

OUR WEEKLY SERIAL STORY INSTALLMENT

Prologue to Love

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CHAPTER XII—Continued

Searching his heart for the cause of his melancholy, Jarvis came with acute anguish upon the truth. Jarvis Dean had reached an end—an end of everything that had really mattered in life. An abyss of nothingness yawned before him.

Without these stark hills and unguessable valleys that had witnessed with silent compassion the drama of his life, he would be as a player upon a stage without an audience.

Frequently during the day, his eyes had roved hungrily over the noble prospect that had been his for more than a quarter of a century. By toil of mind and body and soul he had made it his own, and his being, in turn, had been delivered over in its entirety to the magnitude of this earth.

All that he had known of joy and sorrow, hatred and love, the saga of his failure and triumph, was written across the bright tablet of this land, inscrutable to all but himself; when he left it his epitaph would be graven there.

The sun marked noon, and the less explicit hours of the west. Toward the latter end of the day Jarvis went on foot to the temporary camp where his young Irish herder, Clancy Shane, was tending the few hundred sheep he had brought down from the range to be sold. It had been a matter of great pride to the boy that he had brought the band down single-handed and Jarvis had expressed his dry pleasure by raising the lad's salary.

In a wooded hollow before he reached the rise from which the flock could be seen, Jarvis halted abruptly to listen. An unwanted clamor of excited barking was coming from the direction of the flock, mingled with the mad bleat of sheep. In alarm, Jarvis scrambled up through the woods to the crest, where a furious spectacle met his eyes.

The low, red sun shone obliquely across a turbulent, livid sea of gray bodies, a sea which, while Jarvis stared at it aghast, seemed to become a vortex spinning closer and closer to the brink of a deep arroyo, a sandy cleft in the ground that had been washed deeper by freshets of the last spring. The dog, in a frenzy, was striving to head the crazed flock away from the danger. Suddenly the Irish lad leaped into the maelstrom and began beating his way toward the churning center. Jarvis shouted a hoarse warning and began to run.

Before he reached the arroyo, however, the outer fringe of the band had run off tangent-wise and were plunging headlong into the gaping earth. Instantly the whirlpool broke, the main body of it following the mad course of the first few into the arroyo. When Jarvis came at last and looked over the edge of the cleft, he found the pit filling with writhing, kicking, screaming bodies. A few had escaped and were struggling up the steep bank, bleating dementedly, their oblique, crazy eyes aglare.

In the thick of the struggle, flailing out with both arms and sobbing frantically, Clancy Shane bobbed about, with hideous ludicrousness, like a cork. Jarvis yelled to him and plunged down the embankment, hurling out of his way the few half-stunned animals that rushed up at him. With all the strength of his powerful frame he fought his way to the boy, lifted him bodily above the descending stream of gray forms, and flung him free.

As he did so, a dozen grizzled shapes came down upon him and Jarvis fell back among them.

Bruce Lander was driving home from town. On a sharp decline in the road where it approached the Dean place, his gaze was arrested by a wild figure that rushed frenziedly toward him, apparently from nowhere. Bruce drew to the side of the road and stopped his car. The madman was young Clancy Shane

The boy collapsed against the running board, his breath a raucous wheeze. Bruce leaped from his car and lifted him to a sitting position. "What's wrong, Clancy?" he demanded.

The boy flung out an arm toward the pasture. "Over yonder!" he gasped. "The master—in the gully! Go quick!"

With only a swift glance of horror into the blood-stained face of the youth, Bruce sped away.

The sight that met his eyes in the arroyo froze his veins. There was a scattering of sheep, running and bleating idiotically still, with the dog valiantly struggling to bring them together. But across the gap in the earth there had risen a solid isthmus of dead or dying bodies. Of Jarvis Dean himself there was no sign. Bruce stood in stony horror. The sheep lay in the arroyo, ten deep.

Two men came running from the direction of the Dean place.

A strange quiet seemed to have fallen upon that land, when—it seemed to Bruce an eternity later—the western sky drew down an emerald curtain upon the glory that had been there. Three men stood back from their work, their bodies wet, and lowered their heads. The battered, still form of Jarvis Dean lay where they had placed it on the ground at their feet.

Clancy Shane had told them the brief and tragic story of what had occurred. An eagle had flown down on the flock and terrorized a few stragglers that had wandered a short distance from the others. They had raced back and spread the contagion of fear in the flock. The rest of the story they could read for themselves in the havoc that had been wrought during the brief moments of the hopeless struggle.

Hannah, in the kitchen of the Castle, lifted her tear-drenched face from her hands. "You will have to go and fetch her, Bruce," she sobbed. "She is stopping the night with the Parrs at their lodge. You know the place?"

Bruce looked down at her. "Yes—I know where it is," he replied.

"Will you go, then?"

His lips tightened. "I'll go," he said.

