

OUR WEEKLY SERIAL STORY INSTALLMENT



PROLOGUE TO LOVE

by
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CHAPTER XIV—Continued

Florian would have a shock when he saw her, Autumn reflected. But the wonder that thrust sharply into the background of her thought was what Bruce might think if he came face to face with her now.

Autumn selected a half-opened pink rose from a vase on her dressing table and drew it through the lapel of her jacket. The effect was chastely sweet, she decided. Well, one had to contemplate the trivial details if one kept going at all—especially when the important things of life seemed bent on one's undoing. Bruce Lander might just possibly call while she was away—no, no, there must be an end to such thoughts as that! She tightened her lips as she heard Hannah's voice calling her from the foot of the stairs. That had been Florian's car, then, that she had heard entering the driveway.

"I'll be down in a moment, Hannah," she called back, and hastily dabbed a powder puff to the shadows under her eyes.

She had almost convinced herself that she was gay when she descended the stairway and approached the drawing room door. On the threshold, she paused abruptly and checked the greeting that was ready on her lips. The young man who rose to meet her was not Florian, but Bruce Lander.

"Hello, Autumn," he said quietly as he came toward her. "I was afraid I might not find you at home."

She felt the wild, hot flush that covered her cheeks. "Why—Bruce! I had no idea it was you. I was expecting Florian."

In her confusion she knew, of course, that she had stumbled wretchedly there.

"I'll not stay more than a minute, Autumn," he said, with a diffidence that brought her a quick marveling of incredulity.

"Oh, please!" she breathed. "Sit down—until Florian comes, at any rate."

What on earth was she saying? She felt as if her wits had left her completely. What she had just said, in effect, was that he might leave the moment Florian arrived. But perhaps Bruce would not care to meet Florian—after their last encounter.

She seated herself and Bruce took a chair near her. Somehow she could not bring herself to glance directly at him in her sharp awareness of the distraught look on his face. Every instinct of her being, alive to his nearness once more, informed her that Bruce Lander had been suffering even as she herself had suffered.

"I had hoped you might come," she found herself saying, the words stumbling out recklessly.

He darted a quick look at her. "Had you, really? I—I wasn't sure you would care one way or the other."

"Oh!" She was not sure whether or not she had spoken. Her fingers twined tightly together in her lap.

"I dropped over to say good-by, Autumn," Bruce went on. "Tom Willmar says you are planning to leave for England within a few days."

"I haven't set the time yet," Autumn replied. "It won't be for another ten days, anyway."

"I am going into the hills for a couple of weeks," he continued. "I'm leaving early in the morning. You'll probably be gone before I get back."

Her voice, when she spoke again, seemed to limp like some injured thing. "Oh," she said, "it was nice of you to come."

He opened his cigarette case and offered it to her. She was obliged to make her fingers rigid in order to control their trembling as she held the cigarette while Bruce lit it for her.

"I came, Autumn," he said at last, his voice strangely tense, "because I did not want you to leave with the feeling that—that we are not friends."

A desire to give way to tears almost overwhelmed her as she looked at him now and recognized what it



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meant for him to speak so frankly. She could have gone to him in that moment and wept in his arms.

"I have had no such feeling, Bruce," she said with some diffidence.

"I couldn't blame you if you had," he said. "I think I told you—one night—that we could not be friends."

She smiled at him but did not speak, smiled frozenly, in a silence that was unbearable.

"I wanted you to know, before you left, that we shall always be friends—because we must be. I had dinner with Hector the other night."

"He told me so," Autumn said. "I heard the whole story—our whole story," Bruce went on, with evident emotion. "I wish you had told it to me before."

Autumn lifted her hands toward him slightly in a gesture of appeal. "I wanted to tell you, Bruce, but you must know why I could not."

"I understand that perfectly, Autumn. I should have felt the same about it myself—and would probably have acted as you did."

She forced herself to look squarely into his eyes. "It has all been terrible—for both of us."

"Forget it, then," Bruce said firmly. "What's past—is past!"

