

The Bloomfield Times.

FRANK MORTIMER,
Editor and Proprietor.

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Intercepted Letters.

THE fields were turning brown; the pitiless wind was stripping the trees of their gay dresses, one melancholy robin piped plaintively from the tall elm at the foot of the garden. The whole world was putting on sackcloth and ashes, it seemed to Syl, as she stood at the garden gate bidding Stephen Lawrence good-by.

"It will only be for a little while," he said, looking tenderly down into the tear-brimmed eyes. "Before you begin to think of spring, I shall come back—come back to claim my wife! Syl, darling, be true to me, whatever they say, whatever happens!"

"I will," answered Syl.

"I will," she murmured, over and over again to herself, watching him until the turn in the road hid him from her sight, "whatever happens, whatever they say!"

"They" meant her mother and Aunt Jane; Aunt Jane, especially. The sitting-room door was ajar, and Syl heard her voice as she went into the house.

"You have been very imprudent to allow her to go with him so much, Susan," she said. "I never had any opinion of these city young men that come along as sure as the summer does, to turn all the girls' heads, and artists are always poor as church mice, everybody knows. As for the notion he has got into Sylvia's head that she has a wonderful talent for drawing, it is all sheer nonsense, of course.—She's got no money to pay to learn, and if she had, and could be a great artist, she couldn't make so much money as she'll have when she is Derrick Hurst's wife, without the trouble of earning it. For my part, I am very glad that dreadful smooth-spoken Mr. Stephen Lawrence is going away, and I hope Sylvia has got a little common sense left, and won't insist upon writing to him. We must get her safely married to Derrick Hurst before Christmas! But I am sure I don't know where her wedding outfit is to come from. Oh, that we should have come to such poverty!"

Syl didn't care to hear any more. She stole softly up stairs to her room, and shut the door to put out the sound of the voices down stairs that it made her almost frantic to hear. It was not that she cared so much for what Aunt Jane said, for she was always sure to have something to worry and complain about; the slightest thing would do. Syl remembered, wondering when she was a very little girl, what Aunt Jane would do when she got to heaven, where there would be nothing to fret about. And that was before she had any real trouble.—Now she wore widow's weeds, and there were traces of suffering in her face. Six years before her husband had gone to California to seek his fortune. He was successful even beyond his expectations, and in a year started for home with money enough, so he wrote, to make them all independent for life. But he never reached home. He was seen at Allston, a town only ten miles distant, on a stormy winter night, and he was never seen again. He seemed to drop out of existence completely, then, leaving not the shadow of a trace behind; while at home they waited and watched for him in vain. The road from Allston was long and lonely, to be sure, and he was a careless man, and might have boasted of the money he was carrying home, but robbers were very uncommon there, and nobody had seen any strangers about. His disappearance created a great excitement for a time, and then was forgotten, as such things are, except by his wife and sister—Syl's mother—who waited and watched, and caught their breath at the sound of every footstep, in the long, dreary nights and days, and grow sick at heart as the suspense settled down into a certainty that he would never come; and yet, not quite a certainty, for even now a sudden knock at the door, or a letter in an un-

known handwriting, would make their hearts thrill.

So, remembering Aunt Jane's trouble, Syl tried to be patient with her continual complaints and her interference with all her affairs. But she did think she might be allowed to marry without her consent.—Aunt Jane had a horror of poverty, and so had Syl's mother, and poverty was knocking loudly at their door. Syl's father had died when she was a baby, leaving his wife and child little beside the farm they lived on; and, wanting shrewd brains to take care of it, that little had dwindled rapidly away. Of late, the harvest had proved a failure every year, the farm was mortgaged at first, then passed entirely out of their hands, and Aunt Jane declared they should all go the poor house unless Syl married Derrick Hurst. Her mother said less, but Syl knew that her heart was as firmly set upon her marrying Derrick Hurst, as Aunt Jane was. Before Stephen Lawrence came, she had thought that she might some day do as they wished, if there were really no other way to keep them from starving, but now, not for worlds! not if they all had to beg their bread, she said to herself, every time she heard his name mentioned. She had never liked Derrick Hurst. She remembered him as a surly, ill-natured boy when they went to school together; she had always preferred any one of the other boys for a cavalier, and been annoyed and indignant when the girls teased her about him, for he always insisted upon drawing her sled and brought her apples and candy, and made himself her devoted slave. He had never been a favorite in the village until of late his evident prosperity and wealth had made him popular. When his father died, seven or eight years before, they had been poor, everybody said; the farm on which they lived three miles out of the village, was all "running down," and the house going to decay; and for two or three years afterward Derrick had seemed to have no ambition to make things better. But all at once there was a change. Derrick went away to the city, and stayed nearly a year, and made money in fortunate speculations, people said. At any rate, the farm soon began to hold its own with the best farms in the country; and it was no wonder, the old farmers said, considering the money that was spent on it. The house was repaired, too, and now that was not fine enough for Derrick. His new house in the village was almost done—a stately mansion, with a French roof, and bay windows, and all modern appurtenances, finer than any body in Densboro had ever dreamed of having.

