

LOVE.

—BY—
ABI. S. JACKMAN.

CHAPTER X.—Continued.

"Thank you, Lord Thorndyke," Sir Lionel answered, and with a bow the elder man passed on, leaving them alone with their love.

"God grant that his life will not be wrecked and ruined as mine has been," he said sadly, as he walked under the lime-trees' shade, "for he is a noble fellow and is worthy of my daughter."

"Now, my queen of the roses, we will have an hour of heaven all by ourselves," Sir Lionel said, once more kneeling at his darling's feet, and he kissed with eager lips the little hands he held within his own.

She leaned down her face to him, her lips moving as if to utter some tender words of love, when suddenly her face grew ashen white, her eyes took on a look of fright and despair, and a cry of mortal terror burst from her trembling lips.

CHAPTER XI.

"I THOUGHT I SAW A FACE FROM THE GRAVE!"

Robbed of the kiss so near his lips, and for which his soul hungered and thirsted, Sir Lionel could only gaze in surprise and dismay into the lovely face of his betrothed that would never be whiter even when she lay in her coffin!

What had come over her fair, young life so suddenly, he asked himself? She, whose eyes were like bright stars only a moment ago; whose smile rivaled the brilliant light of the sun; whose tremulous, loving mouth had been pressed to his, waiting for the kiss that was never given? What was it that had driven the smile away from her lips, the light of happiness from her eyes and chilled the little hand he clasped until it seemed to be the icy hand of the dead, lying like a stone in his warm fingers? Why did she not bend her beautiful head, and tell him what troubled her so sorely?

"What is it, my darling?" he asked tenderly his true blue eyes seeking the exquisite face, ardent love shining forth from their misty depths.

And then for the first time since she had uttered that cry of terror, she spoke, and so hoarse and changed was her voice that he would never have known those harsh tones for the silvery voice of his darling.

"It is nothing," she whispered with a long sigh of relief. "I thought I saw a face from the grave, and for the moment it startled me, but, thank Heaven, it was merely a fancy!"

"Whose face was it, little sweetheart?" he asked, kissing the quivering lips as he spoke. "Tell me, dearest, whose face it was that startled you?"

"It was the hateful face of one of the gypsy band, from which papa rescued me that awful morning in the mountains," she answered with a shudder. "The face of the gypsy, Leon Costello, who was shot by papa. Oh, the fearful remembrance that my father's hand is stained with the life-blood of one of his fellow-men! The thought haunts me day and night."

She shivered as if a cold blast of wind had struck her, and clung closer to her lover. Even as she did so, she fancied that she heard a burst of wicked, mocking laughter, and in fancy she could feel a hot, fierce breath fan her brow, while even her face aching eyes like an evil spectre, gazed that dark, devilish face with the bullet hole in the forehead from which the crimson blood was flowing.

"Do not think of it, my pet," she heard Sir Lionel's musical voice saying, and with a sob she laid her head upon his breast, whispering:

"Oh, Lionel! my own dear love, you do love me, do you not? Promise me that, when I shall know that, that whatever happens, I am sure of your dear love."

"Why, my dearest, how stampingly you are talking!" he said, striving to soothe her nervous fears. "You talk as if you expected to die, or be separated from me very soon. You remember, my darling, that I will, for what could possibly part us?"

"We shall never be parted, Lionel," she whispered, with a sob. "For, my darling, when I would leave you, and live away from you, I would kill myself. If anything ever comes between us hearts, I will remember that it means death to me."

"Gabielle!" he cried, in surprise, clanking back so that he could look into her eyes. "Gabielle, you have something on your mind, dear! Trust me, and tell me all, darling!"

And she, looking into his tender eyes, was tempted for the moment to tell him of the sorrowful secret that darkened her fair, young life, and then as she realized what it would mean to her, she closed her lips resolutely, saying to herself:

"No, I will not tell him, for he might not be able to forgive me for my treachery and deceit. He might throw me from him in scorn and loathing, and I—oh, God in heaven! how could I live without him now?"

And so her lips were sealed, and lifting her head proudly, she said:

"I think I must be nervous, that is all, and I love you so dearly, so truly, Lionel, that to even fancy what life would be without you makes me desperate. Oh, Lionel! my love, my love, did ever woman love before as I love you, my adored king?"

