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Lindsey's Wedding:

—OR—
THE TWENTIETH OF DECEMBER.

CONCLUDED.

DROPPING upon one knee, he peered once more into the dead face, then winding his hand in the man's neckcloth, he dragged him over the ground towards a deep gully at the lower part of the grounds. It was not far. I listened and heard the body crash through the brush, and thud among the stones below.

It was a course of the utmost shallowness to pursue, if concealment was the guilty man's aim as it must have been.—But he seemed to realize his guilt so fully that I think it dazed him.

He strode away under the larches to the house. I never stirred for many a long hour. I was trying to decide what I ought to do.

Of a certainty I never thought of exposing the matter—of bringing Lindsey's father to justice. I was only confused by the horror and suddenness of the matter, and uncertain how I could best help those I loved. I could not decide then.

But after I had sought my bed, and lay on my sleepless pillow, I made a plan. If the body lay where it was it would be discovered, and the secret ferreted out. At the bottom of the gully was a bed of bushes and brambles and the corpse was probably concealed among these. It was not safe there, but a little further along, upon the hillside, was an old well. Here it would never—in our generation, at least—be found. There, on the following night, I would place it. All my life I had been a tough and powerful woman. I knew that I had sufficient strength left to do that for Lindsey.

I fell asleep just at daybreak; for I was not quite independent of the infirmities of my sixty years in spite of the dangers of the hour; but when I awoke and heard the birds singing, it seemed as if it must all have been some horrible dream.

If it was only a terrible vision, Colonel Walton had dreamed it too, for he came down to breakfast with a pallid face and bloodshot eyes. Mr. Guthrie was already in the breakfast-room. He stood at a window trimming his delicate nails with his pen-knife when I went in to see if the table was all right.

"Good-morning, Guthrie! The major has left us!" said the colonel.

I felt myself tremble.

"What? already?" asked Guthrie, turning around.

"Yes. He walked down to the landing for the early boat."

I saw Guthrie smile then, but I suspected nothing. They sat down at table, and the colonel's hand trembled as he cut the steak. I could not bear to look at him, and I came out.

I did not understand it until later, but after this I noticed that Guthrie often observed me closely during the next two days.

As I had planned I went, the next night, after the moon had set, to the gully. I went down into it, and searched every spot large enough to set my foot on, and not a token of that dead man's body could I find. I concluded, that the colonel had taken it away and buried it. How, when and where I could not guess.

But I knew afterwards, that, in his sleeping thoughts, and in his waking ones, Colonel Walton believed that dead face lay

among the brambles at the bottom of that gully. He never went near it. The next day Guthrie left us.

Others beside myself saw that Colonel Walton was a changed man. He was pallid and haggard. Sometimes he would shut himself up in his room for days; and then he would be in a constant haste and flurry with business, coming home at night ready to drop. He talked of selling the estate; several gentlemen came out from the city to look at it.

This distressed Lindsey very much, for she was fond of Larch Lanes. But I thought I knew how hateful the place must be to the man, with that still gully lying behind the trees. No words can tell how I pitied him.

Nearly two months went by. Ben and Lindsey wanted to be married. Lindsey purposed to ask her father again for his consent. They had made so many plans—those two happy young things!

She saw her father so seldom that she was obliged to seek a chance of meeting him—so she set upon an evening and waited for the boat to come in. It was a chilly fall night, and a fire was kindled in the library grate.

She wandered around there, now sitting for a moment in the easy chair before the grate, now looking out of the window, now going to the door to listen for carriage wheels. She was a little nervous and apprehensive of disappointment, for her father was more difficult to approach than ever of late.

Suddenly there were voices in the hall, and the colonel entered with Mr. Guthrie.

The latter saluted Lindsey with profound courtesy. At the first opportunity she asked her father if she could speak with him for a moment.

"You want to ask about that wedding, I suppose," he answered, carelessly. "You may be married any time you please—say the twentieth of December."

Lindsey came out radiant, but in a little natural tremulousness.

"I am afraid Mr. Guthrie heard what my father said," said she, "for I saw him smile. What a cold-looking, handsome man he is!"

The colonel rang for wine. As usual, he had supped in town. Lindsey was in my room, talking over her plans for the wedding, when the library bell rang again, and Tip came up to say the colonel wanted me.

"Surely they don't want supper! 'Tis ten o'clock," said I.

I went down. The colonel sat at the table; it was Mr. Guthrie who saluted me and bade me be seated. He himself brought me a chair and then locked the door.

"This will secure us from interruption," he said, in his smooth, cold voice. "I shall detain you but a few moments, Mrs. Douglas."

I glanced at the colonel. He was looking steadfastly at Guthrie, who, after a moment drew from his breast a two-edged silver-handled clasp-knife, and laid it upon the table.

"Have either of you ever seen that before?" He asked.

The colonel gave an inarticulate cry. My breath stopped, for I knew it was the knife with which Major Southly was killed.