And of this fair mansion Syl was invited to be mistress. A lucky girl, everybody said. There wasn't another girl in Densboro who wouldn't jump at the chance, even if there were some who would consider Derrick an incumbrance. One couldn't expect to have such a position in life without some drawbacks. And Derrick was a fine fellow, with the dress and manners of a gentleman, and, if the Hursts had been a rather worthless drinking set, the Dericks, his ancestors on his mother's side, were the first people in the country. Of course Syl had only been flirting with that artist from the city to tease Derrick; she was always a bit of a coquette. She would never be such a fool as to refuse Derrick.

Syl had refused Mr. Derrick Hurst, but he did not seem able to realize, any more than the rest of the village people, that she could be in earnest in declining such a position in life as he offered her, or else, as his face indicated, he was not the one to take no for an answer, not the one to accept defeat while there was a shadow of a chance of victory. And he said to himself now, that he had more than the shadow of a chance of victory, with Aunt Jane and Syl's mother, on his side, and their farm in his hands.

Syl walked her chamber floor, that afternoon, and considered what she should do. "Get her married to Derrick Hurst before Christmas, indeed!" Aunt Jane would see! And they would not go to the poor-house, either. For had not Stephen Lawrence declared that she had wonderful talent, and, with the instruction he had given her, might paint pictures that would sell, might become in time, a famous artist? Already Syl fancied herself presenting the deed of the farm to her mother on her own wedding day—the day when she should be married to Stephen Lawrence, with scarcely a remonstrance even from Aunt Jane. For when she should be a millionaire, by her own labors, who would presume to dictate to her? And so Syl reared her stately castle, and its foundations, in the talent that she felt and knew

she possessed, looked so solid, that she would have laughed at any body who called it a castle in the air.

"It seems to me you were out a good while," said Aunt Jane, when she went down stairs. "Mr. Hurst was up here to see you. I guess he'll come again this evening. I suppose you know that the rent is due, and there's no way that I know of to pay it. It isn't very pleasant to be dependent on anybody that you treat as you do Derrick Hurst!"

"We are not going to be dependent on Derrick Hurst. I have a way to pay the rent, and I don't think he will have to wait for it more than a month, at the most."

Aunt Jane opened her eyes wide.

"O, you expect to earn the money by the exercise of your talent, I suppose!" she said, scornfully.

"Yes," said Syl, with provoking coolness.

"Well," said Aunt Jane after a pause, making a feint of wiping her eyes with her handkerchief, "If John had only lived, your mother and I shouldn't be obliged to depend upon a silly heartless chit of a girl like you. Talent, fiddlesticks!" she cried removing her handkerchief as her wrath began to rise again—"I'd rather have common sense enough to see which side my bread was buttered on, than all the talent in the world!"

Syl withdrew from the contest then, for however long it might last, Aunt Jane was always sure to have the last word.

Derrick Hurst made his appearance that evening, with his black brows a little unbecoming from their usual frown; now that the coast was clear he was sure of winning.

But the reception Syl gave him was anything but promising. "We shall ask you to wait only a little while longer for your rent, Mr. Hurst," she said, with something of a grand air, and a tone that said, "of course, you could have come here only on business!"

"Rent! don't talk to me of rent!" said he, impatiently. "You know I am glad and happy to have you live here as long as—until you come to live in my new house, with me, Syl!"

The angry blood mounted to Syl's forehead, and her eyes flashed. "That will never be!" she said, and left him for her mother and Aunt Jane to entertain, while she went to her own room, and tried to forget her anger in the delights of carmine and cobalt.

While Mr. Derrick Hurst, taking his homeward way, said to himself, with an exclamation which he would not have cared to have Syl hear:

"It will be! it shall be! and soon, too!"

