

LOVE.

—BY—
ABI. S. JACKMAN.

CHAPTER V.—Continued

"My God, they will kill us!" Firefly panted, clinging to her father's arm as she spoke. "We are at the mercy of a band of fiends, and they will show us no pity! What shall we do? Oh, what shall we do?"

"We will escape them, the demons," Lord Thorndyke answered, his teeth set, his eyes flashing. "Now, when I give the word, you must make a dash and run to where my horse is standing. Mount him, and I will be close behind you. If I am not able to reach the horse at the same time that you do, don't wait for me, for I will easily overtake you. Ride for your very life in the direction of the mountains, and you will be safe. Be brave now, dear, and do not fail, for it is a matter of life and death. These half-crazed devils will hesitate at nothing now."

"I will be strong and brave," Firefly whispered. "Oh, I will, I will. Do not doubt me."

With howls of rage, the gypsy mob rushed at Lord Thorndyke and little Firefly, urged on by Leon Costello, their leader. They would have killed them both, so crazed with anger were they.

Lord Thorndyke leaped quickly to one side, and snatching up his rifle, leveled it at the entire crowd, crying:

"Back, you cowardly gypsies. One step nearer and I will shoot. Back, I say."

Wild shouts and derisive bursts of laughter greeted him, and setting his teeth tightly together, he vowed that he would keep his word.

"Oh, do not shoot him, please do not shoot him," Firefly pleaded, her lips growing deathly pale.

"Silence!" Lord Thorndyke thundered, his very blood boiling. "If he makes an attempt to stop me, I shall certainly kill him."

The purple, working face of the gypsy was coming nearer and nearer, and with the quickness of lightning he attempted to wrench the rifle from Lord Thorndyke's hands, not reckoning the cost.

An angry light shone in Lord Thorndyke's fine eyes, and his lips grew white with rage. There was an instant's silence followed by a loud report that rang through the wood like thunder, a wild cry of pain, and Leon Costello fell to the green ground, his life blood staining the budding leaves.

A shriek of terror fell from little Firefly's lips, and wringing her clasped hands, she cried:

"You have killed him, oh, Father above! your hands are stained with the life-blood of one of your fellow-creatures!"

"Fly!" he answered, grasping her by the arm. "Fly for your life!"

She cast one frightened look at the ghastly, upturned face of the gypsy as he lay bleeding before her, and then with feet that scarcely seemed to touch the ground, fairly flew in the direction of the white horse.

She unfastened him, and with one leap was upon the animal's back, just as her father rushed from the wood, followed by the howling gypsy mob.

"Make haste!" she cried, her small hands holding the reins tightly as the spirited animal reared and plunged, made almost unmanageable by these fierce yells. But Firefly was a fearless horse-woman and kept her seat well.

With one spring Lord Thorndyke was on the horse behind, and like the wind they were off, heading directly for the mountains.

The eyes of the fleet, white charger were flashing and the foam flew from his mouth as the sound of his iron-shod hoofs rang through the fresh air of early morning. While she lived little Firefly never forgot that wild ride for life, and although her heart was filled with horror and regret at the fate of Leon Costello, yet even in that hour of peril and danger she was conscious of a glad feeling of relief, for now she was free! Free to brood over the beautiful face of her dreams, and as she was borne along on the back of the fleet-footed horse, her heart gave a great thrill of happiness and joy.

"'Tis a ride for life," her father said with a grim smile. "And we are more than fortunate, for if these maddened gypsies should chance to overtake us, we are lost. They would show us no mercy, for I have roused all the fire in their blood by slaying their leader."

"I wish you could have spared his life," Firefly said, in tones of regret. "Oh, I wish you could have spared him!"

"It was in self-defence," her father answered quietly, "and I have nothing to regret."

"They will follow us," Firefly said, anxious to forget, if she could, the sight of that white, staring face, all stained with the bright life-blood as it flowed from the wound made by her father's rifle.

