

OUR WEEKLY SERIAL STORY INSTALLMENT

Prologue to Love

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SYNOPSIS

Lovely, independent Autumn Dean, returning home to British Columbia from abroad without her father's knowledge, stops at the home of Hector Cardigan, an old family friend. He tells her that she should not have come home, that things have changed. Arriving home at the "Castle of the Norns," she is greeted lovingly by her father, Jarvis Dean, who gives her to understand that she is welcome—for a short visit. Her mother, former belle named Millicent Odell, has been dead for years. Autumn cannot understand her father's attitude, though she gives him to understand that she is home for good. She has grown tired of life in England, where she lived with an aunt.

CHAPTER II

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Jarvis Dean stood before the great windows in the hall, looking out upon the world where the light of early morning was aflame above the spires of the pines. He moved away once and called up the stairs to assure himself that Autumn was getting ready for the ride she had insisted on taking with him into the sheltered ravine where the lambing was in progress. When she replied, he strode back to the window and looked out upon the softly lighted mosaic of the world that was his. As he stood, weary and haggard from a sleepless night, it came to him that it had been better had he sold it last winter when he had had a substantial offer for it. Why had he not sold it? He was getting old. Pride, pride! Pride and vanity. Vanity of possession, of power, of triumph! The triumph, as he had thought, of his own conscience over a catastrophe of twenty years ago. That was why he had stayed on here, stubbornly, bitterly, when his world had seemed ready to crash about his ears after the death of Geoffrey Landor, and then—Millicent.

Ah, Millicent, forever loved, forever lost! Her slender red smile, red still as she died in fever, red in the undying love of another, slender in hatred of himself, seemed to pierce the brooding east now as he stared at it with vacant eyes.

"Fool, fool!" he muttered to himself. "I might have known—I might have known!"

He turned as Autumn, dressed for the ride, came down the stairs.

"Let's go!" she sang out, and stood before him slapping her boots with her quirt.

Two horses stood before the door, Jarvis Dean's big black and Hector Cardigan's hunter. In a moment they were in the trail and heading eastward over the way that Autumn had come the night before.

They were on their way to visit old Absolom Peek at his camp in the ravine. When they turned at last from the main trail and took a winding path that led toward the camp, Autumn remembered a roundabout and more picturesque way to the place, down through a gully where a tiny creek ran and where the white birch grew in a dense wall up either slope. Landor's Gulch it was called locally, partly because one-half of its length marked the boundary between the Landor and the Dean acres; partly, too, because it was down there beside the creek among the birches that the body of Geoffrey Landor had been found years ago by one of his own men. The years had dimmed the details of that tragic story, though they had served only to deepen the legendary color that invested it. Years ago, old Hannah had told Autumn that sheep herders had encountered Geoffrey's ghost among the white birches there, of a moonlit night in spring, and had heard his voice calling to his sheep-dogs when the wind came up from the river. Autumn had all but forgotten the legend, but its memory smote her now as she drew rein and turned her horse toward the gully.

"Come on, Da!" she called. "Let's go down this way."

Jarvis drew up short and looked at her.

"There's quicksand along that creek," he replied. "Don't you remember?"

Autumn laughed. "Come on! I used to find gold pebbles down there. I want to see if there are any left."

Jarvis exclaimed under his breath. "Damn it, my girl, I have no time for such fooling! Are you riding with me or are you not?"

Autumn held her horse for a moment in perplexity, then followed her father along the trail of his own choosing. One of these days, she thought to herself, it would be necessary to warn Jarvis Dean that his daughter was grown up and would not be spoken to as if she were no more than a child. But there would be time for that.

When Autumn drew abreast of her father again, his face was oddly rigid and colorless. Hector Cardigan had been right, then. Her father had changed. He was not the man she had known in other years. He was getting old, and the burden of living had lain too heavily upon him. Her impatience with his mood melted to pity as she thought of him.

"By the way, father, how are the Landors?" she asked casually, when they had ridden a short distance.

"Eh? The Landors? Ah—they're well, I presume," he said absently.

"You told me at Christmas time that Mrs. Landor had been ill," she reminded him.

"Oh, yes, yes, of course," he said hastily. "Old Jane has been very low. She's not long for this world, I'm afraid."

"And Bruce?"

But Jarvis had fixed his eyes suddenly on a straggling bunch of frail new weeds close to the trail. He dismounted abruptly and pulled the grasses up by the roots.

"Milk vetch," he remarked, and got back into the saddle.

When they arrived at the camp, old Absolom was in his shack, brewing coffee and frying bacon. While her father went indoors, Autumn lingered for a moment outside, her eyes sweeping the rounded skyline above her, where the morning sun was burnishing the hills. The snug little valley into which she had ridden was filled with the bleat of ewes and the tiny cry of hundreds of newborn lambs. On the sunlit slope above her, the main flocks grazed, ewes with their lambs old enough to be released from the pens, or ewes which had not yet dropped their young.