As he spoke, a car drove up before the door and came abruptly to a stop. Bruce got up and walked toward the window.

"That must be Florian now," Autumn said.

"It is," Bruce told her. "I'll be on my way."

He came toward her and held out his hand. She slipped her hand into his and thought in swift panic that she was losing him now, forever.

"Did you mean what you said—that the past is past?" she asked him hurriedly, as Florian's footfall sounded at the door.

Before he could reply, Florian had bailed them from the doorway. Bruce drew back a step and Autumn turned to meet Florian, who was coming toward them, his usual easy self, his hand extended.

"Hello, folks!" he greeted them. "Great to see you again, Autumn! And you, too, Bruce! How's the big sheep man? Gosh, I haven't seen you for an age!"

"The last time we met—" Bruce began, but Florian interrupted him.

"Say, the last time you spoke to me—you had murder in your heart."

"I admit it," Bruce said with a smile.

"You're great on that defending-a-woman's-fair-name stuff, Bruce. You'll get a reputation if you're not careful. You looked ready to kill me that night—kill me with your two hands, as they say in the thrillers."

"I know I was," Bruce admitted. "I owe you both an apology for what I thought that night."

"Don't spoil it, now," Florian admonished him. "You know, you really should have lived in the days when knights were bold—and all that rot—when running a man through was just part of the day's work." He laughed at Bruce and then turned to Autumn. "Give us a drink, Autumn. I'm as dry as an old salt mine."

"Sorry I can't stay with you and join in one," Bruce said. "I've got to get into the hills first thing in the morning and I've got a lot to do before dark."

"Sorry," Florian replied. "I was hoping we might have you down at the ranch for a little party this weekend. Autumn is coming down to help us celebrate her going away. In fact, Lin told me she intends to telephone you tonight about it."

"I'd like to go," Bruce assured him, "but I can't put off the trip another day. Tell Lin for me, will you? I'll not be home to take her call."

"You're not leaving tonight?"

"No, but I'll be staying up at the cabin in the ravine tonight," Bruce replied. "I have some work to do up there on some new corrals I'm putting in."

"Well, business is business," Florian observed, "and I've had enough of it to last me for a month. How about that little drink, Autumn?"

"I'll say good-by, then," Bruce said, and gave Autumn his hand once more.

Autumn held his hand for a moment without speaking, then turned away as Bruce started for the door.

"Call me up when you come out of the hills," Florian suggested as Bruce waved him a farewell.

"Right!" Bruce replied and was gone.

Florian turned to Autumn as the door closed. "Come along, darling—one drink and we'll hit the trail."

Autumn brought the ingredients and permitted Florian to mix them. He kept up an incessant chatter concerning his trip to Vancouver and the scores of small interests that had occupied him since their last meeting. Autumn did her best to listen but found it impossible to keep her mind on what he was saying. When at last Florian filled the glasses and handed one to Autumn, she sipped it once and then set it aside.

"Come on, darling," Florian urged. "We'll have to be making tracks."

She looked at him. "I can't go with you, Florian," she told him.

"What!"

"I'm sorry," she replied, "but something has come up—since you telephoned. I've got to stay here tonight."

Florian was puzzled. He knew from her manner that there was no use in urging her to come with him. She had made up her mind.

"That's rough on me," he said, "but you've become a woman of affairs, and there isn't much I can do about it, I suppose."

"There's nothing anyone can do about me," she said, "except myself."

Florian was silent for a moment. Then he helped himself to another drink and lifted it in his hand, regarding it thoughtfully. At last he looked at her over the rim of the glass.

"You know, Autumn," he said slowly, "I have a hunch you will not go to England at all."

"I don't know, Florian," she admitted.

"You don't want to go," he told her.

"You know I don't."

"I thought as much," he said, lifting his glass. "Well—here's luck!"

Autumn lifted her glass and drank



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with him. When she set it aside once more, she got to her feet.

"You are going to stay for dinner," she announced abruptly, and in spite of his protests she went to the kitchen to confer with Hannah.

