

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. Late in the evening Autumn leaves the dance, rides horseback to the neighboring ranch where she meets Bruce Landor, friend and champion of her childhood days. He takes her to see his mother, an invalid. His father is dead, thought to have killed himself. As soon as his mother sees Autumn she commands Bruce to take her away, that death follows in the wake of the Odells. Autumn is both saddened and perplexed. Bruce, apologetic, can offer no reason for his mother's attitude. Autumn calls again on Hector Cardigan—this time to find out the reason for Mrs. Landor's outburst. From his conversation she inferred that Geoffrey Landor killed himself because he loved Millicent Dean, her mother. Meanwhile, Bruce Landor rides to the spot where his father's body was found years before. There he meets Autumn, who, leaving Hector, was searching for a lost child. Bruce had found the child, and there Autumn and he talk of their families. They agree that her mother and his father loved each other deeply—and that their love is the cause of present antagonism. Florian Parr, at the Castle for dinner, proposes to Autumn. She refuses him. The next day Autumn rides toward the Landor ranch. She meets Bruce in a herder's cabin.

CHAPTER IV—Continued

An hour before sunset the sky had been overcast, with a purple caravan of thunderheads in the west; the thrumming of insects and the humid, flower smell of the air presaged rain. On a grassy hill-top ten miles eastward from the Castle, Autumn dismounted from her horse and let the animal graze while she stood and looked into the valley below.

On the slopes that streamed into the valley like smooth reddish cascades in the low sun, more than seven thousand head of sheep moved in bands, twelve hundred to a band. At dawn the herders had started them from home on the trek up into the mountains to the very margins of the eternal snows, in the relentless, lonely quest for grass.

Now, from the hillside directly opposite her across the little valley, a crow's flight half-mile away, came the limpidly sweet note of a bell. It seemed to Autumn that the sound was almost visible, floating like some silver bubble within that rosy dome of silence, lingering and vanishing into the infinity whence it had come.

It was the note of the Basque bell.

A fancy had seized her that morning while she had watched her father's men preparing for their departure. Only a week before, there had come to the ranch a youth of nineteen or twenty whose appearance had been so bizarre that the Willmar children had gathered around him with frank curiosity. He had come from the soda mines up north, and was seeking employment as a herder. He was slight of build, not over medium height, and on the back of his head he had worn a shapeless homespun cap, set so that a twine-colored mop of hair started out abruptly from beneath its peak. He had worn a short, tight-fitting coat, a jerkin, Autumn had supposed it was, also homespun and of a faded pea-green, so inconspicuous in the sleeves that the red joints of his wrists stuck painfully out from beneath them. Under the jacket he had worn a checked shirt and where the jacket gaped aside, suspenders of a brilliant green drew his threadbare trousers almost up to his armpits, leaving his bare shins exposed. He had worn hobnailed boots, and had carried a birch stick over his shoulder, at the end of which a gray bundle had been loosely lashed. The Laird out of the kindness of his heart, and probably a whimsical humor, had given him employment as old Absalom's helper. His name, they had told her, was Clancy Shane, but Jarvis Dean had jocularly nicknamed him, "Moony."

On a sudden impulse, Autumn had gone back into the house and brought out the Basque bell. She had entrusted it to the keeping of Clancy Shane, who had been lit to the wether on his stock. And now, from the opposite hillside, came the pure sound of the bell, singularly innocent across the hollow distance.

The sound turned her thoughts again to Bruce Landor, who had scarcely been out of her mind during the past week. She thought of their meeting at Hector Cardigan's,

when she had gone to fetch home the bell, and of her telling him about Hector's conceit concerning it. There was something in the sound of the bell now that brought the lovely wraith of her mother before her out of the nebulous glamor of the past. This had been Millicent Odell's world, the world of the pioneers and the subtle architects of empire, and now in turn it was her world. Suddenly she was glad, glad with all her heart that she was back home where life had meaning, where life was a profound harmony.

She pulled a bit of bloom off a sage-bush and began to pick it to pieces with her fingers. There had come upon her a revelation that dismayed, frightened and exalted her. She stood for a moment looking down into the valley where the shadows were beginning to deepen, then, impulsively flinging away the shrub



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which she held, she mounted her horse again and rode westward toward the Landor ranch.

