

The Christmas Bride

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By Grace Livingston Hill

WNU Service

CHAPTER VI—Continued

"But if he won't, and if we lose it, why we thought perhaps we would just go down the mountain and find some place where they would board us for what we could do this winter. I'm still able to cook, and your grandfather can do clerical work. So you're not to worry. He thinks his friend, Elihu Martin, will let him keep books in his hardware store.

"So we are quite cheerful about it now. And I'm just writing to suggest that perhaps if you would speak to some of the rich ladies that come into your office sometimes, perhaps you could get them interested in buying some of the old furniture. You know that old walnut chest is over 200 years old and really ought to be worth something.

"Your grandfather just said that he feels there might be just a possibility that Elias might weaken and let us have a little longer time on paying the mortgage if we could be sure of having the whole of the interest in hand the day it is due. He thinks he can get together enough all but \$25, and he is wondering if you would have any way of getting that other \$25 by Thanksgiving? Let us know what you think.

"Your loving grandmother,

"REBECCA LORIMER."

Eventually Margaret got control of herself. She ought to have written before.

She walked steadily to the telegraph desk and wrote out her telegram.

"New job. Awfully busy. Depend on me. Money Thanksgiving. Lovingly.

MARGARET."

She paid for the message and turned away, somewhat relieved in mind. But where was she to get the \$25?

Now she must get a real job somehow. And to that end she must have at least one good night's rest. So she went to the Travelers Aid and asked questions, discovering a place where she could get a clean bed for 35 cents.

She stopped at a drug store on the way and got a cup of hot soup and a sandwich.

Her heart sank as she hurried down the street toward the sleeping quarters. She had relieved the minds of her dear family for the moment, and had fed and housed herself for the night, but she was in a desperate situation. What was she to do? Twenty-five dollars! Where could she get it?

She sighed deeply as she entered the clean bare precincts of the charity dormitories.

She paused inside the warm entrance hall to slip her grandmother's letter into the little compartment with the other letter she knew was there, patting it tenderly, choked back a sob, strapped it in with the other, and went in to the desk to apply for a bed.

Gregory Sterling looked down upon that little jeweled hand on his arm and something protective flared in his heart. He looked up at the flabby Mortie triumphantly. He was needed here to shelter Alice from these half-drunken people. He would get her away from them presently and bring her home and try to dissuade her from this sort of thing. He remembered their beautiful intimate dinner, and looked down at her again, her face turned in profile there against his shoulder. What did that remind him of?

There had been another face quite recently turned thus against his shoulder, closer than this, white and sweet and fragile in its beauty. Margaret! Involuntarily he drew back just a fraction and looked at this beautiful painted face. Somehow it did not belong there. Somehow it gave him a start. What was it like? Those red lips, glaringly red under the bright light of the vestibule chandelier?

Ah! Those girls on the train. How he disliked their memory.

Refined, educated, exquisitely garbed as Alice was, she yet resembled somehow those girls, those dreadful girls! Or was she refined? He didn't know. He honestly didn't. His mother didn't use to think she was refined as a girl, but he had thought her wrong.

Suddenly he lifted the lady's hand from his arm and held it out to Mortie.

"With all appreciation of the honor you would put upon me," he

said to Alice, I must forego the pleasure. This gentleman I believe has prior claim, and I have a duty in another direction. I will bid you good-evening—Alice!"

Then with a slight inclination of his head toward the others of the party who had not noticed him until now, he went out the door and left them.

He heard a clamor of exclamation behind him.

"Oh, Alice! Alice darling! You got it in the neck that time!" shouted one hilarious feminine voice. "You thought you had some one to pay your gambling debts, didn't you, darling? But you thought too soon!" And then a perfect avalanche of laughter gurgled after him and re-echoed down the corridor as he stepped into the elevator and dropped to the level below out of sound of it.

CHAPTER VII

Greg stepped gravely forth from the elevator and out into the night, the hot blood burning in his cheeks. So that was Alice! His old sweetheart!

Yet now as he thought of her silly laugh, that had come after she had had a drink or two, of the way she let that cur of a Mortie hover about her with flattery, his heart was hot with anger and shame.

Alice! Lovely Alice, with her divorces and her tearful confidences, her delicate, fragile, startling beauty! And then Alice with her wine



"This Gentleman, I Believe, Has Prior Claim."

glasses and her men friends and her gambling debts!