Syl's first picture was soon finished, for she put her whole soul into it, and worked night and day. She sent it to an art dealer in the nearest large city, and waited in anxious suspense to learn its fate, on which all her hopes depended. Stephen Lawrence had asked her to send it to him to sell, but she knew that if he were unable to sell it he would by it himself to save her from disappointment, and let her think she had been successful. So she determined to win her way without help. It seemed an age to her before she heard from her picture. Then a brief discouraging letter came. Her picture was bold and somewhat original, but showed an unskilled hand. By years of study and practice she might win success, but now the market was filled with pictures like hers, which could find no sale.

So Syl's castle crumbled, before her eyes, utterly into ruins, soon, for Stephen Lawrence's letters suddenly ceased. Syl was sure at first that that he must be ill or dead, and kept on writing to him, in vain. Aunt Jane and her mother were loud in proclaiming that they had known, all the time, he was only flirting with Syl; he was on the lookout for a rich wife; there were girls enough who could be fooled into marrying him, by his handsome face and his soft speeches.

It was long before Syl doubted him; she conjured up a thousand things, probable, and improbable, that might have prevented his writing. She never quite lost faith in him. But what was she to do? Her "mither pressed her sair," as in the old song; disappointment and suspense had made her pale and ill, and the village people began now to shake their heads, and say that Syl Shepard was in love with that artist, after all, and was pining away on his account, and Syl was proud, and that was hard to bear; and, more than all, they were dependent on Derrick Hurst for shelter; by-and-by what would keep them from starving, now that her talent had failed her.

So it came to pass that Derrick Hurst went home one night, triumphant, leaving his betrothal ring on Syl's finger. The new house was finished and ready for its mistress, and the wedding was arranged to take place in the last of January. Aunt Jane and Syl's mother, and Derrick had arranged it, and Syl did not even hint at a delay. She feigned an interest in her wedding preparations, and tried her best to be cheerful, even gay, for Syl was not one to wear her heart upon her sleeve. She knew that she could never forget Stephen Lawrence, and that happy summer past, but she banished all thought of them, as much as possible, from her mind. But she could not give up her painting, though that recalled her teacher consolation; the only way in which she could forget her sorrow, for a moment.

It was only three weeks before the wedding day. There was to be a ball at Allston, and, after repeated urging from Derrick, Syl had consented to go. She was the prettiest girl in Densboro, and Derrick liked to display his conquest. To Syl, now, such gayeties were torture, and she was glad enough to find it a stormy day when she awoke.

"La," said Aunt Jane, "the storm wont hurt you! You may be sure that Derrick wont mind it, for he is determined to show you to the Allston folks."

And Derrick didn't mind, though the storm raged still more fiercely, as it drew towards night. Syl had been strangely nervous and excited all day. She felt a presentiment of something going to happen, whether good or ill she could not tell. And, though she laughed at her own folly, she could not rid herself of it. She was gay without an effort, and Aunt Jane and her mother agreed with Derrick Hurst that she had never looked so well in her life. She wore a white muslin dress, caught up with cherry ribbons over a cherry silk petticoat that had been Aunt Jane's, in the days of her youthful gayeties, and the ribbons were not so bright as her cheeks. Even the long dreary ride through the storm to Allston, with Derrick Hurst beside her, could not take away her spirits. When they passed the Hurst farm, which was out on the road to Allston, the great lonely old house made Syl shudder. There were pine trees around it, and they made such a lonesome moaning as the wind swept through them!

She felt a thrill of thankfulness that that was not to be her home. Derrick's mother was to live there still, after he was married and gone to his new house. She was very old, and never went outside the door. There were stories about that she had lost her mind, or was insane; nobody knew exactly what was the matter, for nobody except Derrick and his aunt had seen her for years. The aunt, his father's sister, was to live with her still; she was a stern, hard-featured old woman, who never had lived and never would live in any house where she could not be mistress. Syl had only seen her once or twice—the Hursts had always lived in a solitary way having very little to do with the village people—but from that slight acquaintance she had decided she could readily excuse her from living with her.

Syl was the gayest of the gay at the ball, but it was only because of a nervous restlessness that had nothing to do with happiness.

The storm had increased with every hour after nightfall, and when they set out on their return it raged fearfully; the rain and sleet drove into the carriage so that Syl was drenched, the darkness was intense, and the horse stopped entirely every now and then, unable to struggle against the furious wind.

