

OUR WEEKLY SERIAL STORY INSTALLMENT

Prologue to Love

By
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THE STORY THUS FAR

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 gives him to understand that she is home for good. She has grown tired of life in England, where she lived with an aunt. Her father gives a welcoming dance at the castle. Autumn meets Florian Parr, dashing, well-educated young man of the countryside.

CHAPTER II—Continued

Autumn knew not what mad impulse had possessed her to desert her father's guests and come out here to be alone on the silver-lit range. In her own room it had taken only a minute or two to change into her riding clothes, steal down again and out to the stables where she had saddled her horse, and come galloping away under the pallor of the night. Some yearning for escape, she knew, had prompted her act. She realized now that she had run away from Florian Parr. It was from the Florian Parrs she had run when she had left that shallow life she had known in Europe—the Florian Parrs, in whom deep passions were merely quaint and laughable.

She was well within the Landor ranch before she realized the direction she had taken. She had been sitting there for minutes, breathing deeply of the night's enchanted perfume, when a sound behind her caused her to draw sharply on the reins and wheel her horse about. Another rider was coming down the narrow trail, his form looming black and high against the moon.

"Hello, there!" a man's voice challenged her, a level voice, unhurried, its intonation rich and deep. As he drew closer Autumn could see that he was bareheaded, dressed in riding breeches and the collar of his dark shirt carelessly open.

"I am Autumn Dean," she announced quickly, as he came alongside her and halted his horse.

Although the moonlight made an obscure mask of his features, she thought she saw a look of puzzled surprise cross them.

"Autumn Dean!" he exclaimed, and extended his hand.

"Why—Bruce Landor! It is you, isn't it?"

Above their clasped hands, Autumn saw his smile—the boyish, quizzical smile she remembered.

"I was sure it was you—at once," he told her.

A thrill of uneasiness coursed through her—a queer, unsteady feeling that left her ridiculously irritated at herself.

"Why didn't you say so, then?" she demanded.

He held her hand warmly and smiled at her. "I have learned to take nothing for granted," he observed. "But—I understood you were celebrating over at your place tonight. How do you happen to be here?"

"I don't believe I could even explain that myself," she said a little blankly. "I just rode away, and—I'm here."

He smiled again and took a cigarette from his breast pocket, struck a match and lighted it between his cupped hands. In that one brief moment she saw the dark, crisply curling hair that was cropped short, straight dark brows rather heavy above eyes that she remembered now were a deep blue, a nose well-formed and sensitive about the nostrils, and a mouth that was somewhat full but straight-drawn and obstinate. In the sudden realization that she was giving him a shameless scrutiny, she wrenched her gaze away in the instant that he looked up at her.

"I had expected to see you over at our dance tonight," Autumn said. "Or were you not the least bit curious?"

"Curious?" He regarded her intently. "Scarcely—curious. I should have come if I had been able. This happens to be a very busy time for

me—and besides, mother has taken another bad spell."

"Oh, I'm very sorry. Father told me she had been quite ill. I should have been over to see her if I had had time. Do you think she would remember me, Bruce?"

His eyes rested gravely upon her face. Her hand moved nervously to her cheek as his look held hers, the moonlight seeming to go thin and extraordinarily translucent between them.

"I doubt it," he said at last. "You are grown-up now."

"Won't you take me down to see her?"

"Now?"

"Why not? It's still early, and I can ride back that way. Unless, of course, she's asleep."

"She never goes to sleep until I come in," Bruce told her.

"I should love to go down, then," she said.

Bruce glanced once in the direction of the ravine. "I can come back here later," he said. "Let us go this way, then."

He led the way across the slope to a point from which the light in the Landor house was plainly visible.

"I hope you will not be shocked at mother's condition," he said. "She has had a stroke, you know, and it has left her partially paralyzed. She may not even remember your name."

"What a pity," Autumn said. "She was always such a proud, capable woman."

It was only when they reached the long avenue of Lombardy poplars leading to the Landor house that their voices ceased. Bruce seemed suddenly to have become preoccupied with something apart and remote as he rode slowly forward, his eyes fixed upon the house that stood among the shadows at the farther end of the avenue. A cool ripple of apprehensiveness passed down over Autumn's body, a feeling ominous and totally strange to her experience. She recalled now that as a girl she had always been afraid of Jane Landor, though she had never known the reason. And now, within a room there beyond that glowing window, lay the helpless form of the woman whose forbidding manner had often caused Autumn to shrink from her. It was not fear that overcame her now, but pity—deep pity for the woman whose staunch fortitude had been reduced to frailty by a life that had beaten her at last.

