

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. 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 Lander, 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. Lander's outburst. From his conversation she inferred that Geoffrey Lander killed himself because he loved Millicent Dean, her mother. Meanwhile, Bruce Lander rides to the spot where his father's body was found years before. There he meets Autumn. 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 meets Bruce in a herder's cabin. There they declare their love for each other, and determine to stand together against everyone who might come between them. Autumn tells her father that she is going to marry Bruce. She is aghast to see his reaction, and is agonized to hear him whisper that Geoffrey Lander did not take his own life. He tells her the story. Millicent, his wife, and Geoffrey Lander had fallen in love with each other.

CHAPTER V—Continued

When Jarvis lifted his face after what seemed an intolerable interval, it was the face of a man grown incredibly old and worn. He passed his hand across his brows, and Autumn could see that he was making an heroic attempt to speak.

Jarvis subsided into his chair. "I have nothing against the boy," he said at last. "But you know as well as I do that there are reasons why I do not want you to go around with him."

"I know what you have in mind, Da," Autumn replied. "I have thought about it, too—and I've talked to Bruce about it. Bruce cannot be held responsible for the fact that his father took his own life—and I think it a little unfair that any stigma should—"

"Will you stop this talk!" her father commanded suddenly.

All Autumn's resoluteness surged up within her. "If you insist, Da," she said levelly. "I should prefer to talk everything over with you, but if I must order my life without coming to you—"

"Do you know that your mother and Geoffrey Lander were in love with each other?" His face was blanched as marble, and even his eyes seemed to have gone white with fury.

"I do, Daddy," she said in an even tone. "And I know that Geoffrey Lander probably shot himself because of the hopelessness of that love. Bruce and I talked about it tonight."

"You talked with him—about that?"

"We had to, Da," she told him simply. "Bruce and I are in love. I'm going to marry him."

The Laird had risen slowly from his chair, like some tremendous iceberg lifting its appalling shoulders above the frozen waters of the sea. "God in heaven!" he muttered, and then, completely and without warning, he crumpled back into his chair, his chin fallen forward on his breast, his gaunt frame heaving convulsively.

Autumn flew to him. Kneeling on the floor, she threw her arms about him.

"Da—for pity's sake, what is it?" she pleaded, clinging to him.

He lifted one hand and placed it tremblingly upon her hair. His lips shook as he tried to speak, but the words would not come.

"Tell me, darling," Autumn urged. "What is it?"

He swallowed as though he would strangle, and shook his head. "You—you can't marry him," he said thickly, and then his voice sank almost to a whisper. "Geoffrey Lander—did not take his own life."

Autumn fell away from him, but her eyes were fixed upon him still as though in some terrible, enchantment. Realization came upon her in agony.

"Da—tell me—did you—do you mean that you killed Geoffrey Lander?"

Her voice had been the merest whisper, coming remotely from her stiff lips.

The old man's eyes became terribly revealed, as though some power had gone beyond his body and murdered his very soul. They were suddenly stark and desolate beyond any need of words.

The brief interval that passed before Autumn heard her father's voice again seemed to encompass an aeon of torture. She sat facing him, her hands tightly clenched, sat waiting against eternity, hoping against hope, for words from him that would dispel the horror that had descended upon her. She saw his lips drawn back in a livid grimace against his teeth, as though the thing he must tell were too cruel for utterance, too cruel to be transmitted from his own mind into the awful silence of that room.

Summoning her last reserve of courage, she leaned toward him and took his hands gently into her own.

"Tell me about it, Da," she said, scarcely above a whisper.

Her touch seemed to restore the life that had all but ebbed from his gaunt frame. She saw him make an heroic effort to draw himself upright in his chair; she saw his hands pass across his eyes as though to clear his vision, and then the rigid lips moved in barely audible words.

"You're getting me, Geoffrey," he said softly at last. "After all these years, you're getting me!"

Autumn turned from him, her limbs unsteady beneath her, and hurried to the small cupboard in the corner. Her hands trembled as she poured a drink into her father's glass and returned with it. To her surprise, he was sitting erect and staring before him with brilliant, almost fierce, eyes, and color lay along each rugged cheekbone like a bright leaf. He ignored the proffered glass at first and Autumn seated herself on a chair in front of him and waited for him to speak while the silence seemed a grotesque din of the throbbing of her own heart.

When she could wait no longer, she placed the glass at her father's lips, and spoke softly. "Da—take this, darling."