Bruce Landor sat before the rough plank table in the herder's cabin in the ravine. The place was deserted now, the men having gone to the hills the previous day. The lamp stood lighted on the table before him. He had put the place in order and was ready at last to leave for home. He drew together the papers of which he had been idly speculating, making estimates of his returns from the season's shearing, and noting the increase over last year's gains. The season had begun auspiciously. He swung quickly about in his chair as a slight sound came to him from the door. Autumn Dean stood there in her black riding habit, a russet scarf at her throat, the dim light casting little facets on her brown leather boots. Her hat was in her hand, and her hair had blown free. Her face was a glowing cameo against the outer darkness.

"Am I intruding?" she asked, entering almost hesitatingly. "One of your men told me I should find you here."

Bruce got up hurriedly and drew out the other chair. A flush had mounted to his brows, and as he stood for a moment uncertainly before her, he drew his hand diffidently back across his hair.

"You certainly aren't intruding," he said. "I was just wasting time—with figures. But wherever did you come from?"

She seated herself and tossed her hat upon the table.

"Out in the hills," she said. "We had an early dinner, and I took a ride out for a look at the sheep. The men left for the range this morning. The evening was so soft and cool—I just couldn't go indoors. I came deliberately to see you after I got back. You see—I'm a bold woman, Bruce!"

"I'm glad you are! I've been as lonely as hell tonight. With the men all gone—"

"Loneliness is in the air, I guess. The sound of that darn bell did for me."

"Bell?"

"That bell I got from Hector, you know. I gave it to a young Irish lad that father hired last week."

"You mean you sent that Basque bell of Hector's into the hills? You'd better not tell Hector that."

"Oh, I don't know. I think Hector would understand. That bell wasn't meant to hang in a drawing room."

"But it's such a precious thing—out on the range all summer—"

"It will come back. It's charmed. Anyhow—I like the idea."

Bruce lit a cigarette and Autumn, watching him, thought how well-shaped and brown his hands were. "May I have one?" she asked.

"Sorry," he apologized. "You see, in spite of myself, I still think of you as the little schoolgirl I used to know."

"The one you fought for?" she asked as she accepted a light.

"The same," he replied.

"You'll have to get over that, Bruce," she told him. "I'm very much grown up."

"Perhaps I'm afraid of getting over it," he said bluntness.

"Because I'm a woman you've been in my mind constantly ever since I saw you again that first night," Bruce leaned forward slightly and looked directly into her eyes.

Her glance fell slowly, and a line of quick pain appeared between her brows.

"And that frightens you, Bruce?"

Bruce rose abruptly, strode to the open door and stood looking out. A thin, misty rain had begun to fall. He tossed his cigarette out into the wet darkness and kept his eyes upon the spark until it died. He turned where he stood and looked at her.

"Autumn," he said simply, "you have been living in a world where men who were skilled in the art have made love to you. I know very little about that sort of thing. When I tell you that I've thought of nothing but you since that first night—I mean just that."

She looked at him gravely. "I rode over here tonight because I have thought of no one but you," she said softly. "But it hasn't frightened me."

"I've been thinking of one other thing, perhaps."

"I know, Bruce."

"Of course you do. We have talked about that. We will never know whether it was love that caused that tragedy twenty years ago. Perhaps no one knows."

"We do know they loved each other, Bruce."

"And we must settle between ourselves, once and for all, what bearing that has on our own lives. I have settled it for myself."

He moved back into the room and leaned against the table looking down at her. She returned his gaze for many moments without speak-

ing. At last she got up impetuously and began to pace to and fro, her hands deep in the pockets of her coat. Bruce looked at her, and his muscles seemed to ripple all over his body. Her lithe, tempestuous motion back and forth across the room was like that of some beautiful, caged animal.

Presently she turned on him. "You and I have our own lives to live," she said vehemently. "It's absurd to think that we should be ruled by something that befell two people whom we can scarcely remember. They lived their lives as they wished—I shall live mine, in my own way."

He lifted one of her hands and kissed its soft palm. Then he took hold of her shoulders and turned her about so that she faced him. She let her head fall back and met his eyes solemnly.

"Autumn," he said. "My darling Autumn!"

Autumn slipped forward and was in his arms, and Bruce was kissing her in a glowing dimness which seemed to have caught them both up from the surrounding shadows. The rain drifted in gently over the still depth of their kiss. It was a rain that left a light, glistening web over their hair, their eyes, a young rain that spun them into one indistinguishable passion.