"Do I need to say any more?" asked Guthrie.

There was a silence of several moments. The colonel sat with his hands clenched upon the arms of his chair, and his livid face bent towards the floor.

"How much do you know?" he asked at length, in a stifled voice.

"I know that you killed Major Southly in a quarrel near the summer-house, last August, and that you threw his body into a gully not far from the spot. I know that Mrs. Douglas, here, was witness to the deed, as she was in the summer-house at the time it was committed."

I could not bear to witness the unutterable agony of Colonel Walton's face. It was evident that he had dwelt enough upon the circumstances to instantly fully realize the

situation. My heart bled within me at the next sound of his broken voice.

"What do you intend to do?"

"On conditions, nothing."

Mr. Guthrie was standing upon the hearth-rug, his white hands locked behind him, looking down at us, calmly and keenly.

"What do you want?" asked the colonel, in a broken tone.

"The hand of your daughter."

There was another silence.

"If Miss Walton becomes my wife," Mr. Guthrie went on, "I shall never use my knowledge of your guilt to your harm. Major Southly shall rest where I buried him. But, otherwise, I shall make the matter public."

It was then that the colonel looked up and gazed at me.

"I interred the body with my own hands upon the night of the murder," said Guthrie, quietly.

I saw that the colonel looked at me with a little hope. He felt and knew that I was his friend.

It is true that I was—but, just then, the sweet face of my darling, full of its sacred happiness, rose up between us, and I felt a flame of indignation, that she should be sacrificed to save her selfish father, sweep across my brow. As he looked at me his eyes dilated with the last horror of despair. He rose, tried to speak, threw up his arms, and fell in a fit at our feet.

We brought him to without raising the house, though with much difficulty. At length he lay upon the couch, sensible and miserable, overwhelmed with physical and mental suffering. At last he asked for Lindsey.

"She has retired," I said.

"Send her down here to sit with me. The rest of you leave me," he said.

I went up and woke Lindsey, who lay dreaming in the sweetest peace. She started up alarmed.

"Your father has been quite ill," I said.

"He is better now, but he wants you to come and sit with him."

"Why, my father was never sick before!" she said, hurrying to dress.

I watched her go down. Her hair, in all its confused curls, clung about her throat. She had forgotten the cord of her wrapper, and it swept its whole length around her.—It was fastened hurriedly at the throat with a little coral pin, and upon her cheeks still lingered the flush of healthy sleep. In the hall she met Guthrie, who regarded her steadily, but she took no notice of him, and went on to her father. When the door closed after her, I sat down upon the stairs and wept in an utter abandon of despair.

I have no doubt that Guthrie quietly went to rest in the chamber assigned to him. He could afford to sleep; his interests were safe. He had perfected his part with a deliberation which admitted of nothing but success. Of course Lindsey would not let her father go to the gallows.

When I rose, the next morning, I did not venture to disturb them in the library. I went about my tasks, feeling their insignificance, and so weighed upon that when I heard the servants laughing in the kitchen, I stepped to the door and looked at them in wonder. Tip asked timidly if I were ill. I told her no, though my very soul was sick within me. I remember now that they all regarded me with pity, and I heard a whisper that "the old lady was breaking up."

It was past nine o'clock when I ventured to send Tip to the library to see if the colonel would take some breakfast. She came back saying that he was asleep.

I went up and softly opened the door.—Lindsey was not there, and the colonel lay upon the couch, before the fire, in a light slumber. There was an oppressive stillness in the room, and O, how terribly wan and ill the colonel looked! He had a look of deep sickness and age upon him, and for the first time, I noticed streaks of white among his hair and beard.

I came out without waking him, and went up and knocked at Lindsey's door.—Mr. Guthrie had breakfasted and sat upon the piazza, smoking.

Lindsey's door was locked, but she came and let me in. Evidently she had not slept any. She was pale, her eyes were heavy, and there were blue shadows under them.

"Is my father wanting anything?" she asked.

I said no. I could not speak again. I made myself busy spreading up the bed while she stood listlessly brushing up her hair.

She laid down the brush, finally, and sank into a seat, as if her strength had suddenly failed her.

"Aunt Manny," she said "when Ben calls to-day, tell him I cannot see him. Tell him I can never see him again. I am going to marry Mr. Guthrie."

I broke out crying.

"I would see Ben if I could," she added, in a suppressed voice. "I dare not. I am afraid that I haven't strength to go through with it myself. But I shall try for my father's sake."

"No fear, poor dear, that they will let you fall back!" I sobbed.

She made no reply.

"Be very kind to Ben, Aunt Manny," she said, after a moment. "Cheer him all you can. The twentieth of December I am to marry Mr. Guthrie."

She turned as pale as a sheet with the last words, but sat calm and quiet.

"Father will give you money. You must get me ready," she added.

"I will not! I will not put my hand to such wickedness!" I cried.

"But the marriage will take place just the same," she said, quietly. "It will be better to have things in order."

