

OUR WEEKLY SERIAL STORY INSTALLMENT



CHAPTER XIII—Continued

The old man drained his glass and set it on the table. "Then—listen until I'm quite through with the narrative," Hector said.

Bruce felt ridiculously like a child who was about to be told the facts of life for the first time. But in spite of his mildly derisive mood, the piquant articulateness of Hector's ancient furniture and clocks and silver and porcelain gave him a strangely warm feeling of receptivity.

However shocking Hector's disclosures were going to be, it seemed true to him now at least—whether or not the mellow personality of the room had hypnotized him—that the past was the past, yesterday flowing back into the Renaissance, into the Middle Ages, into the lush glow of prehistoric times, sealed and separate from today.

Three clocks, in various shadowed recesses of the room, struck eleven. Bruce had heard all of Hector's story, and the two men had sat for several minutes without speaking a word.

Hector got up from his chair, looked briefly at the youthful figure seated across from him, elbows propped on knees, head resting on hands, and poured out two more drinks of brandy.

"A night-cap, my boy," Hector said sturdily, as he offered the glass to Bruce.

Bruce came suddenly out of his reverie, and took the glass from Hector, then sat for a moment staring the while into the sparkling liquor.

"How much of this does Autumn know?" he asked.

"Everything I have told you," Hector replied.

"I see," Bruce said quietly. "Did you tell her?"

"Jarvis Dean told her—one night—but a short time after she came back."

"You don't happen to remember—about what night that was?"

Hector thought for a moment. "Not very clearly. She called here the next morning—I think—on her way to visit the Parrs."

"That was on her first visit, wasn't it?"

"I believe it was," Hector told him.

"It must have been," Bruce said. "It just about killed the girl, I guess."

Hector looked at him for a moment. "But why do you think she has been playing the fool ever since?"

Bruce tossed off the brandy and set his glass aside. "It's a crazy world," he said. "One night—only a week ago—I learned how it feels to want to kill a man."

Old Hector, standing above him, raised his eyebrows. A light seemed to dawn in his eyes and he smiled whimsically down upon the roughly tousled head of his guest. He waited a moment before speaking. Then:

"That was good for your soul, my boy," he observed. "You learned something that ought to mean much to you in the future."

Later, when Bruce got into his car, Hector stood within the little, cowl-like porch of his abode and noted that the Milky Way was a pearly bridge built from mountain

top to dark mountain top. Bruce called a good night and Hector waved a response. And as the car sped away he looked up at the sky again and thought how much younger the stars had been when he was young.

CHAPTER XIV

Autumn walked across the grounds to the Willmar cottage, her wide-brimmed leghorn hat in her hand, the light, warm wind blowing the skirt of her white organdie dress into a billow about her. As she approached the cottage, three children rose from the tall field of white daisies that grew in the hollow between the Castle and the foreman's lodge. The Willmar brood—Dickie, Simmy and Laura—started toward her with excited cries, their hands full of the white daisies they had been gathering. Trotting behind them came the ubiquitous Mo-mo, still possessed of his woolly tail, and bearing himself with considerably more dignity than when he had gone wandering with Simmy in the early Spring.

Autumn stooped and gathered the children into her arms, then turned and stretched her hand to rub Mo-mo's velvety nose.

Laura, the ten-year-old, pressed her blonde head close against Autumn's cheek and wound her arm tightly about her neck.

"I don't want you to go 'way, Autumn," she said, her voice full of pleading. "Mamma says we'll have to go away, too, if you go. We don't want to go."

Autumn's eyes darkened with the anxiety she had been feeling for the past week. "Nonsense, dear!" she protested. "You will stay here no matter where I go."

Dickie and Simmy broke into a duet of lament. "We can't have Mo-mo any more. The man says he's goin' to take Mo-mo away from us."

"Oh, you dear sillies!" Autumn scolded them. "No man is going to take Mo-mo. Come along, let's go in and see mother."

With a warm little-boy hand in each of hers, and with Laura walking sedately ahead of her and Mo-mo following closely behind, Autumn proceeded slowly to the Willmar cottage.

It was baking day for Mrs. Willmar. As Autumn entered the kitchen with the children, the woman turned from the table where she had been rolling out cookie pastry. The troubled look in her eyes changed swiftly to a resolute smile as she dusted the flour from her hands.

"Good morning, Miss Autumn," she said, brushing a loose strand of pale hair back from her warm brow. "My goodness, you young ones shouldn't hang on Miss Autumn's dress that way! Don't let them do it. Come away, Dickie—your hands are a sight!"

