

Cap'n Warren's Wards

By JOSEPH C. LINCOLN

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CHAPTER XV.—Continued.

His niece was expecting him. She had anticipated his visit and was prepared for it. From the emotion caused by his departure after the eventful birthday she had entirely recovered or thought she had. Stephen's ridicule and Mrs. Corcoran Dunn's congratulations on his return from the "encumbrance" of his uncle and the stilled reproaches of her conscience, Mrs. Dunn, as always, played the diplomat and mingled just the proper quantity of comprehending sympathy with the congratulations.

"I understand exactly how you feel, my dear," she said. "You have a tender heart, and it pains you to hurt any one's feeling, no matter how much they deserve to be hurt. You feel that you may have been too harsh with that guardian of yours. You remember what you said to him and forget how hypocritically he behaved toward you. I can't forgive him that. I may forget how he misrepresents you, but I can't let you go—that I may even pardon in time—but to deceive his own brother's children and introduce into their society a creature who had slandered and maligned their father—that I never shall forget or forgive. And—you'll excuse my frankness, dear—you should never forget or forgive it either. You were a brave girl, and if you are not proud of yourself I am proud of you."

So when her uncle was announced Caroline was ready. She entered the library and acknowledged his greeting with a distant bow. He regarded her kindly, but his manner was grave.

"Well, Caroline," he began, "I got your letter."

"Yes, I presumed you did."

"Um-hm, I got it. It didn't surprise me what you wrote, because I'd seen the words in the papers, but I was hoping you'd tell me yourself, and I'm real glad you did. I'm much obliged to you."

"I gave you my reasons for writing," she said. "Although I do not consider that I am in any sense duty-bound to refer matters other than financial to you; and, although my feelings toward you have not changed, still, you are my guardian, and—"

"I understand. So you're really engaged to Mr. Dunn?"

"Yes."

"And you're callin' to marry him?"

"One might almost take that for granted," impatiently.

"Almost, yes. Not always, but generally. I will give in. You've got to marry Malcolm Dunn, why?"

"Why, because I choose, I suppose."

"Um-hm! Are you sure of that?"

"Am I sure?" indignantly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean are you sure that it's because you choose, or because he does, or maybe because his mother does?"

"She turned angrily away. "If you came here to insult me," she began. He interrupted her.

"No, no," he protested gently. "Insulting you is the last thing I want to do. But, as your father did put you in my charge, I want you to hear what I have to say to you."

Remember, Caroline, I ain't bothered you a great deal lately, I shouldn't now if I hadn't thought 'twas necessary. So please don't get mad, but let me tell you this: Do you care for this man you've promised to marry?

Enough to live with him all your life and see him every day and be to him what a true wife ought to be? See him, not with his company manners or in his automobile, but at the breakfast table and when he comes home tired and cross maybe? When you've got to be forbearance and forgive him?"

"He is one of my oldest and best friends," she interrupted. Her uncle went on without waiting for her to end the sentence.

"I know," he said. "One of the oldest, that's sure. But friendship, 'ordin' to my notion, is something so small in comparison that it hardly counts in the manifest. Married folks ought to be friends, sure, but they ought to be a whole lot more'n that. I'm an old bach, you say, and ain't had no experience. That's true, but I've been young, and there was a time when I made plans. However, she died, and it never came to nothing. But I know what it means to be engaged, the right kind of engagement. It means that you don't count yourself at all, not a bit. You're ready, each of you, to give up all you've got—your wishes, comfort, money and what I'll buy and your life, if it should come to that, for that other one. Do you care for Malcolm Dunn like that, Caroline?"

She answered defiantly.

"Yes, I do," she said.

"You do. Well, do you think he feels the same way about you?"

"Yes," without quite the same promptness, she said defiantly.

"You feel certain of it, do you?"

She stamped her foot. "Yes, yes, yes!" she cried. "Oh, do say what you came to say and end it!"

Her uncle rose to his feet.

"Why, I guess likely I've said it," he observed. "When two people care for each other like that they ought to be married, and the sooner the better. I know that you'd be lonesome and

troubled, maybe, and all I can say is that I'm awful glad for you. God bless you, my dear! I hope you'll be as happy as the day is long."

His niece gazed at him, bewildered and incredulous. This she had not expected.

"Thank you," she stammered. "I did not know—I thought—"

"Of course you did—of course. Well, then, Caroline, I guess that's all. Won't trouble you any longer. Good-bye."

He turned toward the door, but stopped, hesitated and turned back again.

"There is just one thing more," he said solemnly. "I don't know I ought to speak, but I want to—and I'm going to. And I want you to believe it! I do want you to!"

"What is it?" she demanded.

"Why—why, just this, Caroline. This is a tough old world we live in. Things don't always go on in it as we think they ought to. Trouble comes to everybody, and when it looks right some times it turns out to be all wrong. If—"

If there should come a time like that to you and Steve, I want you to remember that you've got me to turn to. No matter what you think of me, what folks have made you think of me, just remember that I'm waitin' and ready to help you."

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"Why, old Sylvester, father's lawyer, I've got the message here somewhere. No, never mind; I've lost it. I guess. He wired me to come home as early as possible this morning. Said it was very important. And you didn't know anything about it?"

"No, not a thing."

Steve hastened to call upon Sylvester and from him learned sufficient to grasp the fact that he and Caroline were practically penniless. This he imparted to his sister, but unknown to her he visited the captain and talked over with him the probable effect the situation would have upon the Dunns. He was anxious that Malcolm should be kept to his promise.

CHAPTER XVII

THE UNMARRIED OF THE DUNNS.

CAROLINE sat by the library window, her chin in her hand, dreading watching the slight as it beat against the pane and the tops of the dark trees heaving in the wind.

Stephen uttered an exclamation. "Some one's at the door," he explained. "It's Sylvester, of course. I'll let him in."

It was not the lawyer, but a messenger-boy with a note. Stephen returned to the library with the missive in his hand.

"He couldn't get here, Caro," he said excitedly. "Wants us to come right down to his office. Come! Rush! It may be important."

The cab made good time, and they soon reached the "Pine street" office.

"Hope he doesn't keep us waiting long," Steve muttered. "I thought, of course, he was ready or he wouldn't have sent for us."

"Ready?" His sister looked at him questioningly. "Ready for what?" she repeated, with sudden suspicion. "Steve, do you know what Mr. Sylvester wishes to see us about?"

His brother colored and seemed a bit disconcerted.

"See here, Caro," he said, "maybe I do know something, or I can guess. Now, whatever happens, you've got to be the sensible girl. Somebody in the family must use common sense, and when it comes to holding a person to a promise then—confound it! Sis, we can't leave Caro out."

"What do you mean?" She rose and advanced toward him. "What do you mean by a promise? What have you been doing?"

"I haven't done anything," he growled. "That is, I've done what any reasonable fellow would do. I'm not the only one who thinks. Look here, we've got a guardian, haven't we?"

Caroline was white, and she glanced from her brother to her guardian. Stephen Warren,