And she had been his wife! His wife! Great Heaven! how she shuddered at the very thought! To think that she had fancied for a moment that she loved the gypsy! Now she understood why she

always looked forward to that dim, vague life beyond, that always seemed stretching out before her eager, longing eyes. No, she knew why she had often dreamed of the great, beautiful world lying out of her reach. She was going to see it, to rule over it, a queen, and, oh, joy! she would meet him, her king, her hero, the one love of her life! She was sure of that, and her young heart longed for the happy day as she had never before longed for anything upon earth.

She glanced at her father's cold, proud face. Ought she to tell him that she, his only child, the heiress of Thorndyke Hall, had been the bride of a gypsy? Her conscience whispered yes, and then a small voice, but, oh! so strong and masterful, seemed to say:

"Why tell him at all now? Leon Costello is dead, and no one except the aged minister who married you knows anything about it. You are free. Let the secret die with your gypsy bridegroom."

And she listened to that tiny voice, and thus made the one fatal mistake of her life. Had she only told her father of her foolish marriage, long, long months—ay, even years—of pain and bitter sorrow would have been avoided, but, oh! what a tangled web she wove around her young life! She had twice escaped death, only to condemn herself to the misery of living with a dead heart in her breast, although she knew it not.

The sun was setting when they paused, in a lonely spot upon the mountain-side, and as they dismounted the white horse gave a sigh of relief that was almost human.

"Poor old Jack," Lord Thorndyke said, patting the glossy neck kindly. "You have had a hard ride, but never mind, you will be yourself again in the morning."

The faithful horse whinnied softly, and when relieved of his saddle and bridle, cast a look of almost human intelligence upon his master.

"A lonely spot to pass the night in," Lord Thorndyke said to Firefly. "But it is far better than being a prisoner in the gypsy camp, is it not?"

"Yes, a thousand times better," she answered. "It is only for to-night, and we can stand it."

"We might even be worse off, my dear," he replied, with a smile, "and it will not be long before we will be home. Home! Does not that word sound sweet to your ears? Home, in dear old England, the fairest spot in all the world. You will be queen of that home, my child, and a grand old home it is, too. After years of wandering over the face of the earth, it must seem like heaven to you to even think of such a home. And who can tell what bright and wonderful future lies before you. You may yet be a princess. Who knows?"

Firefly did not answer, for she was thinking of one handsome, smiling face, with eyes like blue bells, and she said to herself:

"He is my husband. He will meet me, and love me, even as I love him, and oh, what a heaven upon earth this life will be. To lie in his arms, to kiss away all shadows that could ever cloud his dear life, to call him mine own before the whole world. Does heaven hold anything better—anything one-half so good? Ah, no! and I shall see him soon. I know it. I feel it."

A delicious thrill trembled up from her feet to her heart. She was so sure that she would meet the handsome unknown of whom she had dreamed that she was only waiting for the day or hour to come when they would stand face to face, recognizing in each other kindred souls!

Then she thought of Leon Costello lying still and cold in death, and she shivered slightly. It was too awful to even think of, and the worst of all was, that he had died by her father's hand!

"I will forget that fearful time," she said between her set teeth. "I will not allow myself to think about it, and after all it frees me!" and she held her proud little head erect, the dying sunset tinging its golden beams in the meshes of her bright hair.

But that night when the pale moon sailed tremulously overhead and the stars were glittering in the sky, she lay with wide-open eyes gazing up at the clear heavens, trying in vain to sleep, but slumber would not be wooed nor won, and at last in despair she sat upright and whispered:

"Am I never to know another hour's peace? Why should his dark face always arise before me, sad and reproachful? Am I to be haunted forever, because of that one mad act of folly? Pshaw! I will not think of it! I am strong, and I will forget!"

She closed her eyes, but every time she opened them she saw before her, as in life, the face of Leon Costello.

CHAPTER VI.

"WHAT DOES THE LIFE OF ONE GYPSY COUNT?"

A whole month has gone by since the morning sunlight shone down upon little Firefly and Lord Thorndyke riding for their lives among the rugged mountains of Colorado, where they hoped to find safety from the band of infuriated gypsies, thirsting for the blood of the Englishman who had shot down their leader. Again the morning sunbeams are shin-

ing through the azure of a perfect summer sky, but this time the golden rays are kissing the shady lawns and sweet blossoming hedges of fair England, seeming to linger most over the ivy-grown walls, and flower-dotted lawns of Thorndyke Hall, where little Firefly, or rather Lady Gabrielle Thorndyke, is standing close behind a laughing, rippling fountain, whose jeweled waters catch and hold the warm sunbeams in their liquid grasp.