So that was what she wanted of him!

Somehow she had learned that he had money. But Alice was not for him.

His business, for the present anyway, was to find that other girl who had been flung across his path when he entered his home town, and now was gone, and was perhaps in peril. So back to the hotel he went.

"A letter in your box, Mr. Sterling," said the night clerk as Greg passed toward the elevator.

Greg turned with eagerness. A letter! Who could be writing him a letter?

As he went up in the elevator he studied it. It bore a Virginia postmark. That would be from his friend Steele.

Of course it was conceivable that Margaret might find the money, suspect that he had put it there, and come back or write back to thank him. But he didn't remember that she had been told where he stayed. Unless perhaps she had gone back for her things and her landlady had given her the word he left for her. But she was probably gone out of his life forever, he thought sadly, as he fitted his key into the lock and switched on his light. Then he settled down to read his letter.

"Dear Brother: "You don't know how glad I was to get your card bearing your address, and to know that we really are to be lasting friends, for now I can find you, and write you, and

perhaps come to see you, and hope to have you visit me sometimes. I find I was a bit afraid you would forget the man who traveled with you on the way toward the East, and think of him as a mere passing acquaintance. And to tell you the truth that would have been a great disappointment, for I found my heart was knit close to yours and I did not want to lose you.

"But I am especially glad just now that I know where you are, for it happens that I found a letter here when I got home asking me to come to your city and address a Bible conference that is to be held there this very week. They are paying my expenses so that the journey is financially possible for me and I am as eager as a boy to know if you are to be free and I may hope to see you some of the time while I am there? I expect to arrive Tuesday morning at eight o'clock and am inclosing the address of the conference, where mail will reach me. Perhaps you will let me know what time of day you are at leisure? In any event I shall call up your hotel as soon as I know where I am to be placed, and find out when we can meet. I do long to see you again.

"Your friend,
"RHODERICK STEELE."

When Greg had read that letter through twice he sent a telegram to Steele's train. He had learned that trick on his own trip East, having witnessed the arrival of messages to travelers.

"Greatly rejoiced at your coming. Please arrange to be my guest while you stay. I need you, and am at your service in any way. Have important matters to talk over with you. Will meet your train."

That night Greg had the first full night's sleep since Margaret disappeared.

The two young men were like two boys when they met the next morning. Greg had never had a man friend since his high school days and he was overjoyed to find this man just as thrilling as he had remembered him. So many things and people had been disappointing that he had found himself looking forward to this meeting anxiously, but the anxiety fled in the light of Rhoderick Steele's smile and strong, warm handclasp.

They went in a taxi to the hotel. Steele called up the committee who had invited him, learned what were his appointments, and then they went down to a late breakfast, for Steele owned up he had only taken a cup of coffee on the train, and Greg grinned and said he had wakened too late to eat before he went to the station. So over a good breakfast the two cemented their friendship again.

Suddenly the two discovered that it was getting late, and almost time for Steele's address at the conference hall, and they hurried away, Greg feeling for the first time in years that he had a real part in things worth while, a real new interest.

Rhoderick Steele had stayed three days and Gregory Sterling learned much, and found out how to learn more.

He had tried to take Greg home with him, but Greg shook his head gravely.

"I can't go away," he said, "not till I'm sure Margaret won't need me. If I find her, and find she is well fixed and has no need for me, well, then I can come. But not now."

Rhoderick looked at him tenderly. On the train he thought of the look in his friend's eyes and said to himself, "I wonder!" and then rested his head back, closed his eyes and began to pray for Greg and the little lost girl.

Greg turned back to his hotel after seeing his friend off with a strange desolation upon him. And yet it was not like the loneliness that had been his before Rhoderick came. His telephone rang and there was the voice of Nurse Gowen!

Nurse Gowen had gone back to her hospital work, and was out on a nervous case that required her constant attention. She had not been able to do much to help in the search for Margaret. She had not called up for several days. She had her living to earn, of course, and though Greg had paid her more than she felt was right for the brief nursing case, and for the help she had given him the first day of the

search, her pride had sent her back to work.

Now her voice was full of eagerness.

"Have you heard anything yet of Miss Margaret?" she asked.