In a few moments he was on his way, the dusk thickening about him as he sped along the winding trail that led southward into the mountains. Two hours later he climbed up out of the troublous dark heat of the valley into the sheer, cool starlight of the hills. Now the road became narrow and capricious, and the black spires of the dense pines made a cathedral ominous against the sky. How like Autumn, Bruce thought with frowning admiration, to have driven over this road alone! One false swerve of the wheel and she would have been at the mercy of this solitary wilderness until someone found her and brought her out. He strove to keep his mind on the deviousness of the way so that he might be possessed of a measure of composure for the difficult task that lay before him. He was glad, with a self-effacing bleakness, that her friends were with her—Linda Parr and Florian. They would be able to offer her comfort, as he himself was not qualified to do.

He had telephoned to Hector Cardigan from the Dean place. It had seemed proper that Hector should be the first to be informed of the tragedy—and, if possible, to break the news to Autumn. Bruce would have given much to have had the old friend of the family with him on this sorry mission, but Hector had not been at home and Hannah had urged that the tragic news should be carried to Autumn without delay.

The road began to steepen treacherously as Bruce approached the comparatively open shelf on the mountain where the Parr Lodge stood. From somewhere in the shrouded darkness far above him came the sinister, feral wail of a

cougar, a trailing sound of wounded malevolence. Closer at hand an owl hooted as though in mockery of that other more menacing cry of the wild.

A gleam of light through the dark web of the pines, and Bruce was driving in at the open gateway to the lodge. He turned his car about, deferring for a painful moment the duty that was before him, and formulating in his mind, with all the gentleness he could muster, the dolorous words that he must speak. As he got down from his car he could hear a door opening in the lodge behind him. A moment later he was face to face with Florian Parr.

Even in that instant, when his distress of mind was uppermost, Bruce detected embarrassment in Florian's manner.

"Hello, Florian," he said as he extended his hand.

Florian took the proffered hand in a brief clasp, then seemed to draw back hesitantly. "Bruce!" he ex-



"Lin isn't here," Florian said heavily.

claimed softly. "You're the last person I expected to see here tonight."

Bruce glanced toward the house. "I've come with some pretty bad news, Florian," he said in a low tone. "Autumn's father was killed this evening."

Florian fell back a step. "Killed? Good God! How?"

"He was over visiting the flock young Shane brought out to be sold. The boy says an eagle frightened the sheep and they got to milling. Shane tried to break up the jam and they got into a ditch on top of him. Jarvis jumped in and saved the boy—but he never got out of it himself."

Florian ran his hand across his brow, speechless from shock. Bruce saw him glance abstractedly toward the house.

"My God!" he groaned at last.

"This will just about kill Autumn!"

"You'd better go in and fetch Lin," Bruce said tersely. "She'll be the best one to break the news to her."

But Florian was regarding him in blank consternation. Bruce, puzzled, began to feel an impatience at his singular attitude.

"There's no sense in delaying it, Florian," he said harshly. "She has to be told. And Lin is the one to talk to her."

As he spoke he glanced toward the house. It came to him that there was something strange about the place. It seemed deserted, somehow, and although the windows were open no voices came out to them from within.

"Lin isn't here," Florian said heavily. "Autumn and I are alone."

Bruce stared at Florian through the gloom with eyes that seemed to go dim and lifeless with the dull flush that had suffused his whole

being after that first sharp stab of incredulity.

"Oh!" he said then, in a voice that had died before the sound issued. "Oh—I see!"

Florian's face was turned toward him in the darkness. For a moment he did not reply. "You don't see at all, you damn fool!" he broke forth at last. "Lin couldn't get here. We were just getting ready to leave when we heard your car coming up the hill. If you think—"

"Shut up!" Bruce rasped. "You don't have to apologize to me. Go in and tell her. She's needed at home—tonight. I'll drive ahead. I don't think I can be of any more use."

With his fists doubled up so that his nails were like blades in his palms, Bruce tore himself away. He had experienced for the first time in his life the exhilarating and horrible impulse to kill. Blindly he staggered to his car, swung it through the gate so that it lurched crazily toward the brink of the trail before he righted it, then paused to await the sounds that told him that Florian and Autumn had started from the lodge.

All the way back down into the valley, with the shameless and heartbreaking sound of that other car following behind him, it seemed to Bruce that the stars rocketed through a delirious sky, and that the night with its burden of madness would descend and annihilate him.

CHAPTER XIII

Strange, Autumn thought with the objective detachment that emotional exhaustion brings, how this gold and white drawing room that had been Millicent's preserved its aloof and reticent singularity, impervious to any unwanted experience of the other quarters of the house. She sat huddled listlessly in a deep chair, part of her consciousness attending Hannah, who was bidding a smothered good-by at the front door, to Snyder, the lawyer, the other part aimlessly adrift on that curiously attenuated sunlight that filled the room. Sunlight—no shadows here, in the room that had been peculiarly Millicent's! How oddly ironical! Even now, when the rest of the house seemed to mourn in sympathy with the Laird's deserted study upstairs, where Saint Pat alone kept his dumb, broken-hearted vigil, this room was a mystically serene denial of death. Or, rather, it was an affirmation of life beyond temporal things.

