one I care about," remarked Sylvia.

Audrey had had some little trouble in persuading Lady Marlow to come to the opera that night; and her ladyship was rather surprised at Audrey's persistence.

"My dear, there is Lady Crownbrilliant's ball and the Parkes' reception," she remonstrated, "and Jordan said that he would escort us there, you know," she added, as if that were of supreme importance now.

But Audrey had clung to her intention of going to the opera.

"Jordan can come there just as well as to the Parkes," she said, coolly, and without the blush with which a newly engaged girl usually mentions her betrothed's name.

Lady Marlow gave in, as a matter of course, and Audrey sat in rapt attention while Sylvia was on the stage,

but seemed lost in dream-land when she was off.

At the finish of the opera she leaned forward, as she had done on the first night, and though she did not drop her bouquet, her eyes met Sylvia's with an intent regard which Sylvia noticed and returned.

Mercy observed that after she had put on Sylvia's out-door dress Sylvia drew a thick veil over her face; but Mercy said nothing, though she knew why the veil was worn.

They went to the stage door, but their brougham was not there. There was more than the usual crush of carriages in consequence of the authorities having blocked one of the adjacent roads for repairs, and Sylvia and Mercy were about to return to the narrow hall of the stage entrance when a crowd of foot-passengers swept them away from the door.

Sylvia caught Mercy's arm and tried to stem the tide or draw aside, but they were borne on by the stream, and Sylvia found herself near to and almost touching a carriage which had been brought to a standstill opposite them.

She uttered a little cry half laughingly, and Mercy, as she held her tightly, said:

"You caused the crush, so we mustn't complain. Take care of the wheel."

At the same moment a hand was stretched out through the carriage window and touched Sylvia. She shrank with a feeling of alarm, though the hand had been as soft as a feather, and, turning her head, saw Audrey Hope's eyes bent on her.

"Are you hurt?" asked Audrey, anxiously in her sweet, frank voice.

Acting on the impulse of the moment, Sylvia raised her veil and smiled a reassuring negative.

Audrey started and changed color, then an eager light came into her eyes.

"Signora Stella!" she said, quickly.

Sylvia smiled again.

"Do not be alarmed on my account," she said. "I am not hurt; I have lost my carriage."

Audrey glanced at Lady Marlow, who had looked on in astonishment, and was wondering what Audrey was going to do. She had not to wonder long, for Audrey opened the carriage door.

"Come in here, please," she said in her prompt, frank fashion. "Please come in; you must be hurt."

Sylvia hesitated, the color mounting to her face; but Audrey took her hand, and almost before they knew it, Sylvia and Mercy were inside.

Lady Marlow recovered herself by an effort.

"How fortunate we were near, Signora," she said in her pleasant way. "Are you sure you are not hurt?"

"Not in the least," said Sylvia. "But—but it is very kind of you to take compassion on us, and I'm afraid we are crowding you."

"No, no, said Audrey: 'the carriage is a large one; there is plenty of room.' Then blushing, as it had suddenly occurred to her that the great singer would think this carrying her off bodily a strange proceeding, she said: 'You are not offended? I mean at my snatching you up like this, Signora?'"

"No," said Sylvia, softly, and with a smile; "it is just what I should have expected Miss Hope to do if she saw a fellow-creature in difficulty."

"You know my name?" said Audrey, quickly.

Sylvia nodded.

"Yes; I asked it the night before last."

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Audrey's closed on it and pressed it, and the two girls looked into each other's eyes in a long silence.

Meanwhile, Lady Marlow had been speaking to Mercy.

"Your friend, the signora, is very young to be so famous," she said, not with the intolerable air of condescension which some, alas! most great ladies think it proper and fitting to assume when they address their inferiors of the artistic world, but with kindly interest.

"She is very young," said Mercy.

"And very beautiful," added Lady Marlow, under her breath, looking at Sylvia's face in the light of the street-lamps.

"Yes," said Mercy, calmly; "and as good and lovable as she is beautiful."

"I am sure of that," assented Lady Marlow. "My ward, Miss Hope, is quite fascinated by her; but I suppose that is common enough," and she smiled. "Are you her sister?" and she looked curiously at Mercy's face, with its air of resignation and subdued sadness.

"No," replied Mercy; "only her companion, and friend, I hope." Lady Marlow nodded.

"I see that you are very devoted to her," she said.

"No one could know her without loving her," said Mercy, her voice thrilling.

Lady Marlow looked across at Sylvia with increased interest. The two girls were talking eagerly, in low tones.

"My ward and the signora have struck up an acquaintance already," she said.

The carriage had gone on by this time, and its movement recalled Sylvia to the situation.

"Where are we going?" she said with a smile.

"To your home, if you tell me where that is," replied Audrey, promptly.

"We are living at No 29 Bury Street," said Sylvia, as promptly; "but I can not let you go out of your way—"

"As it happens, it is in our way," said Audrey. "We live in Grosvenor Square."

Sylvia's direction to the footman. Then she said in a low voice: "Will you—will you think I am taking advantage if I ask you to let me come and see you, Signora?"

"Will you?" said Sylvia, eagerly.

"When will you come? Tomorrow?"