Autumn laughed and rumbled Dickie's hair. "Hands and dresses can be washed, can't they, Dickie?" she said.

Mo-mo's hoofs clattered across the kitchen floor to a basket of vegetables that stood in one corner.

"Simmy—look after Mo-mo," Mrs. Willmar sighed wearily, and wiped her face with her apron. "If you children can't mind that lamb he'll have to be kept outside. He's getting too big to be in the house, anyhow."

When the children had lugged the sheep out of the house and had gone romping into the yard, Autumn seated herself beside the kitchen table and Mrs. Willmar went on cutting out the cookies with the cover of a baking-powder can.

"Tom says you'll be leaving us soon again, Miss Autumn," she said quietly.

"Not for another two weeks or so," Autumn told her. "There is a lot to do with straightening everything up in a place like this."

"Ah, dear! I don't know what we're going to do!"

Autumn glanced quickly at her and saddened. Tom Willmar's wife was a wistful-eyed little woman who had won her way back to health when she had come to live here ten years ago. The Dean ranch had meant life itself to her. And now—the fear of being ousted from her contentment and her modest security haunted her eyes.

"I've been wanting to talk to you about that, Mrs. Willmar," Autumn said gently.

The woman turned her face toward her in an utter hopelessness that wrung Autumn's heart.

"Talking about it won't change anything, I'm afraid, Miss Autumn," she replied resignedly. "Snyder was talking to Tom last night in town. He's a hard man, that Snyder."

"What was he saying, Mrs. Willmar?" Autumn asked.

"Tom told him he'd like to stay on here—it's been home to us for over ten years now. But Snyder says his clients, as he calls them,



"It just about killed the girl, I guess."

have plans of their own and there won't be any more place for us here."

Autumn clasped her hands in her lap. For days, ever since the evening of her last conference with Snyder and the men who were considering the purchase of the ranch with all its stock and equipment, her mind had dwelt almost constantly upon the Willmars, and Hannah, and poor old Absolom Peek, and the others who had given their years of faithful service to Jarvis Dean. At the outset of her negotiations with Snyder, Autumn had supposed that her father's old dependents would remain where they were and go about their work as they had always done.

Hannah, of course, would have to be looked after, but Autumn had already resolved to take her along with her and make her remaining years as comfortable as she could in the service of Aunt Flo. Snyder had been as diplomatic as possible. He was anxious to complete the sale without delay and in a manner that would be quite satisfactory to both parties to the transfer. When Autumn had expressed her wish that the staff should remain to carry on the work, Snyder had been unwilling to commit himself. His clients, of course, would have plans of their own. He would do what he could, certainly, to bring them to accept her suggestion. In the end, Autumn had refused to put her name to

anything until the point was satisfactorily settled. The transaction had been delayed—and Snyder had been annoyed.

Autumn looked at the pitifully brave smile on the face of Mrs. Willmar. This little woman was only one of that small community of souls who, with the toil of their hands and the unquestioning courage of their spirits, had brought richness and well-being to this valley.

And now that community was to be disrupted, flagrantly, ruthlessly, with no thought of the injustice that was being done to these humble people whose loyalty to Jarvis Dean was no part of the bargain that Snyder was making. In that brief moment Autumn looked inward upon herself and saw that in her pampered life she had taken these honest folk for granted, just as carelessly she had taken for granted the substantial revenue from her father's estate. Here was a heritage from the past which she had not recognized.

"I know, Mrs. Willmar," Autumn said at last. "Mr. Snyder is being very difficult about it—though, of course, he is not altogether free to do as he chooses. He must meet the wishes of his clients. But they will never find anyone better than Tom to manage this place. I have told them so."

"There's precious little comes of telling people what they don't want to hear, Miss Autumn," Mrs. Willmar replied.

"I know," Autumn said. "But I don't want you to worry. If the worst comes to the worst, I shall see to it that you and Tom have a good position before I leave."

Mrs. Willmar had placed the cookies in a pan and turned now to put them into the oven. When she straightened again, she looked at Autumn with a small, sad smile.

"That's awfully kind of you, Miss Autumn," she said. "But you shouldn't trouble yourself about us, really. We shall get along—somehow. And it isn't so much a question of where we'll go as it is—just our leaving here. The Laird was always too kind to us, I guess. He—he spoiled us. No other place will ever seem like home to me. You see, I got my health back here—and my two youngest were born in this cottage. It makes a kind of difference—to know that we're leaving home."

Leaving home! The words cut across Autumn's heart with a cruel import. The woman could never guess what they meant to her, of course.