Jarvis Dean's voice called to her from the doorway of the shack. There was old Absolom Peek, grown more wizened and gnome-like than ever, his weathered face contorted in a shy grin. He held the screen door open and she ran up to him.

"Hello, Absolom!" she called.

He shook hands with her, his old eyes beaming and watering with delight.

"Welcome home, Miss Autumn!" he said, achieving a gallant little jerk of a bow. "You've been gone a long time. But a fine young lady they've made of you, I see."

Autumn laughed and glanced at her father who stood by, tall and elegant in his riding clothes, smiling indulgently down upon his old herder.

"I've been gone too long, Absolom," Autumn said. "But I'm home for good now, and I'll be over to see you often."

"We'll be makin' for the hills right after shearin'," Absolom told her. "In about another fortnight."

"Stay and visit with Absolom while I go out and look over the new family," Jarvis said, starting for the corral. "Come along when you feel like it."

Autumn entered the shack and seated herself while Absolom tended to his coffee and bacon.

"It'll be like old times havin' you back at the Castle, Miss Autumn," the old herder said. "You'll be puttin' new life into the old place."

"Perhaps the old place could stand a little new life," Autumn replied.

Absolom turned to her with the frying pan in one hand, then glanced quickly through the doorway.

"And I'm telling you it could stand a lot of it," he said. "You never

saw such a place as that's got to be. The Laird's a great man, an' still hearty for a man of his years, mind you, but there's need of someone about the house there besides that poor old body that does the cookin' and the cleanin'. In the old days we used to have a bit of a dance now an' then, or something to keep a man from gettin' old before his time—but yon's a morgue, gettin' to be."

"You give me an idea, Absolom," Autumn said. "It isn't every day in the year that a daughter comes home. I'm going to celebrate. I'm going to invite the whole countryside to a dance. Will you come? We couldn't give a party without you."

"We'll be leavin' in another fortnight," he reminded her.

"We'll make it next Friday night, then."

Absolom's face lighted up with enormous pleasure. "I'll come, right enough, if I can get away to it."



"It isn't every day in the year that a daughter comes home."

But ye'll promise to put on a few of the old dances, mind. I'm gettin' too stiff in the j'int for the stuff they call dancin' nowadays."

Autumn laughed. "If some of the youngsters today tried your reels, Absolom, they'd have to be carried off the floor."

"Aye, that's right enough, too. But who'll ye be askin', now?"

"Everybody!" Autumn replied.

The old fellow's eyes became dreamy with reminiscence. "I've had many a good turn in my time with Katie Macdougall, down at The Bend—if ye'll think of it to ask her," he suggested archly.

"We'll send her a special invitation, Absolom," Autumn promised, getting up. "I'd better leave you to your coffee, now, while I go and take a look at the lambs."

"Aye, an' they're worth lookin' at. Nigh unto five hundred was dropped durin' the night."

Autumn went out and found her father beside one of the pens that opened off the corral. Within it a large, robust ewe stood in maternal dignity, while about her pranced a day-old lamb on its ridiculous legs, flicking an absurd cottony tail.

Autumn laughed in sheer delight. "Oh, you little rascal!" she said. "I'll have to learn about sheep all over again, Da."

She glanced up at him and noted the wistful eagerness that came into his eyes, and the quick, unaccountable restraint that immediately masked them.

He sighed heavily. "It's no business for a woman, my girl."

"That's a man's opinion, Da," she countered.

"And it's my opinion that a woman can talk a lot of damned nonsense, given the chance," her father retorted. "With the help of God,

I'll be out of the business myself before another year."

"Out of sheep-raising?"

"I'm going to sell," he told her.

Autumn caught her breath with dismay. "Now who is talking nonsense? You'd die without all this—you know you would."

One of the sheep dogs, a graceful collie, came bounding up to them and Jarvis stooped to pat him. "I know, I know. But I'm getting too old for it, Autumn."

They moved to another pen and Autumn laid her hand affectionately on her father's arm. "I never heard anything so absurd in my life," she said, then decided to turn the conversation into another channel. "Now, that ewe, Da, is a Rambouillet, isn't it?"

Jarvis smiled appreciatively, drawn out in spite of himself. "I sent you to Europe to forget all that," he mused aloud. "But it's little you can do with a woman, it seems."

With a lighter heart, Autumn mounted her horse and rode beside her father up the steep trail that led back to the highway.

It was ten years or more since the Laird had opened his wide doors to the purposes of merry-making, and people had come from as far away as Kelowna to welcome his daughter's homecoming. The drawing room and the hall thundered with the lusty measures of a Highland schottische; Old Country folk stamped resolutely on the polished floors—middle-aged and elderly Scots, their gnarled faces scarlet and streaming, swung their partners with the earnestness of warriors going into battle. Not the least conspicuous and nimble-footed, and certainly the most terrifying of all, was old Absolom Peek, whose flaming red necktie rested companionably on the shoulder of his partner, Katie Macdougall.