"I love you, Bruce." Her voice was a stumbling whisper. "Terribly—so terribly."

Her lips moved softly over his eyes, over the line of his brown cheek where a hollow came when he smiled, and over his lips and throat. Presently Bruce placed his hands strongly upon her shoulders and studied her face.

"Enough to stand by me against them all?" he demanded gravely. "It will not be easy, darling—at first."

"I'm strong enough for anything—with you, Bruce," she replied.

CHAPTER V

The Laird was still up, though it was already an hour past his usual bedtime. He had come back from town and had gone to his study to wait for Autumn's return. When he finally heard the door open downstairs, he was startled. The dead stillness of the house and the sleepy patter of light rain had drugged his senses so that any sudden sound would have disquieted him. But as he got up and went to the door of the study, his heart throbbed so that he pressed his hand to his side and caught his breath.

In a moment Autumn was at the head of the stairs.

"Why, Da!" she exclaimed. "I thought you would have gone to bed long ago. You haven't been worried about me, have you?"

"It's late," he said. "I had begun to wonder what had happened."

"Oh, I'm sorry, darling," she said, coming into the study and throwing off her jacket. "But I'm glad you're up. The fire feels good."

She went and stood before it, ruffling her hair with her hands.

"You'd better get out of those clothes," her father advised her. "They're wet."

"Not really," she protested. "I'll dry out here in a minute. I don't want to hurry away to bed just yet. It's so cozy here."

Jarvis seated himself before the fire. "Where have you been?" he asked.

"I've covered half the countryside," she said, smiling at him. "I started out early and rode up the valley for a look at the sheep. It's the first time I've seen them like that in nearly ten years, Daddy, and it was lovely—in the sunset and—"

"You had a lot to do," Jarvis said, disgruntled.

"Now, darling, you're not going to be cross with me for that," she coaxed. "I'm in no mood for a scolding."

"A lot of good it would do you anyhow," the Laird replied.

"Not a bit, dear." She laughed at him, then went and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "But I don't want you to worry about me one bit. I don't want to do anything to make you unhappy—and you know it."

Jarvis stirred uneasily in his chair. "You're going to drive down to Kelowna tomorrow—to the Parrs, aren't you?" he said, by way of changing the subject.

"Aren't you coming, too?" asked him.

"There's too much to do," he told her. "Besides, what I do spending two nights away from home when there's no call on me like my own bed best."

"I may not stay over then," Autumn replied. "I'm sure that I won't be bored all—if the rest of them are Florian."

Jarvis smiled. "You do much for the boy?"

"He's all right, darling—he is. I've seen so much kind during the past few years I'm not particularly thrilled more by the species."

"I can't say I'm sorry for the Laird observed. 'They amount to much.'"

Autumn turned and gazed at fire for a moment. She

half-burned stick into place, watched the sparks go twirling the flue.

"The fact is, Da," she said last, "I came back to you away from all that. It doesn't seem to me that anyone except those are cut out for it. And I want on that pattern, darling. I realized it so much as I did when I stood and watched the moving up the valley. It makes lonely as the devil."

"And so you stayed out all in the rain just to cure yourself a fit of the blues," he retorted.

"No," Autumn replied. "I didn't do that exactly. I know wouldn't be home, so I rode out to the Landor place and talked to Bruce for a while."

She glanced at her father's to see what effect her words would have upon him. He gave no outward sign of having heard her except that his frame seemed to become rigid and one corner of his mouth twitched nervously.

He spoke to her at last, his gaze steadily into the fire. "You are not going to make a habit of that," he said.

"Of what, Daddy?"

"You know what I mean, my dear. I don't want you going around Bruce Landor."

"Have you anything against Bruce?" she asked abruptly.

"Damn it all," Jarvis burst out. "Must I be cross-questioned by my own daughter? Or isn't it my own daughter?"

"I should give my opinion a look to have it respected?"

Autumn leaned forward in his chair, placed his hands heavily upon his arms, preparing to rise. "If we were in bed. Let's have more of this tonight."

Autumn did not move. She gazed at her father, aware that she was becoming angry. She clenched her fingers and strove to control her voice.

"Da," she said, "I am not to cross-question you—and I'm not your opinion more than the opinion of any other man alive. But I ask you what you have to say, Bruce, I naturally want to know."

(TO BE CONTINUED)