

OUR WEEKLY SERIAL STORY INSTALLMENT

Prologue to Love

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CHAPTER XIII—Continued

"I haven't told you," Autumn said hesitantly, "about the night Bruce came to Parrs' lodge to tell me what had happened to father. I had gone up there earlier in the evening. Bruce found me there alone with Florian. Hannah had told him that I had gone to spend the night at the lodge. I had intended to, but Linda was to have been there, too. She became ill that day and couldn't leave home. Florian met me there—to take me back home, of course. But we had supper together in the lodge and before we were ready to leave—Bruce arrived. You know yourself what he must have thought. Florian tried to explain, but Bruce wasn't in a mood to accept his explanation."

"Hm-m," Hector said, knitting his brows. "Has Florian done nothing more about it, then?"

"Florian was incensed, of course, at Bruce's attitude. He will undoubtedly have a talk with Bruce—and force him to listen, but he's away just now on a business trip for his father. It won't make any difference to Bruce, though. You see—he had changed toward me before that."

Hector frowned and cracked his knuckles. The romances of these young creatures were too much for him. He had been given to understand that young love of the modern variety held the conventions in light esteem. Now, in his day—ah, well, in his day!

"You're a pair of young fools!" he blurted out suddenly, and poured himself another cup of tea.

Autumn got up and stood looking out of the wide spread of windows into the garden. Hector was endeavoring, she thought to herself, to bring her out of the ghastly enchantment that had imprisoned her since that dreadful night when Bruce had come for her at the lodge. Only isolated images remained in her memory of the events of that shocking time, brilliant and horrible as exploding stars. The ride home—a nightmare in which the staggering knowledge of her father's death clashed against her knowledge of Bruce's reaction to finding her alone with Florian. Then, suddenly, Hannah taking her in her arms—Hannah, white-faced and speechless. And the closed mask of a door—the door of the little back parlor, behind which her father lay. The comical little undertaker, with the cone-shaped bald head, at whose appearance Autumn had fled to her own room to scream into her pillows with hysterical laughter, until Hector had come quietly in and sat on the bed beside her. From somewhere—Hector had come. She learned later that Bruce had finally reached him by telephone. Then, in the depth of night, the moan of Saint Pat, the deep-throated, forsaken moan of Saint Pat!

Yes, Hector was trying to bring her around. It was sweet of him, of course, but where was the use of their talking any more of Bruce Lander? Bruce seemed more unguessable to her now than ever, in the numbness of her fatigue. It was difficult to remember clearly what he looked like, or to recall the timbre of his voice. It seemed years since she had seen him, severe and silent, at the entrance to the Castle, where he did not turn in after his car had escorted her and Florian home.

Autumn turned and faced Hector. "Fools?" she said. "Yes, darling—and past redemption."

He looked at her with curiously bright eyes. "Probably, my dear, probably," he replied. "What, for example, are you going to do about that—that little note your father wrote into his will?"

"I don't know yet," she replied. "I should like Bruce to know about it, naturally. I shall think of some way—"

"With your permission," Hector suggested, "I shall attend to that myself. I should like to, if you don't

mind. Or perhaps you would prefer to look after it in your own way."

"I'd like you to do it," she replied. "It would be simpler."

"I'll make a copy of it now, then," Hector said, and took the paper to a small desk at the end of the room where he sat and wrote while Autumn smoked a cigarette in silence.

Presently he got up and folded the sheet of paper as he came toward her. Her eyes followed him with a slow, spent interest as he thrust the paper into his pocket and drew out a slender packet tied with gold cord.

Hector unbound the packet, and with fingers strangely reverent, lifted from it a letter that lay uppermost.

"These letters," he said in a gently modulated tone, "were my reason for asking you and Bruce to dinner at my house that night. As it turned out—you could not come, but I had wanted you both to read them, even then, difficult as it was for me. These letters belonged to your mother. They were written to her by Geoffrey Lander. Before she died she entrusted them to me. I am giving them to you now so that you may read them when you are alone. In them he tells of his efforts to leave the country with his wife and son when his life here became hopelessly involved."

Autumn drew a quick breath. "You mean—he tried to get away?" she asked softly.

Hector cleared his throat with a painful hesitancy. "He did. I myself know how he tried—quite apart from anything he wrote here."

"I did not know that," she murmured.

"Your father did not tell you that, because to him it was not important," Hector went on. "Jarvis never had a true perspective of the thing that happened to him—to all of them. He was obsessed. Jealousy will drive a man to do things for which he is not altogether accountable. Your father believed it was Geoffrey's plan to leave and have Millicent join him later. But Geoffrey's property at the time was heavily burdened—and Jarvis held the bag, as we say. He had Geoffrey at his mercy."

Autumn sat on the edge of her chair, her fingers tightly interlaced in her lap. Her eyes burned fixedly upon Hector as he talked.

