

## At the Eleventh Hour!

CHAPTER XXIII.

Love's Revolt.

'Miss Sims, too; and just out of a sick-bed, aren't you? Come, let me find you some wine and refreshments!' exclaimed Mrs. Dare, hospitably spitting the old woman away with her, and leaving her daughter to make the explanation about Lynette that she knew must be forthcoming.

Edgar looked tenderly at his beautiful sweetheart, until she dropped her eyes with a very becoming blush, and he blurted out:

'My sister—is she with you? His heart sank with fear as Myrtle answered promptly:

'Lynette is not here.'

'Not here—heavens!' and he was springing from his seat in dismay, when Myrtle gently pushed him back.

'Wait!' she said, reassuringly, and added, with a roguish smile: 'Your sister is safe and mamma and I have just returned from her wedding.'

'Her wedding? Impossible! I have just come from Blooming Meadows, and Lynette had run away!'

The young man began, in astonishment, and again Myrtle returned, with a confident smile:

'I know all that, Edgar. She ran away from Graham Prentiss, but she was married at seven o'clock to another man.'

'You are jesting, Myrtle!' the young man cried out in painful anxiety.

'I am not jesting, Edgar. Do you not see how fine I am?' smiling down at her dark silken gown, relieved by rich white lace. I wore this gown to Lynette's wedding.'

'Whom did she marry, Myrtle?'

'Stephen Belcourt, and the ceremony was in the Lewisburg prison.'

All at once Myrtle realized that she was talking to a sick man, and that the shock of her announcement was very sudden.

Edgar gave one convulsive start, as if he had received a wound, and sunk back in his chair, his eyes closed, his face deathly pale, his hand pressed convulsively against his heart.

In wild alarm, Myrtle sprang to his side, placing her warm, throbbing hand on his cold, white brow.

'Edgar, Edgar, speak to me!' she sobbed entreatingly.

His dark eyes opened in a dazed way, and he murmured:

'Do not be frightened. I have been very ill, and still weak. I cannot stand a sudden shock.'

'I am so sorry. I—I was too hasty. Let me get something to revive you!' she exclaimed, withdrawing her hand; but suddenly he caught it in both his own, saying in a stronger tone:

'Do not leave me. I am better now. But what horrible things were you telling me, Myrtle? It cannot be true that Lynette was mad enough to consent, or any one wicked enough to sanction my poor little sister's marriage to a criminal in prison awaiting trial for murder!'

He looked at her entreatingly, as if hoping for her to deny her statement.

But Myrtle answered stoutly:

'Oh, Edgar, he will surely be vindicated, for he is not guilty, and at

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of Lynette's true friends admire her courage and constancy.

'Myrtle!' reproachfully.

'Now, Edgar Lewis, keep quiet, will you, while I go over the whole story of the case. Then you may have your say. But—my hand, please, I shall want it for dramatic gestures.'

And, gently releasing her hand from his clasp, not wishing to have the young man take too much for granted, Myrtle drew a chair close to his side, and recounted with moving eloquence the story of poor Lynette's trials and persecutions up to the moment of her flight from Blooming Meadows.

'You see how it was she cried; Lynette was desperate. She had lost the hope of your coming, and was in despair. At one moment she contemplated suicide. Then she prayed over it, and at last a wild temptation came to her to write to Stephen, tell him all, acknowledging that she loved him only, and accepting the offer of marriage he was making her that awful day when he was snatched from her side and cast into prison. Lastly she begged him to marry her on the same hour that was appointed for her wedding with Prentiss.'

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'And he was coward enough to let my poor sister link her future to his dishonored name!' cried Edgar, hotly interrupting.

'Hush, Edgar; you shall not blame him! You should be proud to call him brother. Yes, he accepted her sacrifice, as I suppose you consider it. He told me it was the darkest hour of his life just before he received her precious letter at midnight, and he felt like one translated from hell to heaven. Next morning he sent for his own people, and talked to them. They were glad to help him all they could, so—well, Lawyer Price got the license. I carried her Stephen's glad letter, and helped her to get away from Blooming Meadows I brought her here; then we all met at the jail—the Belcourts, Stephen's lawyer, mamma, and I—and the rector of the Episcopal church, Doctor Easter, tied the knot. The jailer and his wife were as kind as could be, letting the marriage come off in their pretty little parlor, and even decorating it with potted plants for the occasion.'

She stopped, and Edgar asked, with a groan:

'At Belcourt with his people, of course. They are all in love with her, you know; but poor little bride, was it not cruel to be parted from her noble husband on her wedding-night?'