She wound her arms around his neck, almost wishing, with a fierce sort of passionate love, that God would take them both home to His rest in heaven as they sat there clasped in each other's arms, for something seemed to whisper to her that the way would not be all flowers and bird songs.

"Yes, I know you love me, my darling," he answered fondly, "and you know well that my heart belongs to you, and you alone. But you are nervous and unstrung, that is all. Suppose we go into the house? You lie down, and I will read to you until you fall asleep. But there is one thing that you must forget, sweetheart, and that is the death of that miserable, who richly deserved his fate—ay, even a worse fate would have been a just punishment for the wretch. Why, what would the lives of a whole band of gypsies amount to when compared with the restoration of you, my darling, to your father? If they all could be swept away from the face of the earth it would be well."

Gabielle shuddered, why she could not tell, and once more she started and clung to her lover, for again that hateful, mocking laugh rang out on the balmy air, and filled her heart with terror. She glanced half fearfully at Sir Lionel, but he did not seem to hear the sound.

He lifted her in his arms and bore her into the dusky, flower-scented parlor, where the lights were turned low, and laid her upon a couch drawn close to the open window, where a pale moon cast its silvery rays across the beautiful face of his love.

A sudden tenderness crept over him as he gazed into that sweet, troubled face, and kneeling beside her, he whispered:

"You do not doubt my love for you, do you, little one? You know that in all the big, wide world there is no heart that loves you one-half so well as I do. Ah, my sweetheart, you are my life, my all!"

She laid her cheek lovingly against his face, and the quick, hot tears sprang to her eyes. How dear, oh, kind Heaven, how dear he was to her! And she swore silently as she lay there that death alone was the only thing that should ever part them.

And then he sat beside her, and holding one little hand tightly within his own, read aloud in his deep, rich voice, selections from the poet Swinburne, whom we all love.

Long, long days after, when her heart was so sore and torn that she wondered why she did not die, as she lay night after night weeping and sobbing in her despair, the memory of that night would come back to her, and almost smother her with bitter pain and regret.

Outside in the moonlight she could hear the song of the nightingale, and the musical, liquid notes brought the tears to her eyes. The air was heavy with the scent of dew-wet roses and the breath of the waving, whispering limes sounded like the lullaby of a fond mother, hushing her babe to slumber. The tiny, twinkling stars above smiled in their azure nest, shedding their slender rays of light over the girl's beautiful face, and the deep, rich voice of her lover as he read on and on, eased the pain of memory that tugged at her heart strings.

Suddenly she started; why had he selected that sad poem when she was so sick at heart and wretched? Why did he not choose something very sweet and tender when she needed it so? She closed her eyes as he went on:

"A broken, an emptied boat,
"Sea says it, winds blow apart,
Sick and adrift and afloat,
The barren wait of a heart."

Leon Costello's face arose before her as she had last seen it, pale and ghastly, the ugly wound in his forehead, the red blood drying the green grass where he fell, his glittering black eyes fixed upon her face in one last look before they closed forever upon the world. Oh, it was horrible, and no matter how hard she tried, she could not banish the dreadful memory.

Her lover's voice was no longer the same to her as he read on. Instead, it was the hoarse tones of the dead gypsy. She knew he was dead. He could never cross her pathway again, and yet why should he haunt her when she wanted to forget? Great God! was it his voice that was repeating the words that filled the air? There seemed to be two voices, one at each side of her couch, and like one in a dream she listened to the words:

"More pains corrode and consume,
Dead when life dies in the basin:
In the infinite spirit is room
For the pulse of an infinite pain."

"I wish you were dead, my dear; I would give you, had I to give, Some death too bitter to fear; It is better to die than live."

The last verse was uttered in a fierce hiss, and she turned her head quickly, just in time to catch one fleeting glance of a shadowy figure that vanished like a spirit from the other world, across the green lawn, leaving only the moonbeams before her eyes.

"My God!" she gasped, "there it is again, the awful, fearful thing! Oh Lionel, my love, my love, save me from him!"