"Yes," said Audrey. "I will come tomorrow at twelve o'clock. You are sure you don't mind? I know that famous persons have so many friends—"

Sylvia interrupted her with a soft laugh.

"Then I am not famous," she said.

"Besides this one," and she touched Mercy and smiled at her, "who is a very dear one, I have only one or two others in the world."

Audrey thought of Lord Lorrimore, and a pang shot through her heart. She had almost forgotten him in the excitement of the strangely brought about meeting with the girl she loved.

"As the carriage drew up at No. 29 Bury Street, and her hand nestled warmly in Sylvia's in parting."

"Well!" exclaimed Lady Marlow, laughingly. "For eccentricity commend me to the future Lady Lynne."

Audrey started, and the smile which had lingered on her face fled at this reminder.

"I wonder, by the way, what Jordan will say when he hears that we have made the acquaintance of the famous Signora Stella?"

"I didn't think of that," and she looked rather grave.

"Don't think of it now," said Audrey, coldly. "What does it matter—I mean what should he care? How beautiful she is, and how sweet! I like her better off the stage than on; I quite forgot while I talked to her that she was an opera-singer."

"So did I—almost," said Lady Marlow. "But I'm afraid we must not allow ourselves to forget it. I have no doubt the signora is an excellent young lady, and everything that is nice and—and—"

still, we are not likely to meet again."

"I am going to call on her to-morrow," said Audrey, quietly, and in that peculiar tone which Lord Marlow called her obstinate one.

Lady Marlow sunk back with a little groan of resignation.

"I wash my hands of you now, my dear," she said, "and leave you to Jordan."

They found Jordan waiting for them when they reached home.

He looked flushed and almost juvenile as he came forward to meet them; but Audrey gave him her hand so coldly that he did not dare draw her toward him and kiss her, as he had intended doing. Not yet had he gone further than toppling her hand with his lips. But he schooled himself to patience; they had only been betrothed a day, he told himself, and he could wait.

"Whom do you think we met tonight, Jordan?" said Lady Marlow; and half fearfully, she told him of the rescue of Signora Stella.

His thick eyelids drooped over his eyes and concealed any surprise or other emotion he may have felt.

"Indeed!" he said, with a smile, "and you are going to call on her to-morrow? How romantic! I wish I could come with you."

Audrey's face fell, and she looked down.

"But I am obliged to go down to Lynne to-morrow on business."

Audrey's face cleared. "I shall not be away for more than one night," he added, tenderly; and in a lower voice he whispered: "Ah, if I could feel that you would miss me one tenth as much as I shall miss you, dearest!"

But though he had taken the news of Audrey's meeting with Signora Stella with seeming indifference, he was disturbed by it, and his face grew anxious and brooding as he walked home.

"If there is no truth in the rumor of this girl's engagement to Lorrimore, Audrey will learn it tomorrow, and then—"

But she can not draw back now; it is too late. Yes, I will go down to Lynne and begin the preparations for its new mistress. The marriage must take place soon—there must be no delay."

### CHAPTER XXIX.

Sylvia talked of nothing else that night but Audrey Hope. She even forgot Lavarick, and she was too absorbed in her subject to notice that Mercy listened almost in silence, and that when she did make some response it was uttered in a tone even more subdued than usual.

"I wonder whether she will come?" said Sylvia, with a little sigh. "Perhaps but people will not let her. They may think that it would not be proper for her to be intimate with an actress, and yet I should not do her any harm. Do you think I should, Mercy?" and she laughed and sighed.

"No, I don't think so," replied Mercy, with a forced smile. "Yes, she will come. Audrey Hope has had her own way too long to be balked of a desire now."

"Why, how do you know?" demanded Sylvia, with surprise.

A faint color rose into Mercy's face.

"She looks as if she were accustomed to having her own way and doing as she likes," she said, hesitatingly. "It was she who opened the carriage door and took us in last night."

"Yes. And I shall always love her for that!" exclaimed Sylvia.

Mercy was right. With a punctuality unusual, Audrey appeared at 29 Bury Street at twelve o'clock.

There was no one in the room into which she was shown, and she looked round with interest and natural curiosity. It was the first time she had been in the apartment of an actress, and, remembering the descriptions of such apartments which abound in novels, she was surprised at the plainness and neatness of the famous signora's room.

There were plenty of books and papers about, but they were as neatly arranged as the music which stood in a big pile near the piano, and there was nothing whatever of a "fast" character to be seen—no empty champagne bottles, or packs of cards, or *billets-doux*. It was indeed just like the room of an ordinary well-bred lady.

Presently the door opened and a slim, girlish figure, dressed in black marino, came forward with extended hand. Audrey started, for in the plainly made but exquisitely fitting black dress the famous singer looked younger and more girlish than in the fur-lined opera-cloak which had enveloped her on the preceding night.

"The two girls were a little shy for a moment or two; then as if she were determined that there should be no barrier between them, Audrey began to ask Sylvia questions about her profession."

"You seem—you are so young," she said, with her irresistible smile, "that it is difficult to realize that you are really the lady who bewitches us all so completely."

"Yes, isn't it a pity that I am not older?" said Sylvia, naively. "But I'm getting better of that fault every day."

Audrey laughed.