Mechanically he took the glass into his own hand, and without removing his eyes from their gaze upon vacancy, he drained the liquor to the last drop. Autumn took the glass from him and saw that his clenched hand relaxed upon the arm of the chair.

"Thank you, my dear, thank you," he said.

"Let us talk quietly—and slowly, Da," Autumn said. "I shall understand."

She heard herself speaking, as though the words were coming through her from someone else, someone who had fortitude beyond fortitude, a stoicism she had never known.

His eyes rested upon her in a brooding gentleness. He seemed to be contemplating her, she thought with a quail, from beyond death. She rose quickly, took a cushion which she placed on the floor at his feet, and seated herself with her head against his knees. So they sat, looking into the flames that licked

at the great logs of the fireplace, while Jarvis unfolded the tragic past, sometimes stroking Autumn's hair, sometimes letting his hand fall in absent idleness upon her shoulder, as though he were communing with himself and had quite forgotten her presence.

She did not interrupt him while he talked, but sat gazing fixedly into the fire. It seemed to her as if each detail of his story were fantastically visible there.

"Your mother was a siren and an angel, Autumn," he said, "—as her mother had been in her time. Your grandmother's hunt breakfasts were the talk of the Okanagan—she had sent to England in the early days for hounds and hunters and brought them all the way 'round the Horn. Her daughter, Millicent, was even more lovely than she was. You must know this if you are to understand what I am to tell you about your mother—and if you are to judge her kindly."

He paused, and into the monotony of his voice came a break.

"Every man who met your mother, Autumn, fell in love with her," he went on. "It was so before our



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marriage—and it was so after our marriage. I never found that hard to understand—I had fallen in love with her myself. Nor was it hard for me to understand how she came to fall back somewhat into her ways of coquetry after we had been married for a few years. Men would not leave her alone. They could not, it seemed. She loved me—I have never doubted that. But I was many years older than she and she loved life and youth and gaiety. I was too set in my ways, perhaps."

He sighed, and Autumn patted his knee affectionately without speaking. "There was nothing serious in any of these—these 'affairs,' as she called them—and she always tired of her admirers as soon as the novelty wore off, and as soon as they began to grow serious. It was an innocent sort of vanity with her, which she indulged quite openly. She loved the admiration of men, but she loved even more to let the world about her see that she was being admired. She would have found no pleasure in any sneaking love affair that was carried on where others might not see."

He paused while the clock on the mantel struck the hour. It was midnight.

"Not long after you were born," he continued, "Geoffrey Lander came here from the Old Country and bought the ranch that lay next to mine. We had been boys together in England. He was younger than I—a sort of ne'er-do-well who had married a woman of his own age

who thought she might make something of him, I think. She had written to me and it was on my advice that they left England and came here to settle. I was as anxious to bring him around as if I'd been his brother."

One of the great logs broke softly in two, the sparks cascading into the glowing embers.

"Geoffrey was restless and reckless and full of charm. Millicent fell in love with him—and he with her. It was a new kind of love for her, but I mistook it for another of her brief infatuations. I knew it was different when it dawned on me that she never made anything of him when they were in public together. Discretion—that was new in Millicent. And then one day she told me—confessed that Geoffrey had won her heart."

Autumn heard Jarvis' hands moving slowly up and down the arms of the chair.

"I must have gone a little mad then," he went on after a pause. "There was no use in my trying to hold her. I knew that. She was gone already, you see. But I couldn't let her go. I hoped that I might do something to win her back, perhaps. The weeks went by, but I soon knew it was hopeless. She was kindness itself to me, but she would forget sometimes and go about the house like one in a dream. She would sit with me throughout a whole evening and never speak a word. I became bold one day and went over to see Jane Lander when Geoffrey was in town. I asked her if she knew what was going on between Millicent and her husband. She denied that it was so, but I knew she was fully aware of it. She was too proud to admit it. I was a little unreasonable, I guess. I told her what I thought of a woman who could not keep her husband to herself. She told me to go home and look after my wife. That was the last time I spoke to Jane Lander, except for politeness when we met in public."

His voice had become very low now, but strangely controlled.