Autumn stood near the doorway and applauded the efforts of the old sheep-herder, who beamed his gratitude and pursued his course more desperately than ever.

When the dance came to an end and the exhausted performers scattered to find chairs or to go out into the evening, two or three of the younger men hurried toward Autumn. One took her peremptorily by the arm and drew her aside.

"The next dance is ours, Miss Dean," he informed her a little complacently. "I have asked the orchestra to favor us with a tango."

Florian Parr was reputed to be the most dashing young man of the countryside. The Parrs, a wealthy Scotch family with a ranch in the Okanagan Valley, had left their son in England to complete his education and had brought him out a year after Autumn had left to join her Aunt Flo in the Old Country. Her father had introduced him to Autumn earlier in the evening and her eyes had surveyed him, with a penetration subtly careless, from head to foot. He was just under thirty, blond, tall, firmly knit, and dressed in white flannels and impeccably tailored blue sack coat. In that amusing medley of rustics and bland sophisticates who were her father's friends, Florian Parr stood out like a man from another world.

His manner was an immediate challenge to Autumn. "Our dance, Mr. Parr? I cannot recall making any engagements."

He stepped closer to her. "It is not so much a matter of engagement, Miss Dean, as it is a matter of preference."

She laughed. "Yours—or mine, Mr. Parr?"

"I can only speak for myself," he replied.

She wrinkled her nose at him. "You seem to find little difficulty in that."

"Are you going to make this awkward?" he countered.

Autumn chuckled softly. "Not at all, Mr. Parr. Besides, I should think a man who plays polo and pilots his own plane—"

"A splendid alliteration," he put in.

Before she could reply, he had swung her out upon the floor. The orchestra had already begun to play. The crystal chandeliers of the drawing room were turned off, and immediately the long floor was a dim pool of violet light from the colored lanterns that had been

strung below the ceiling. Autumn noted the eyes that followed her and Florian, shadowed eyes of admiration, and overheard or two comments that were local. She permitted herself in the joy of the dance, glancing at her partner now and then at her rare, long look of half-closed eyes that is the piquant complement of that most subtly artistic dances.

In the encore that followed the tango, Florian maneuvered so they became separate from the body of the dancers, and through the open French windows out across the piazza and down steps into the garden.

Florian leaned above her with elbow resting on the bough of a tree. She saw him smile as he shed a lock of her hair and pressed to peer at the moon through mesh.

"Mr. Parr," she said, with severity, "I must remind you I am hostess this evening—and I am treated with the dignity of a position."

"You might also add that we for the first time not more than an hour ago," he said.

"I do."

"But it has been an unfortunate hour," he responded.

Another couple strolled by a moonlight.

"Look here," Florian said suddenly. "Why can't you come down the week-end in Kelowna now? The family will be keen on you. They all heard about you from your mother. My sister Linda wanted to come up tonight, but she has a sprained ankle. She'd be about you."

"I should love to come," Autumn assured him.

"I'll tell you what," he suggested. "Drop down for the polo game week from tomorrow and stay Sunday. I promise you a good time. Your father owes my government visit too. He hasn't been down months. Let's make a real party of it."

"I'll speak to father about it," she said.

"Right!" he said. "Let's go back, Mr. Parr," Autumn remarked. "I'm forgetting duties."

"I'll come if you'll call me Florian," he stipulated, in a voice low and engaging that it brought her throaty, pleased laughter.

"Very well, Florian," she responded, and they retraced their way to the brilliantly lighted piazza.

The music floated out to them when they mounted the steps of the piazza that was completely festooned with honeysuckle in sweet and bloom. Florian caught her arm.

"Let's finish this dance before we go in," he said, and drew her away from the rhythm of the music that was being played.

The piazza was in darkness, save from the moon, and as they went to the farther end of it, they found themselves alone. There Florian paused, drew her close and brushed her hair with his lips.

"I think I'm going to love you," he whispered.

Autumn's lips and cheeks glowed faintly, and she experienced the swift sensation of being deliciously drugged. Then, for some unaccountable reason, she thought of her mother, Millicent, whom she recalled only as a dream, and of another Odell woman, known only as a myth, the woman who had been her grandmother. She thought of men in England and men on the Continent, whom she had known with until they merely bore a resemblance to the man who had been maimed in the war. The women had been no respecters of hearts, old Hector had said. Basque bell! She winced and drew away from Florian. It was for this, then, she had left her that life she had lived for the past nine years?

Casually, and without a word, Florian back into the drawing room of light from the open French windows, and a moment later they were among the dancers in the drawing room.

When the waltz had ended, Florian spoke a quiet word to her and slipped away up the stairs to her own room.

(TO BE CONTINUED)