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## The Mystery of Rutledge Hall

### "The Cloud With a Silver Lining"

#### CHAPTER XXXI

"Sidney, what folly is this? Where do you go?" he cried. "What is the motive of this strange and, to me, unaccountable conduct?"

"I can give you none," she answered faintly, stopping short by the table and leaning heavily against it. "Let me go!"

"Nor do I," she replied. "But I am going away—going away from Easthope, and—"

"You can hardly suppose that I am going to let you leave your home thus," he said, forcing himself to speak calmly, because he saw that her excitement was terrible, and that it threatened momentarily to overcome her composure. "You are ill, unfit for travelling in any circumstances. It is impossible that you should continue your journey in these, Sidney," he added persuasively. "Don't you see the folly, the madness of it all? You tell me yourself that you do not know where you are going, and that you have admitted no one into your confidence. What your motive for such mysterious conduct is I cannot pretend to judge; but, since a fortunate chance has allowed me to meet you and to prevent the carrying out of your foolish pro-

ject would lay you open to? You could not leave your husband's roof without giving rise to scandal and misrepresentation of your motives."

"I do not care!" she exclaimed. "What does it matter?"

"It matters much," he said earnestly. "You are so young, Sidney, and you have all your life before you. Why should you seek to mar every chance of happiness which the future may have in store for you? I cannot let you carry out this foolish plan of yours, dear; but—"

His voice shook, and failed him for a moment; he had entered the waiting-room of hope and encouraged by his friend's cheerful anticipations, and the disappointment had been great and severe. Not only did the wife whom he loved so dearly not return his affection even a little, but she hated him so deeply that she was madly planning to leave his home forever. His own judgment had been wisest, after all; he had better carry out his intention of going abroad, and leave her free to do as she liked, poor unhappy child! It would be better to let the scandal which must ensue fall upon him than upon her. He was a man; he could bear it better. And, if he left her at Easthope in his father's charge, with his mother and his sister for her friends, how could any stain fall upon her reputation? It was the only alternative, since she cherished this desperate resolve. If she would be freed from the intolerable burden of his presence at any price, he must pay the price and free her from it.

He turned to her as she stood, panting and haggard, leaning against the painted wall of the waiting-room—a sad sight, for all her beauty and her costly attire.

"Sidney," he said very gently, but with a sadness born of his sad

thoughts, which struck her with a new sense of pain. "It would be impossible for me to misunderstand your reason for leaving home. It is to rid yourself of my presence, to separate yourself from me. Have you reflected that in separating yourself, also from Dolly, from your father, from many old and dear friends? Have you thought what a strange anomalous position a woman finds herself in if she is cast on the world alone, especially when she is a woman whose previous life has been sheltered from all contact with the rough world? You cannot have realized it, I am sure, or you would never have seriously contemplated the step you propose to take now. Ah, I know what you would say," he went on hastily, seeing that she was about to speak—"that any life would be preferable to the one you live now! But, although I know that you feel so, my child, I think you are mistaken."

"You think I am mistaken," she said slowly, "because you do not know, because you think—Ah, you cannot imagine how wretched I have been!"

"Can I not?" he questioned sadly, with a sadness more pathetic in its quietness than her more violent emotion. "And yet I have known something of what wretchedness is lately, Sidney."

His tone struck her even more than his words, and a wave of overwhelming misery seemed to sweep down upon her. Under it she drooped and sank upon her knees by the table, throwing out her arms upon it, and hiding her face upon them in her agony. Stephen, who had moved toward her, thinking she was going to fall, paused irresolute, and stood on the other side of the table, looking down at her with infinite pity, infinite compassion in his grave dark eyes, and infinite love also!

Any one looking into the little waiting-room on that snowy winter afternoon would have been astonished at the scene that was being enacted there. The actors in it seemed so out of harmony with the bare little waiting-room, with its oil-clothed floor and its hair-covered chairs. Sidney's costly fur and delicate beauty and Stephen's distinguished appearance were striking enough in themselves; but they were rendered yet more so by their surroundings.

Husband and wife were too absorbed to heed the publicity of the place in which they were; it never occurred to either that at any moment a porter or other railway official, or even a traveller, might enter the room.

"Sidney, can I do nothing?" he said huskily, bending toward her as she knelt, and touching gently one of the little outstretched hands. "See, my child—to give you, if not happiness, at least peace, there is nothing I will not do. And—and if you wish you shall make that inquiry, you have so much wished to make, even though—the result—"

"No—no—anything but that," she cried out, suddenly, lifting her head and speaking with swift passion and fear—"anything but that! I do not wish to make any inquiry! I do not wish to know—I do not want—"

"You are afraid of the result of an inquiry," he said sadly. "Well, you are right perhaps, although it seems to me that any certainty is better than suspense."

"I am afraid," she returned slowly, looking across at him with miserable eyes—"yes, I am afraid of the result!"

She was looking at him steadily and keenly, with her eyes fixed upon his face; but she saw no change there, no flush of conscious guilt, no shame, only the same intense sadness and pity.

Ah, how good and true and noble he looked! How she longed to throw herself into his arms and sob out all her misery, all her suspicion on his breast! He could not be guilty—it was impossible. Her whole soul revolted at the thought—revolted in horror and in fierce unshattering denial; and for a moment her trust and faith in him were perfect and unquestioning; the next his own words shook that faith again.

"Then we will say no more about it," he said calmly, "and I will tell you the proposal I had meant to make to you this evening. I have been thinking for some time past of going abroad. Will not that answer all purposes, Sidney?" he added, smiling. "It will free you from a husband who cannot but see how he has failed to make you happy; and you can stay at home with Dolly, and be happy with her."

(To be continued.)

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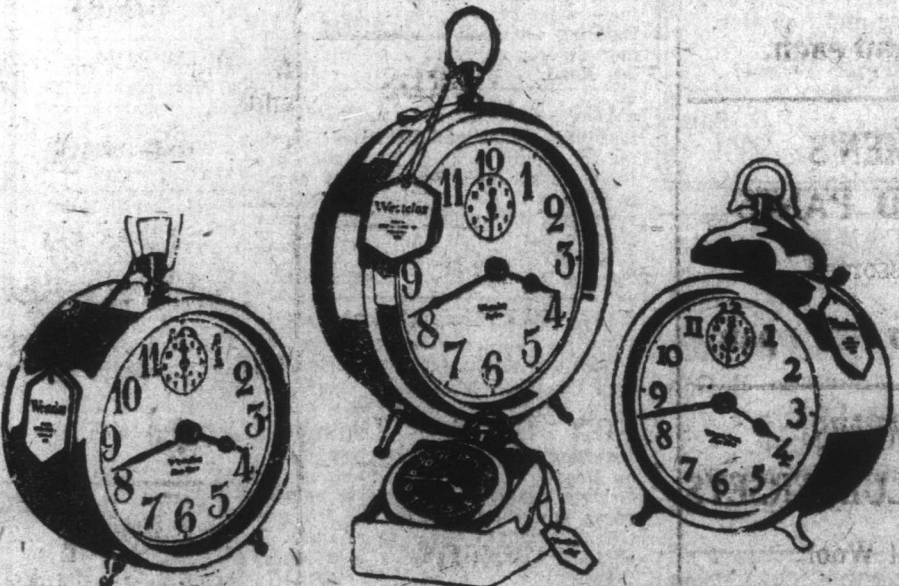
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