"And what then?" said I, looking at her in wonder.

"I am going to Guthrie Falls to live, I suppose."

I did not ask her how much she knew.—What did it matter? She was to be sacrificed; that was the main thing. Her father had pleaded with her, and her love for him had done the rest.

Well, what could I do but see Ben, witness his passion and despair, send for the very seamstress who had been already engaged for preparing Lindsey's outfit, and arrange everything for the wedding?

Guthrie had the wisdom not to force his attentions on Lindsey. He seldom visited the colonel, either. He seemed quite willing to keep out of sight of the misery he had consummated.

But on the morning of the wedding, he came and presented Lindsey with a deed of his splendid home at Guthrie Falls.

In spite of the best medical care, the colonel had not yet left the house. He looked poorly enough. There were to be no guests. Lindsey looked like a lily. I was afraid she would faint; but she made the responses calmly and steadily.

The wedding ring was the most magnificent diamond I ever saw. She had sent Ben back his sapphire, kissing it first—and then burying her face in her hands.

The marriage service ended. Mr. Guthrie kissed his wife, and I kissed her pale cheeks and lips, and held her head for a moment, not in congratulation, but out of the undying love of my heart. "Dear Aunt Manny," she murmured, and then turned to her father. He put his arms about her and held her to his breast. When he released her, her face was quite radiant.

She was to go to Guthrie Falls that very night. A splendid sleigh, Mr. Guthrie's, was brought to the door immediately after the service. I could hear the bells jingling as I wrapped Lindsey up, in her chamber above.

"It's a terrible cold night, and growing colder, dearie," I said. "I wish it were not so far. But you must keep well cuddled down under the robes."

I was about to fold a crimson shawl around her, under her cloak, but she put it aside.

"Not that; it looks like blood," she said.

She caught up a little wadded sacque of brown silk.

"This will be warmer," she added.

At last she was well robed from head to foot. A cloak of superb Russian sable enveloped her whole figure. So she came down, was kissed by her father at the door and handed into the sleigh by Guthrie. The air stung my face like fire as I leaned from the hall to look after her. She called her last good-by and they were off. There were only the two. Guthrie drove the splendid Black Hawk horses, while Lindsey sat well sheltered from the cutting blast.

After making her comfortable, he did not speak to her. He was probably busy with the prospects of his marriage; he must have had expectations of some difficulty in perfecting his happiness.

On they glided. They had twelve miles of travel before them. It was bitterly cold and every moment growing more so.

Guthrie showed signs of suffering, at last; thrashed his arms across his breast, and muttered that he was chilled through. As the wind fell, the cold became more intense, and he finally settled into a position of stolid endurance.

The horse travelled swiftly. The houses trees and fences glided swiftly by—yet the white, crisp road stretched miles before them.

A numbness and torpidity settled upon Lindsey. Yet she did not suffer much, and waited patiently for the end.

At length the horses wound smoothly about a turn in the road, and she heard their hoofs strike the bridge just below Guthrie Falls.

"Are we most there?" she asked.

Her companion did not answer.

The sleigh whirled on—past a building and finally up an avenue. Out of her muffings she could see a light. The horses made a turn and stopped at the door.

As the jingle of the sleigh-bells paused, the door flew open, and a man came down the steps.

"Fritz is away, sir; I will take the horses," he said.

Mr. Guthrie did not stir nor answer.

"Shall I help the lady, sir?" asked the man, advancing to the sleigh.

No reply.

The servant stepped forward and held the lantern to his masters face, while the horses impatiently pealed their bells.

"Good heavens! he is stone dead!" he cried.

It was true. Mr. Guthrie, exposed by his driving, had frozen to death beside his bride. They carried him, a stiff corpse, into the house.

And so ended the twentieth of December. Soon, very soon, we had Lindsey among us again. Before the spring, the sapphire was back upon her hand—the diamond laid away.

She was mistress of the magnificent Guthrie estate. Guthrie had surely intended to make her happy in his way.

It was rather a fortunate thing, for Ben Arundel, looking upon Lindsey's broken father in the light of a tyrant, refused even a wedding supper at his expense. He was not wealthy, and it was well that Lindsey had means of her own.

But the colonel never recovered from his mental and physical injury. He was soon a feeble old man, so pitifully patient, that Ben, at last, relented in his resentment. When the baby was born, he consented that Lindsey should name him for her father.—The little one was the last gleam of sunshine on Colonel Walton's life. He died blessing him, and it was to the child that he left the larger part of his fortune. Lindsey was pleased to have it so.

As for myself, I am still Aunt Manny—an old woman in the corner—but well-loved, I feel, when my darling comes and lays her boy across my knee, and then puts her own sweet cheek against my breast. We are very happy at Guthrie Falls, for all sad associations are overborne by an active, sunny life. Larch Lanes was sold, and the owner filled up the gully, in total ignorance of the past, and planted a vineyard over it.