When Bruce finally dismounted before the doorway and stretched his hand up to her, she laid her own slender one within it and got down. For a moment she clung to his hand and hesitated.

"Wait, Bruce," she whispered, and the thought struck her that she should not have come like this to see Jane Landor.

He smiled down upon her and folded his other hand over hers. "You look—frightened," he said, leaning close to her.

She followed him into the house. The large room was in darkness, but a light from the open doorway of an adjoining room cast a soft glimmer over the old-fashioned furnishings of the place.

Immediately a woman's voice, small and nervous to the point of querulousness, spoke from the inner room.

"Is that you, Bruce?"

"Yes, mother. I've brought a visitor to see you."

There was a moment's silence. Then, "A visitor? Who?"

"I'll let you figure that out for yourself," Bruce said, and led Autumn into the room.

Jane Landor was in a half-sitting position among the pillows, a light attached to the bed above her thin, colorless face. Autumn had expected to find her changed from the woman she remembered, but she was not prepared for what she saw there under the soft light of the bed-lamp. She drew back instinctively before the look from the fierce black eyes that were turned upon her as she stepped through the doorway.

"Come in where I can see you," Jane Landor ordered, and struggled to draw herself up for a closer look at her visitor.

Autumn stepped into the light and stood for a moment smiling down at the frail woman.

"Don't you remember me?" she asked in a soft voice that was none too steady.

Jane Landor's face twisted suddenly as if in spasm. She lifted



"You look—frightened," he said, leaning close to her.

her thin hands to her wasted cheeks and drew her breath in a quick gasp. "You! You!" she cried. "Millicent Odell! What brings you back here? Take her away, Bruce! Take her away!"

Her voice was a hysterical shriek now. She covered her eyes with her hands as she lay back sobbing among the pillows.

Bruce was beside her instantly, his arms about her shoulders. "Mother—mother, it's Autumn Dean," he tried to reassure her. "Don't you remember Autumn? She has come back."

His face under the light was shocked and bewildered.

"Take her away, I say!" Jane Landor insisted vehemently. "Nothing but death follows in the way of the Odells!"

She clung to Bruce, who tried in vain to soothe her, and Autumn stole in a trembling daze from the room and out of the house.

CHAPTER III

Breakfast in the Dean household had always been a ritual. In his busiest season Jarvis Dean nevertheless attended his table of a morning with the leisurely grace of a country gentleman. If a man could not begin the day becomingly, the Laird maintained, he had better remain in bed.

He was in good spirits this morning as he sat in his place, his daughter on his right and old Hannah opposite him at the end of the table nearest the kitchen. Hannah Stewart had, since the death of her mistress twenty years before, been accustomed to eating with the family

unless there were guests. This arrangement had seemed to Jarvis to be the most sensible one while Autumn was small and had to be attended to, and later Hannah was so much one of the family that it was unthinkable that she should eat alone. Hannah had seen to it that the paper streamers and other decorations that had festooned the dining room for the dance of the night before had been cleared away and the place restored to its wonted homely austerity. She would give her attention to the drawing room and the rest of the house as soon as the meal was over. Here in this room, however, life had returned to its accustomed way.

To Autumn, it seemed that some perverse fate had ordered the quiet scene so that she might find it impossible to seek an answer to the questions that had assailed her mind throughout an almost sleepless night. She had ridden home from the Landor place and had returned to her father's guests with a feeling that some curse had been laid upon her. She had moved about under a black spell that was as unreal to her as a delirious dream. And when it was all over and the last guest had gone, she had hurried to her room and lain awake until dawn.

Her father turned his eyes searchingly upon her as she seated herself at the breakfast table.

"It was a little too much for you, that business last night," he observed gently. "You look stale this morning."

"I didn't sleep well," Autumn admitted. "I'll be all right when I've had a little rest."

She had permitted her father to know only that she had indulged an impulse last night to get away alone for a ride in the moonlight; it had been impossible to tell him of her frightening visit to the Landors.

"I don't know what's wrong with the women nowadays," Jarvis continued. "In my time a young woman could dance all night and go to work the next day and be none the worse for it. But the women today have gone to pot."