Autumn pressed her fingers against her eyes at the feeling of light-headedness that was coming over her. The ordeal of listening to Snyder read her father's will had undone her completely. And that extraordinary codicil, that footnote that he had written into it to Bruce Lander only a short time since—

But here came Hannah, with a steaming pot of tea! Snyder had refused tea—had helped himself generously to the Laird's choice brandy, instead. Funny how resentful one could become, in times of emotional upheaval, over a small and irrelevant thing!

She glanced at the tiny watch that hung on a cord about her neck. Hector Cardigan would be here again soon. He had been coming faithfully every day, and now she felt that without him she would be utterly lost.

A shadow, unobtrusive, gentle, fell across the threshold, and Hector entered through the French windows from the lawn. Autumn rose and drew another chair close to her own beside the low table on which Hannah, with a silence that marked her own personal grief and not the decorum of a servant in the house of bereavement, had placed the tea things. With pale humor, Autumn had noted how Hannah had taken the loss of her master unto herself, after a due observance of the amenities in consoling the master's daughter.

Hannah withdrew noiselessly, and Hector seated himself beside Autumn.

"One sugar, I believe, Hector!" she said, with an effort at briskness. "And lemon?"

"Quite so," Hector returned.

Her very hands, she thought as she poured the tea with an uncontrollable tremble, seemed to have

lost their character. They looked weak and purposeless.

Setting her cup on the table beside her, she leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. "I'm adrift, Hector," she murmured. "Absolutely adrift."

"Now, now, my dear," Hector stammered. "Life must go on, child. Even after—after terrible things happen to us."

"Life must go on? Why?" She opened her eyes and gazed at him, as though in genuine wonderment.

Hector shifted uneasily. He looked worn and shaken, she thought with idle compassion. His friendship for Jarvis had been a long and tried one; he was the only living being who had witnessed the extraordinary drama of that ill-starred soul from beginning to end. Perhaps it was unfair to inflict upon poor Hector the irony of the epilogue.

"That is an absurd question, Autumn," Hector said gruffly. "The daughter of the Laird will go on. You are shocked and exhausted, my dear—"

"I have not been the daughter of the Laird for a long time," Autumn interrupted in a pensive voice. "I know now that father died twenty years ago. The ghost of him came back now and then—and on one of those visits he wrote a note in his will to Bruce Lander."

Hector started. "A note?"

Autumn rose slowly and went to the desk at the farther end of the room, where Snyder had sat with her and Hannah a half hour ago. When she returned she held an envelope in her hand. She removed from it a narrow sheet of paper.

"Father must have written this on the bottom of his will immediately after Bruce came to visit him one day, at father's request. Snyder could make neither head nor tail of it, of course. We shall have to give it to Bruce."

Hector took the paper from her hand.

He read, in the Laird's bold, impatient hand: "To Bruce Lander, the admission that I may have been wrong in many things. At this moment's writing I seem to see a light. But it flickers and goes out, leaving an old man in darkness. I cannot help it if I blunder through the night that envelops me. Life has played me false, making of me that which I would not be."

For some seconds Hector sat looking attentively at the writing. Then his eyes lifted and Autumn was surprised at the solemn radiance of his face. It was a look of relief, almost of happiness.

"Yes," Bruce said, as if to himself. "It must have been as you say—the ghost of Jarvis came back. I myself have thought something of the kind. Thought it often. Poor Jarvis! His obsession with the past distorted all his thinking. He wrote this in a moment of—of lucidity. You should be glad he did, my dear."

"Glad?" Autumn said absently. "It alters nothing, Hector."

"On the contrary, my dear," Hector protested, "it alters much." He tapped the paper lightly with his fingers. "This is the equivalent of a retraction of everything that Jarvis had against Bruce Lander."

"Even so, Hector," Autumn said wearily. "What good can that do now?"

"It will not hurt Bruce to know that Jarvis Dean held no real bitterness in his heart toward—"

"Certainly, Hector!" Autumn broke in. "Forgive me, please! That was a selfish thought."

Hector laid the paper on the table and placed his hands awkwardly on his knees. "I see," he said softly. "What you would have preferred, perhaps, would have been your father's written consent to—"

"Oh, Hector!" Autumn interrupted again. "I wasn't thinking when I spoke."

"I can see that," he said. "The fact is, when a young woman is in love she interprets everything in the light of that one fact. Well, my dear, this retraction—small as it may seem to you—may have some bearing even on that."

Autumn looked at him and smiled resignedly. "You don't understand, darling. Bruce has made up his mind about me."

"You are sure of that?"

(TO BE CONTINUED)