"Nothing yet," said Greg sadly. "I've sort of given up trying. There wasn't anything else to do, though I did plan to go down to Rodmen street tomorrow and ask again if she had been there. It seems strange that she hasn't gone for her clothes yet. She has the receipt for her back board. She wouldn't have to wait for that."

"Maybe she hasn't discovered it yet. Maybe she didn't understand what you said about putting it in her purse. Where did you put it? In the outer pocket by any chance?"

"No, inside with a letter from her grandmother that was in a little strapped compartment. She could easily miss it if she didn't know. By the way, you don't suppose, Miss Gowen, that Miss McLaren could have gone back to her home in Vermont, do you?"

"Well, that's an idea. I don't know why we never thought of that before. That would be the natural place for her to go, wouldn't it? And since she had money in her purse probably she did. But what about her things? It does seem strange that she didn't go for them immediately after you told her her board was paid."

"She's probably afraid of me, don't you see?" said the young man forlornly. "I suppose she's perfectly justified in her feeling after what that nurse must have said. But good night! It doesn't seem as if I could give this thing up! She never talked to you about where she lived in Vermont, did she? You don't remember the name of the town, or the name of her people, do you?"

"Why, yes," said Miss Gowen thoughtfully. "She did give me the address. I wrote it down on an old envelope. I told her I ought to have it in case she got worse or anything, and I wrote it down after you left on Sunday afternoon. Now whatever did I do with that envelope? Strange I never thought of that before in all our searching! It must be somewhere among my things. I'll go and look it up right away and call you again. Are you going to be there all the evening?"

"Right here!" said Greg. Suddenly the telephone rang again and he sprang to answer.

"Well, I've found the address," said Nurse Gowen.

"Yes," said Greg, eagerly. "It's Mrs. John Lorimer, Crystal Lake, Vermont."

"That's all?" asked Greg as he wrote it down.

"Yes, that's all. I'm dreadfully sorry I didn't think of it before."

"Don't worry," said Greg. "I think I'll find her now!" His voice was throbbing with excitement. "I'm not just sure how I ought to go about it, but I think I could telephone them and say she spoke to me about a job and I failed to get her address. That wouldn't startle her grandmother. You know she was terribly afraid I had telegraphed them when she was brought to the hospital."

"Yes, I know," said Nurse Gowen, "but I can't see how it could possibly alarm her, telephoning her that way. I think that's a good idea. Well, I hope you find her. Good-night."

Greg lost no time in getting long distance and putting in his call for the Lorimers of Crystal Lake.

But suddenly the bell rang and he found his heart beating very rapidly as he took up the receiver.

But it was only the long distance operator talking.

"Are you the party calling Crystal Lake, Vermont, name Lorimer? Well, that telephone has been disconnected."

Dismay entered Greg's heart. "Are you sure?" he asked eagerly. "Perhaps it's only listed so because the bill wasn't paid. If so, I'm willing to pay the bill at once right here at the telephone office in the hotel. This is an emergency call. It is most important!"

"Wait a minute," said the voice. Finally came a chief operator, and then a district superintendent, and Greg turned heaven and earth metaphorically speaking to induce the telephone company to annul that disconnection, but all to no purpose. They told him the telephone had been disconnected for six months, and the wires were down.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Oh Wad the Powers the Giftee Gie Us—

The pompous old gentleman in the railway carriage had been boring his fellow travelers for an hour or two with tales of his success and his superiority to everyone else.

When the ticket collector came into the carriage, the old gentleman merely looked annoyed and handed a ticket to the collector, who looked at it and remarked:

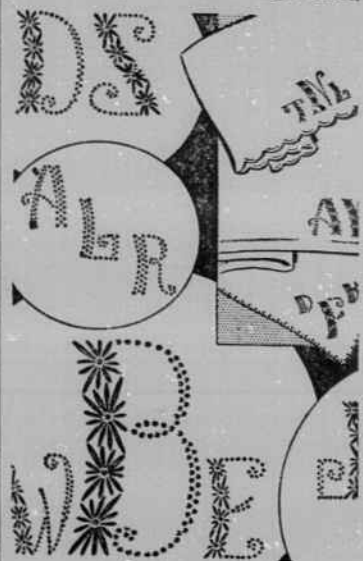
"Where are you going, sir?"

"Good gracious, man, can't you read?" shouted the passenger. "You've got my ticket, haven't you?"

"I've got your ticket, certainly, sir," came the quiet reply. "But it's for a watch."

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