"Oh, Mrs. Willmar!" she cried. "If you only knew how—how terribly I understand!"

She was on the point of saying more, but suddenly, utterly bewildered by the complexities of her own feelings, she got up and went to the little woman and threw an arm impulsively about her shoulders.

"I've talked too much," Mrs. Willmar said, the tears starting to her eyes.

"I'm glad you have," Autumn said quickly. "But I don't want you to worry about it any more. I know it will work out, somehow, for the best."

There was little comfort in that, Autumn thought, but words were so futile, after all.

Mrs. Willmar hastily dabbed at her eyes. "I'm behaving badly, I'm afraid, Miss Autumn," she said brokenly. "I've no right to carry on this way. It's not proper, at all."

"Proper, fiddlesticks!" Autumn replied. She turned suddenly and looked out of the door where the children and Mo-mo were at some game in the yard. "I'll have to run along now, Mrs. Willmar." She opened the door and then looked back at the foreman's wife. "Those cookies smell awfully good. Do you suppose you could have one of the children sneak some of them past Hannah for me?"

Mrs. Willmar smiled. "We might try," she said.

A little later, when Autumn slipped in through a side door of the Castle, she surprised Hannah in the small sitting room in the act of wiping her eyes with the corner of a dust cloth. Hannah straightened severe-

ly and contrived a cheery smile which in no wise deceived Autumn.

"Hannah!" she reproved. "What's the use of carrying on like this?"

Hannah flicked the cloth indignantly over the rungs of a chair. "Who is carrying on? Not me!" she denied vigorously.

Autumn gave her a narrow look, then went into the drawing room where she seated herself at the piano, thinking to break the heavy enchantment of the house with the sound of the melodies she loved best. But after a random bar or two her hands fell dismally away from the keys and she stared from the windows into the garden, her spirits sinking under the burden that had lain upon her for almost a week.

Uppermost in her mind, above all the questions that arose out of her perplexity, was one thought that bore constantly upon her mind. Hector Cardigan had told her about the evening Bruce had spent with him, when he had unfolded the past, withholding nothing of the story of Geoffrey Landor and Millicent Dean. Autumn had lived through four days of unspeakable suspense, hoping for some gesture from Bruce, some sign of his relenting toward her. At last, in utter despair of ever hearing from him, she had turned her mind toward preparations for her departure. Her resolution to leave all behind her and begin life anew might be both cowardly and selfish, but to her defeated spirit there seemed no other way.

Late in the afternoon, when it seemed no longer possible to cope with her problems, Autumn went to the rose garden to spend an hour with her own thoughts among her mother's flowers. She had been there only a few moments when Hannah called to her from the house.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Miss Autumn," Hannah told her as she came up the porch steps.

"Is it Mr. Snyder?" Autumn asked, with the ever-recurring, breath-taking hope that this, at last, might be Bruce calling.

"I don't know. It didn't sound like him—though I don't hear like I once could."

Autumn went to the telephone and picked up the receiver. The voice was Florian Parr's. He had just come back from his business trip to Vancouver and insisted on Autumn's returning with him to Kelowna. He had talked with Linda on the telephone, he said, and it was her fervent wish to have Autumn down for a day or two so that she might meet Linda's new fiancé. Besides, Linda was planning to go to Europe on her honeymoon. There would be plans to discuss with Autumn.

"I'd love it, Florian," Autumn said impulsively, glad at the prospect of any relief from the depression that had weighed upon her all day. "I'll be ready when you get here. Hurry!"

"Right-o, old thing!" Florian chimed back. "You won't be able to see me for dust once I get started. I have a few things to do yet before I leave, but you can count on me in—make about an hour and a half, say. How's that?"

"The sooner the better," Autumn told him. "I've had a terrible day of it, one way or another. I'm dying to talk to someone."

"And I'm dying to talk to you," he replied. "I'm the original old die-hard, Autumn."

She left the telephone with a sudden feeling of relief. Florian was a good sort, after all.

After telling Hannah her plans to go to Kelowna for a couple of days, Autumn hurried upstairs, took a refreshing cold shower, and proceeded to dress with an attentiveness to her appearance which had, in times past, helped to brace her flagging morale.

Presently she stood back from her pier glass and surveyed herself. The past few weeks had taken their toll; her eyes looked frightened and too large in the hollow pallor of her face; the backward clustering of her hair seemed too heavy for her head. And this severely tailored suit of white linen, smart though it was with its mannish silk blouse, gave her an almost ascetic look.

(TO BE CONTINUED)