"We may be able to get as far as my house," Derrick said. "You cannot possibly get home to-night. Aunt Joanna will take care of you and give you some dry clothing."

Any other time the thought of passing the night in that house, that had always looked so dreary and ghostly to her, would have been insupportable to Syl, but now in the storm and darkness the light that streamed from its windows looked cheery and inviting. Still, if it had been possible, she would have preferred to go home, and she was sure Derrick would have preferred to have her, for he always seemed averse to having her enter that house.

But Aunt Joanna made an effort to relax her grim features into a smile, as she greeted her, and bustled about, with quite a show of hospitality, to get her some hot tea and dry clothing. But when she ushered her into the room where she was to sleep, Syl's heart almost failed her. It was a great desolate room on the ground floor,

with a damp uninhabitable feeling, and looking as if nobody had entered it for years. The dust lay thick on the clumsy old-fashioned furniture, and the spiders had festooned their webs over the windows.—Miss Joanna made some half-muttered apology for the uninviting aspect of the room; they so seldom had company that she had got into the habit of neglecting the rooms which they did not use. Even the wood-fire, burning in the open fireplace, did not take away anything of the dreary, uncanny look of the apartment. The shadows of the firelight took ghastly shapes on the walls; outside the wind moaned and wailed through the pines like a human voice.

Sleep would not come at Syl's bidding. She lay and listened to the wind, and watched the wavering shadows on the wall that now were ghastly faces, and now ghostly beckoning hands, while the night wore slowly away. How could it be so long, she wondered, ten was almost gone when she left the ball-room in the Allston Hotel?—Suddenly she heard slow soft footfalls in the hall, then the door of her room swung noiselessly open. Syl was not sure whether she was awake or dreaming, when she saw the figure that entered—a little old woman with a yellow wrinkled face, and white hair falling around it. As she came before the fire, so that its light fell on her face, Syl recognized her. It was Derrick's mother. She had seen her often in childhood, but she had changed fearfully since then. If she had seen her anywhere else she would not have known her, Syl said to herself.

She went up to the bed and looked keenly, yet with a sort of terror in her face, at Syl. The blood grew cold in Syl's veins, she had no strength to move or cry out.

"It isn't him nor his ghost," the old woman murmured. "You needn't be afraid; they wouldn't kill a little girl like you. But there has been blood spilled in this house—in this very room!" Her voice sank to tragic whisper on the last words, and then she moaned and rung her hands, and paced up and down the room.

Syl felt as if some horrible nightmare were upon her. And yet she knew it was reality; she was alone with this mad woman, and with no power to call for help.

She came back to the bed soon, and bent her lips to Syl's ear.

"There's blood on those walls beside the bed! They had it papered over, but paper wont stay on it; you can see how it has started off. I pulled up one corner the other day, and I saw the blood! Joanna doesn't know that I come here; she would kill me if she did! she doesn't like to come herself, and she isn't afraid of anything earthly. But this room is full of ghosts! they are walking around here, and crying and groaning all night. I thought you were one of them, at first. He is here—John Lyford, with that great gash in his throat, and the blood streaming out—rivers and rivers of blood! Is it not very strange that he can come back when he is buried so deep? way down at the bottom of the old well; you know where the old well is, out by the pine-grove. They carried him out there—Derrick and Joanna. It was hard, when he was only three miles from home wasn't it? But the old well is deep, and no body will ever know it. And Derrick is a rich man, now, you know, and nobody will ever know where John Lyford is. Derrick has built a new house; he don't like to live here, because John Lyford's ghost comes here, and he is going to marry John Lyford's niece—little Syl Shepard. She don't see the blood on his hands; nobody can see it but me, Joanna says; but there it is, dripping, dripping all the time!"

She moaned and wrung her hands frantically, and then talked incoherently and excitedly. Syl, straining her ears to the utmost, could not catch an intelligible word. All her terror had vanished in the excitement of the fearful discovery she had made. Was it truth, or only the fancies of this disordered brain?

The gray light of dawn was just beginning to stream into the window, and the old woman took her departure, first coming to the bedside again, and looking, with that same terrified expression, at Syl, as if not yet sure that she was not a ghost.

Syl was not bewildered nor frightened, now. She was filled with amazement and horror, but her brain had never been clearer. How plainly the story had been told. And there was not a shadow of doubt of its truth in her mind. A hundred trifles that she had scarcely noticed before, crowded up in her memory to confirm the story. Derrick's nervousness at unexpected footsteps and sounds, the sudden palor that