"What a perfect day," she exclaims, raising her eyes up to the cloudless sky, while a smile of deep contentment plays round her ripe, red lips. "And oh, what a glorious thing it is to live and breathe! This is life!"

She drew a deep breath, inhaling the fresh air as she spoke, and with a singing, rippling laugh, held one hand beneath the crystal water that rose and fell into the marble basin again.

Could this be the same young girl that wedded the gypsy that dark, gloomy night in the little village among the mountains of Colorado? This gloriously beautiful creature whose dainty morning robe of snow-white silk and swan's-down had enhanced her loveliness? It was the same proud, fearless face, the same clear, honest eyes and the same peculiar wealth of glittering hair that gave to her the name of little Firefly. The gypsy queen used to tell her that in the darkness of the night her hair gleamed like the twinkling fire-flies that flashed through the air around the tents of the camp.

She had almost forgotten those fearful scenes of a month ago, when she was obliged to flee for her life. She could hardly make herself believe that she was the same girl whose life was spent with the gypsies. It seemed to her as if she had always lived in this grand old home, surrounded by all that wealth could give. And yet at times the face of her murdered gypsy husband would arise before her and she would grow sick at heart. Oh, what a dreadful mistake she had made. Why, oh, why had she ever consented to marry him at all?

With a mighty effort, she banished the thoughts that kept crowding through her brain, and gave herself up to enjoy the beauty of the morning.

"How happy I am!" she whispered softly to herself. "Is there another girl in all the world who has as much to live for as I have? No, I am sure there is not."

Presently the sound of approaching footsteps fell upon the soft green grass, and turning quickly, she beheld her father coming toward her, his face looking grave and stern. A sad smile flitted across his face as he saw her, so young, so beautiful standing there by the side of the babbling fountain, her lovely face looking like some pure, fair flower beneath the golden sunbeams.

"What is the matter, papa?" she asked, running to meet him, her eyes upraised to his face.

He smiled fondly down upon her, and answered sadly, drawing her hand through his arm as he spoke:

"I was thinking of a turned-down page in the history of my life. It has arisen to life again to-day, for some reason that I cannot explain, and I have decided that it is better for you to know all, and that alone may serve to keep you from following in her footsteps."

"What do you mean, papa?" she questioned in surprise. "Keep me from following in whose footsteps? Of whom are you speaking?"

"Your mother!" he answered in a cold, hard voice.

"My mother!" the girl exclaimed. "Why, my mother is dead, is she not?"

"Let us hope so!" he said, his face growing dark as the sky at midnight. "Let us hope that she is in her grave, and that her sin is buried with her!"

"Papa, papa, for God's sake what great mystery is this?" she cried, her face growing pale as death. "I thought that my mother was dead! Tell me, oh, tell me all! Keep nothing back, I beg of you!"

"I have every reason to believe that she is dead," he answered thoughtfully. "And yet I fear she still lives, and my constant dread both day and night is that she will come back and claim you. My God! what a blow that would be! When I have just found you after these long years of separation!" and he covered his face with both hands as if to shut out the sight of such a picture.

"But I will never leave you, papa!" the girl whispered, clasping both arms around his neck, and laying her curly head upon his breast. "I will not leave you if a thousand mothers came after me! If she has sinned I hope she is dead!"

"She has sinned, my darling," Lord Thorndyke said sadly. "She has sinned against me, and she has also sinned against you, for she left you a tiny, helpless babe, and ran away with a gypsy!"

A cry burst from Gabrielle's lips and she gasped:

"Left you to run away with a gypsy? Oh, papa, how terrible!" She had forgotten that she was the bride of a gypsy only a few weeks ago.

"Come and sit down here on this seat," Lord Thorndyke said, gently drawing her toward a small, rustic bench, under a great blossoming rose-tree, and there, with the sun turning her wonderful hair to a living, burning gold, and the scent of roses filling the air, she listened to the story of her mother's life.



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