The sound of Florian's car on the highway was still audible to Autumn as she hurried to her room and began removing her white linen suit. She changed quickly to her black riding clothes and fastened a bright green scarf about her throat, her hands trembling with an unaccountable excitement.

Her flight down the stairs and out of the house brought from old Hannah a mere despairing click of the tongue. She had long since given up the struggle of trying to cope with the vagaries of her young mistress.

The sun had gone and the new moon had cut a barely perceptible silver curve in the pale sky as Autumn mounted her horse and turned him westward. She was glad, shamelessly, that her gaze fell full upon it, and neither over her right shoulder nor over her left.

Beneath the serene dome of evening the mountains had drawn into their blue secrecy. The drowsy murmur of the range drifted toward her and overwhelmed her senses with its prophecy of fulfillment.

Bruce had told Florian that he would not be at home. He would be in his cabin. She turned from the trail and rode over the hills straight in the direction of the ravine. As she came to the white birches and looked ahead, she saw the cabin among the trees, almost hidden in the dusk. There was no light in the window, and her heart fell at the thought that he might not be here, after all. If he had already gone—

She rode up the narrow trail and dismounted among the birches, leav-

ing her horse to graze as she approached the door. She did not knock, but pushed the screen door quietly open and stepped within.

Bruce was on his knees in the middle of the floor, packing a heavy box with supplies. He looked up quickly, then got to his feet and faced her in the shimmering gloom of the place. She retreated a step and leaned her back against the frame of the doorway.

For a moment neither spoke. Then he stepped toward her.

"Autumn!" he said, his voice quick with excitement.

"You did not answer my question—this afternoon," she said.

"What question?" he replied.

Autumn strove to speak but her voice failed her. Bruce came and stood looking down at her.

"What question?" he repeated.

"Did you mean it—when you said—the past is past?"

"I meant—just that!" he told her.

"Forever?"

"Forever—and ever!"

She looked at him for a moment before she spoke again.

"And you told me once—that I should never come here again," she said, smiling up at him. "Did you mean that, too?"

The slender furrow deepened in either cheek as he leaned toward her.

"I meant that, too," he said. "I meant it—then."

She caught her hat suddenly from her head and flung it across the room.

"I'm here!" she said. "That's why I've come."

[THE END]

Land May Have Linked Asia to North America

A Chinese scholar and his American colleague, poking about a prehistoric lake bed in Shantung province, discovered evidence indicating that some 15,000,000 or more years ago the continents of Asia and North America were linked by dry land.

The results of their search were described by the American, Dr. Ralph W. Chaney of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, before the Geological Society of America and its affiliated organizations, says the New York Times.

He and his Chinese associate, Hsen-Hsu Hu, found fossilized bones of primitive deer, rhinoceros and members of the cat family, as well as plant impressions.

Their discovery, he said, supports their theory that primitive North American animals and plants came here from Asia ages before the mighty geological upheavals on the west coast of North America which upraised the Cascade and Alaskan mountain ranges while depressing the land ridge between the two continents and forming Bering Strait.

Plants similar to those discovered in Asia apparently flourished in Wyoming and other western states millions of years ago, and descendants of the animals unearthed are found today in tropical and semi-tropical Asia, although they disappeared from North America probably before prehistoric man crossed the ice of the straits from Asia, Dr. Chaney's paper said.

The Shantung of that period, according to the types of flora disclosed by the fossils, had a climate far more humid and somewhat warmer than it has today, Dr. Chaney added. It approximated modern conditions in the Yangtze valley and at middle elevations in Japan, where present-day equivalents of many of the fossil plants have been traced.

Dr. Horace G. Richards, expert on the geology of the Mexican gulf coast, disclosed in a paper that the finding of marine glacial-age fossils at a depth of 2,400 feet in the Mississippi delta region offers some evidence as to the amount of silt that river has carried down through the ages. Thus since the last ice age, which geologists place at from 18,000 to 20,000 years ago, it would appear that more than 2,400 feet of silt have been deposited by the river near its mouth.