Old Hannah sniffed. "I don't see that your men nowadays show much to brag about."

The Laird smiled. "Aye, they're a feckless lot, and have a mighty high opinion of themselves."

"It's hard to judge the present by the past, Da," Autumn ventured.

"Aye, my girl, there's something in that, too. It's the times that make the difference. It was a hard life we lived when I was a youngster—and it made hard men of us."

And hard women, too, Autumn thought, her mind upon Jane Landor.

"It'd take more than a hard life to make anything o' the like o' that Parr lad, I'm thinking," Hannah suggested.

"There's no way of telling that," Jarvis countered. "There's good blood in the boy. His father comes of a good line."

"The world's full of fools who can boast of good fathers before them, then," said Hannah stoutly.

"Right enough," declared Jarvis, chuckling to himself. "It takes two to breed even a flock of culls."

"Will you be using the car today, Da?" Autumn asked abruptly.

"No. I'll be down at the pens till supper. Haven't you done enough traveling to be content for a while?"

"I have some things to do in town, she said. "I'll leave right away and be back early."

"There'll be no call for haste," the Laird cautioned her. "You drive that car like something that had lost her wits."

Autumn smiled at him. "I'd lose them completely, Da, if I had to sit and watch you drive it."

Her father grunted. "There's no taming you, I'm afraid. Well, you didn't get that from me."

"No," observed old Hannah, "that she didn't. She's her own mother over again, and there's little fault to find with her for that."

Silence fell upon Jarvis Dean as Hannah told of how Millicent Dean had ridden to the hounds in the days when the Cornwalls of Ashcroft Manor were still famous disciples of the chase. Autumn listened eagerly and would have ventured a question here and there but that her father's

brows grew darker and his glance clouded the more as the rule old housekeeper pressed

"That will be enough now," vis interrupted finally, in a that quieted Hannah at the breakfast was finished in silence.

"You'd better be getting the Laird advised Autumn got up from the table, and felt that her father had no leave her alone with Hannah your things together and I'll the car brought out for you."

And while Autumn was in room preparing for the trip she could hear her father's stern admonishment to poor Hannah.

Hector Cardigan possessed a ror of glaring daylight, and the of the late morning sun that into his drawing room between heavy drapes of the window gested to Autumn the curious gers of the present prying into crypt of the past. She sat in Hector's armchairs, a glass of tea in her hand, her lids half upon that searching beam of from the window.

"Hector," she said, glancing at him with sudden directness came to have a talk with you, you mind?"

Hector smiled at her. "We to get on very well with our I remember."

"I was a child, then, Hector"

"Yes—that's so, that's so. I ly hadn't considered that as our—our friendship, may I say?"

"I am no longer a child, Hector"

"Very true, my dear. I re nize the fact—and I am forced confess that I have never been spectacular success in conversat with women."

"You don't have to be on the casion, Hector. I am not here small talk."

"Hm-m-m—well, of course—" "I want to ask you some tions."

"I cannot promise—ah, de de you know—to answer any ques young woman might put to me. I, now?"

Autumn could not tell whether manner was becoming evasive merely apologetic.

"You can answer the ques have in mind, Hector. I am that."

"Well, we shall see, perha What, for example, are you gup ask?"

Autumn drained her glass and it aside.

"I went over to visit Jane last night," she began.

"I thought you were giv dance."

"I left it for an hour or so— rode over to the Landor place met Bruce and he took me to house to see his mother."

"I see. Rather singular cond for a hostess, I should say."

"I'll admit it was—for the being, in any case. I saw Jane dor."

"You—spoke to her?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps a word forget. It was what she said that I have come to ask you about."

Hector moved uneasily. Jane Landor is not to be held to count for anything she says days, my dear. I understand she no longer—coherent."

"I am not going to hold her sponsible for what she said, Hector. I want to know the meaning of that's all."

"Hm-m, well, my dear—what she say?"

"When I stepped into the room with Bruce, she became hysterical. She declared to Bruce that I Millicent Odell and pleaded with to put me out."

"Was that all?"

"Not quite. As I turned to I heard her say that death follow in the way of the Odells."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing. I hurried out and back home as fast as I could."

For several seconds Hector remained standing with his back to fireplace, his hands folded behind him, his eyes at gaze across room.

(TO BE CONTINUED)