"Spring came, and I knew Millicent and Geoffrey were having rendezvous, but there was not a breath of scandal. I said nothing at first. I said nothing until I could stand it no longer. Then I—I gave orders. I made Millicent a prisoner in her own house. I forbade her going anywhere beyond the grounds unless I went with her. Perhaps I was foolish in that. At any rate, I kept them apart. Millicent didn't protest. If this had been one of her silly flirtations, you see, she would have died rather than give in to me. But it wasn't. This was real to her—and she didn't utter a word of protest. She obeyed me to the letter. Presently I heard that Geoffrey was drinking heavily and neglecting his work. The gossip of that was on every tongue. When he was found—shot to death by his own gun—it was easy enough to suppose that it was either suicide—or accident."

Autumn gathered her hands together tightly about her knees.

"I had gone up north to look at some wolf traps I had set the day before. I had told no one I was going there, for I wished to be alone in the woods and think over my problem. It was early summer and I went on foot. I carried a fowling-piece with me in the hope that I might raise a partridge along the way. Millicent was very fond of the breast of partridge. It was still early afternoon when I went out—along the way we go to Absalom's camp—but down the gully you wanted to follow that morning after you came home. At the farther end of the birches I flushed a couple of partridges and brought them down. I went on and inspected the traps I had set. I found them empty and returned the same way I had come. As I entered the birches, I came upon a brood of partridge chicks that kept running before me and hiding under leaves and keeping the woods alive with their ceaseless chirping. I realized then that they were the brood that belonged to the brace of birds I had bagged only an hour before. I was sorry for them, I remember, even then."

He paused for a long time, and a sigh of unutterable weariness seemed to pass all through his body. Autumn turned slightly and clung to his knees.

"It was there that Geoffrey Lander rode down upon me," he said at last. "He had evidently been drinking. I don't know what he brought him down there for then. He couldn't have known I was there. No one knew. I seemed surprised at first, and then he got down from his horse and came to where I was standing. He confronted me with an insolent that put me beside myself. I heard that taunting laugh of his my dying day—and into eternity tried to quiet him, knowing that he had been drinking, but it only angered him the more. When I went to go away from him, he stepped suddenly in front of me and whipped out his revolver. He told me I could not go on living without Millicent—that it had to be either him or me. It took me a minute or so to understand what he meant. He was actually challenging me to a duel. He looked magnificent as a gallant stood there instructing me in cool arrogance what I must do. Even then I did not believe that meant to go through with it. He seemed an insane thing, even in those days. Then he called something—it was an epithet not only involved my own honor but Millicent's as well—and I struck him with all my might. I wanted to kill him. I lifted his hand quickly—the one with the revolver in it—probably to guard against the blow—perhaps to strike me. I do not know what was in my mind. I saw him fall face downwards—and I heard his gun explode at the same instant—a sort of muffled sound. I watched him fall and waited for him to get up. He didn't rise. I knelt and touched him over. Geoffrey Lander was dead."

Autumn's burning eyes were fixed against his knees, but no tears came. The image behind her seemed to have seared away all emotion.

"What I did immediately after that I do not know," Jarvis continued. "My memory there is a blank. I think I dragged his body to the water to revive him if possible. When I saw he was past all help, I left him in the shallow water, downstream at the sound of the shot. I looked around me and wondered what I should do. And the stillness came only the echoing of the partridge chicks. I turned and ran out of the gully. When I reached the open, on the top of the hill where the trail turns upward to the sheep camp, I sat down and thought of what I must do. I became very calm. I soon knew there was but one thing I could do. If I had gone to the authorities and told my story—just as it all came about—I would probably have been believed. I wouldn't have minded that, although life means much more to me than that it does now. What I did not want was the whole story involving Millicent should be brought to light. So as anyone knew, Millicent and I were as happy together as we had always been. For her sake as much as for my own, I think, I resolved to say nothing about it to anyone. I came back home. Late that night I saddled my horse and left camp. I was riding down to Absalom's camp. Something drew me back to the spot where I had last seen Geoffrey alive. I think I expected to find him alive still. I don't know. I rode as far as the entrance to the gully and halted to listen for some sound that might reassure me. I stood and listened, I heard nothing but the mad chirping of the partridge chicks. I have never gone back there since. The next day one of his own men found Geoffrey's body where I had left it. I went to Millicent that night and told her that I was sorry. She had been weeping. I told her exactly what had happened. She did not look at me. She said, 'Your secret is safe with me, Jarvis.' Before the end of the summer she died of a fever."

His voice was emotionless now as the stark tale came to an end. He leaned forward slightly and clasped his hands.

"Now you know why I did not want you to come back here," he said simply. "I did not want you to come back—to this."

(TO BE CONTINUED)