The book dropped from Sir Lionel's hand, and he caught the terror-stricken little form, saying with alarm:

"My darling, you must be dreaming or else you are ill, for there is not a single object in sight. What did you see, dear?"

"That same fearful countenance!" she whispered, burying her face upon his shoulder as though she feared she would see the unwelcome vision again, were she to open her eyes. "Ah, Lionel, will it haunt me forever?"

"No, dear, no," he answered tenderly, as if he were soothing a restless child. "It will not haunt you for another hour, for he will have the grounds searched thoroughly at once, and if we do find anything, it will only be some one who wants to scare you. Come with me, and we will see about having the servants search the grounds," and he made an effort to arise.

"No, no, no!" she cried, clinging to him. "Oh, no, Lionel! Let it pass, but do not leave me for a single moment. Stay with me, my darling, and I will not fear the whole world. I am brave when you are with me, but oh, such a coward when you are away!" and he could not unclasp those clinging arms from about his neck.

"I will not leave you, little one," he said, reverently kissing her. "I will remain close at your side. Now, go to sleep, sweetheart."

With her hand clinging nervously to his, she nestled the curly head against his shoulder, and slept, and as he felt the pressure of that beautiful little form against him, he murmured:

"My darling, my darling, how dear you are to me, and oh, what a happy day it will be when you are my wife."

The soft sigh of the wind seemed to echo his fond words, and was it only fancy or did a sigh of pain outside the open window, come floating to his ears?

CHAPTER XII.

WITH HORRIFIED EYES SHE BEHELD BEFORE HER, THE SCENE THAT HAD HAUNTED HER DAYS AND NIGHTS FOR MANY LONG WEEKS.

It was several weeks since the ghostly face from out the past had appeared before Lady Gabrielle Thorndyke, and she was already beginning to forget. Every day that passed over her fair young head, but bound her closer to her lover. Often and often in the middle of the night she would awaken, and creeping from her snow-white bed, kneel down, and thank Heaven for giving unto her a love so brave, so true, so noble.

Then, too, she had found a new friend—a lovely, gentle girl, whose title, Lady Ethel Sommerville, seemed all too stately for such a fair, frail creature. She was alone in the world, her parents both were dead, and her shy, loving heart went out to beautiful Gabrielle from the hour they first met. They loved each other with a strength and friendship that is rare among women, and next to her lover, whom she worshiped, rather than loved, Gabrielle loved the gentle Lady Ethel.

To-night Thorndyke Hall was ablaze with hundreds of different lights from basements to roof, and the first impression that one would receive upon entering the grand hall with its broad, winding stairway, would be that they were in a long garden, filled with blossoming flowers, golden-feathered songsters and silver rippling fountains of cologne that rose and fell through the sweet-scented air in rainbow shafts of color and beauty.

It was the night of the grand ball, given in honor of Lady Gabrielle's birthday, and it had been the talk of the country for weeks. It was a scene that seemed to have been taken from fairyland, and even the stars in the calm, night-sky seemed to gaze down upon all the grandeur with awe in their meek faces.

Up in her room, Lady Gabrielle was dressing, her eyes brighter than the diamonds that lay scattered carelessly upon her dressing-table, her cheeks flushed a far richer and deeper color than the masses of great red roses that lay waiting to deck her glittering hair.

"But, my lady, surely you intend to wear your diamonds?" cried Jeanne, her maid, as with a sweep of her dainty white hand Gabrielle brushed the priceless stones into one of the open drawers of the table as carelessly as though they were only pebbles.

"No, I am not going to wear any jewels at all," she answered, with a laugh. "These are the only jewels that I shall wear to-night," and she pointed to the dewy red roses that decked her toilet-table.

"And your diamonds, your beautiful diamonds!" gasped the dismayed Jeanne, looking at her mistress as if she doubted her sanity. "Oh, my lady, but they are such perfect jewels, so—"

"That will do, Jeanne," Lady Gabrielle said quietly, but with such meaning in her tones that the maid did not speak again. "Now make haste and do my hair."

Jeanne's deft, nimble fingers soon had the lovely, glittering mass arranged in a crown of beauty upon the small, proud head, and then she raised the perfect form in a dress fine as a cobweb, and yet it seemed to be made of a living, burning gold, that glistened and glittered beneath

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