'What a lot you think of that fellow!' exclaimed Edgar, half-angrily.

'He deserves it,' she answered, very seriously; and added: 'I may as well tell you, Edgar, though it must be kept secret yet, that Stephen's lawyers are in possession of some very incriminating evidence that almost places the rope about Graham

Prentiss' neck. Lloyd Llewelyn returned from Washington to-day, having traced out step by step that man's courtship and marriage to Madge McDonald. He was her husband, and when she followed him here, he put her out of the way; then, to remove a rival from his path, he bribed Jason Bell to charge Belcourt with the murder.'

'Can this be true?' cried Edgar, in amazement, and she answered confidently:

'It is true, though, based on such clear links of circumstantial evidence that we hope to prove the man Bell guilty of perjury.'

'Thank God, then, Lynette was saved from a marriage with that guilty wretch! And, Myrtle, how can I thank you for your devotion to her interests?'

'I need no thanks. It pleased me to watch over her, for Lynette has always been as dear to me as my own sister.'

But suddenly Myrtle blushed hotly, seeing that she had given Edgar an opening such as an ardent lover would seize on to push his suit.

'I—I—' she began incoherently, but Edgar caught her hand and leaned over her, whispering tremulously:

'You love Lynette as a sister, don't you? Then let me make her your real sister, darling! I love you! You have known that through patient years, haven't you, sweet? I always felt as if God made us for each other, but I was too proud to ask you until my future prospects were assured. Now all is sunshine, and—let me kiss you, Myrtle! Silence gives sweetest consent!'

Up at stately Belcourt, in the brilliantly lighted drawing room, sat our pretty bride, Lynette, surrounded by a group of admirers—mamma-in-law, sister-in-law, and brother-in-law.

Now that the past had been explained, and Lynette's fealty to Stephen so nobly demonstrated, they fairly worshipped the choice, and vied with one another in loving demonstrations.

'Ah, if Stephen could only be with us now!' sighed the gentle mother, her tender heart returning to her son in his lonely prison cell—lonely, yet not unhappy, for his heart was warm with love for his noble little bride.

Suddenly the door opened and the curtains of the butler, and announced:

'Miss Dare, Miss Sims, and Mr. Lewis!'

And all at once there was a scene—Lynette and Edgar in each other's arms.

'Darling little bride!' he murmured.

'Then, you do not blame me, Edgar?'

'No, darling, no; but I don't intend to remain single now that you are married, so Myrtle and I have agreed to make a match.'

'I never saw a man yet that could keep a secret!' pouted Myrtle; and this tacit admission was the signal for all the women to fall on her with congratulatory hugs and kisses.

'To think that you shall be my sweet sister! How charming!' cried Lynette; adding, less the others should be jealous: 'I always wished for a sister, and now I am rich I have three.'

And just at that moment the poor old maid came up to her favorite, saying in a gentle voice:

'Honey, I beg pardon for coming here in such a time to see you, but you know I promised you a pretty wedding-gift, dearie, so here it is.'

And she suddenly clasped round the girl's white throat, with her feeble hands, a pretty gold chain and locket.

Lynette checked up when she tried to thank the dear old woman, and just caught her in her arms, with a fervent hug and kiss.

Then they all crowded round to inspect the gift, exclaiming on its beauty.

'What beautiful carving! Why, it's your monogram, isn't it?' asked Lloyd Llewelyn, who came last.

He held it in his hand, studying out the intricate lettering, and suddenly his voice was raised, shrill with horror:

'M. McD! Oh, heavens!'



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And though his fingers trembled as with sudden ague, he touched the spring, and the locket opened, revealing a pictured face.

They all crowded around to look at it, Sally Ann exclaiming:

'Laws me! I never knew it had a picture inside the thing.'

But there within the golden lids, smiling out at them in all its dark, evil beauty, was the face of Graham Prentiss!

A triumphant cry ran from lip to lip:

'The lost locket!'

A hand grasped the old maid's shoulder, and Lloyd Llewelyn almost gasped:

'How came you by that thing?'

Not at all comprehending the prevalent excitement, Sally Ann explained calmly:

'Laws me! I found it, sir, an' I kept it, because there wa'n't no inquiry made fer it, an' I knowed 'twas no harm, fer Madge McDonald lost it at my cabin door the same day 'at she was shot—leastwise, I 'se shore 'twuz her'n, fer you kin see fer yourself a little thread of fine silk twisted in the clasp, just exactly like her blue silk belt an' collar.'

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