"I shall leave the letters with you, then, to read when you wish. But this—" he tapped lightly the letter he had selected from the packet—"this one I want you to read now—while I am with you. It was your mother's wish that I should give it to you when—and if—I should ever think it necessary to do so."

He removed a fragile, folded sheet from the yellowed envelope that enclosed it.

"Why haven't you told me about this before?" Autumn asked him.

Hector flushed painfully. "You forget, my dear, that your father was my friend. It has been difficult enough for me to decide to tell you even now. Nothing but your resolution to leave this country and spend the rest of your days in England convinced me that the time had come for me to place these letters in your hand."

He unfolded the letter and took from within it a short note that had been enclosed with the longer one.

"This," he said, handing Autumn the shorter one, "you may read before the other."

Autumn took it in trembling fingers and let her eyes dwell upon the delicate, piling script.

"Hector, my dear friend (Millicent had written), I do not think that I shall recover. Please do not forget your promise to me. I trust that the task I bequeath to you will bring you no unhappiness. In gratitude, Millicent."

With unseeing eyes, Autumn stared for moments at the slip of paper in her hand.

"Now, my dear—you may read this," Hector said, handing her the letter he held.

When at last she was able to govern her emotions, the phrases seemed to burn into her eyes with a ghostly incandescence.

"To my beloved daughter, Autumn (she read). When you read these words, if you ever do read them, it will be because Hector Cardigan has deemed it proper that you should do so. They concern things which I myself should have wished to tell you if events and circumstances had made it necessary—or possible."

"I want you to know, dear Autumn, that neither your father nor Geoffrey Lander was to blame in the unfortunate accident that took Geoffrey's life. Geoffrey had done his utmost to get away and forget me—and help me forget him. Hector can tell you why it was impossible for him to go. Since that terrible day, in the spring, your father has brooded constantly over the death of the man he once called friend. I fear that it may become an obsession from which he shall



"He had Geoffrey at his mercy."

never escape. I am the one who is to blame, Autumn, if any one is to blame for hopeless love."

"I can never tell you, my darling girl, how love came to me at last, after years of groping. I can only tell you that it came, after you were born, but that I never forgot the vows that had made me the wife of your father. I can tell you, too, that love—when it is love—is a woman's whole life and being. She can never escape it though she go to the ends of the earth."

"I do not know what lies before you here. Jane Lander is a strong-willed woman and she has already made it clear that she intends to continue at her own ranch, discharge all her obligations, and bring up her boy in the valley. You and he will be growing up together, Autumn, and the time will come when you must be friends or enemies—according to the will of his mother and your father, who hate each other now. It is my wish, Autumn, that you see things clearly and without prejudice, and that you refuse to be influenced by this tragedy of the past. I should like to think that you would be a friend of Geoffrey's boy. It might help to pay the debt of Your devoted mother, Millicent."

By the time Autumn had reached the end of the letter, the words were moving like a dimly silver caravan beyond her tears. The clairvoyance of the dying! Perhaps Millicent had even hoped that there might be more than friendship between her daughter and Geoffrey Lander's son—and effectuation of that destiny which had begun in her and Geoffrey. Autumn glanced across at Hector where he had seated himself again at the windows, and folded the letter pensively in her hands.

"Thank you, Hector," she said, "—for showing me this."

He did not turn from the window, and Autumn laid the letter beside the packet on the table and went to him.

"You've done your part," she said, "and I'm grateful to you."

He turned and put an arm about her. For a moment he seemed on the point of speaking. Then he patted her shoulder affectionately and turned away.

"I'll be going, I think," he said brokenly. "Come to see me."

Without another word he left her, picked up his hat from the small sofa on his way out, and walked away, his thin, straight back soldierly and unflinching. From the windows, Autumn watched him go, her teeth biting down into her quivering lip. Then she turned and went to her room.

Bruce Lander, in loose gray flannels, swung his considerable length of limb out of his modest automobile and proceeded carelessly up the steep steps to Hector Cardigan's door. He was somewhat mystified, though he had resisted any suspicion of intrigue, by the urgency with which Hector had pressed him to come to dinner.

Hector, obviously at a tension, ushered him in, took his top coat and hat and hung them on the rather insecure rack in the hall, a rack which, Bruce supposed, one should admire as having belonged to Cleopatra, or perhaps Confucius.

"I'm glad you came, my boy," Hector said, drawing himself up solemnly and looking at Bruce with a penetrating eye. "Come along in. I have an appetizer waiting for you."

"Right, Hector!" Bruce said, following his host into the dining room where one end of a long refectory table of solid, gloomy old oak was spread tastily with fine linen and silver and china, and a surprising array of edibles.

Bruce had here, always, a disconcerting feeling that he was about to see the wraiths of antiquity emerge from the draperies on the walls and repossess with jealous hands these treasures that furnished Hector's home.

He stood by while Hector filled two glasses, one of which he handed his guest with a courtly bow.

"To good fellowship, my boy!" Hector proposed, and held his glass for Bruce to touch it with his own.

They drained their glasses at once and Bruce held his forward with a smile.

"One more, Hector—to the spirits of the past!" He waved a hand toward the tapestried walls as he spoke.

Hector looked at him quickly, then filled the glasses again with an excitement in his movements that caused Bruce to wonder. But he smiled across the top of his glass as he bowed once more to Bruce and drank.

"Well," he said, when the glasses were empty again, "you must be ready for supper, my boy. Let's sit in."

"I hope I shall never be hungrier," Bruce replied and took the chair to which his host invited him with a wave of the hand.

The wine was excellent, as were the cold meats and the salads. Hector's first excitement seemed to subside as the meal progressed, and he talked in a leisurely fashion. They talked of Jarvis Dean's death and the impressive funeral that had followed, of the Dean estate and of Autumn's plans to live in England—but always in an impersonal tone that gave Bruce no hint of what was in the old man's mind.

When they rose from the table, Hector spread a cloth tidily over the dishes and led Bruce into the drawing room, closing the dining room door behind him.

"The skeletons will be at the feast," Bruce thought, smiling to himself.

The evening having turned cool, Hector had kindled a small blaze of pine logs in the Dutch tiled fireplace, and now they seated themselves before it with their brandy and cigarettes.

"I suppose you would be uncomfortable in the presence of modern furniture," Bruce remarked, glancing idly about the room. "You have lived so long with the ghosts of the past,"

A strange glow warmed Hector's eyes. "In more ways than one, my boy," he observed pointedly. "But I have never permitted my ghosts to haunt me. That Elizabethan wine-cup, now—" he pointed to an elaborately wrought chalice that stood on the top of a china closet—"who knows but what the death of some gallant courtier may have been drunk from its brim? But does it make the cup less beautiful, less precious to our time?"

"Rather not," Bruce replied. "On the contrary—"

"The past," Hector said, warming to his subject, "is a dim avenue down which we may walk and find the diverging paths of terror and beauty and passion. If we stand at the entrance to that avenue and peer within, remote times telescope into our own immediate past, so that with clear eyes we may note that the events of antiquity and of a few decades ago have the same values. Or do you follow me, sir?"

Bruce regarded his host with mounting curiosity.

"I believe I do," Bruce said, swept involuntarily into Hector's stately mood.

Hector waved a fine brown hand toward the Spierinx tapestry on the wall to their left. "The accomplished fact of the past," he continued, "may be compared to a tapestry like that—upon which we can look with disinterested sympathy and compassion and admiration at the quaint desires and ambitions and tragedies and loves of our forefathers. To the rational mind even a generation ago is such a tapestry, my boy."

Hector was leading studiously to something. His oratory was not without a definite object, of that Bruce was sure. He settled himself in his chair and resolved to wait patiently for the disclosure of his purpose.

"Do you remember that line from The Tempest? 'What's past is prologue.' You will excuse me," he apologized suddenly, "—I am an old man—and given to romantic indulgences."

Bruce smiled. "Go ahead, Hector! I've had some such ideas in my own mind, though I've never been able to put them into words."

Hector favored him with a shrewd glance. "Of course you have, my boy. Of course you have! You have thought of the past that lies behind you, no doubt—your own father's death, for example."

Bruce tossed his cigarette into the fire. "It was that I had in mind, Hector," he admitted.

There was a brief silence in which Hector leaned forward and turned his brandy glass thoughtfully about in his fingers.

"Would you mind it very much if I asked you something about that?" he said finally.

"There is nothing much that I can tell you, Hector," Bruce replied. "You probably know more about it than I do."

"Have you any very clear opinion concerning how your father came to his death?" Hector asked abruptly.

"I have understood that he took his own life—because of his love for—for another woman," Bruce returned.

"You know that?"

"I have put two and two together, Hector," Bruce replied bluntly. "I know they were in love—the rest I have guessed."

"You have talked with Autumn about it?" asked Hector.

"A little—a very little—one night just after she came back," Bruce admitted.

"You came to that conclusion together, then?" Hector asked. "I hope you don't mind my questioning you in this way. It's scarcely good manners in a host."

"It can't make the slightest difference, Hector," Bruce replied. "I see no reason why you and I should stand on ceremony."

"Certainly not! Certainly not! Because of that, I mean to tell you the truth about that episode, if you can bear the telling of it."

Bruce bit meditatively at his under lip while his eyes studied Hector's face.

"I'm of age, Hector," he said. "I guess I can stand hearing it—if you can tell it."

(TO BE CONTINUED)