

# LOVE.

—BY—  
ABI S. JACKMAN.

## CHAPTER I.

### PRINCESS LAURETTA'S THREAT.

"Little Firefly, little Firefly, I warn you that I am not to be trifled with!" The speaker, a swarthy gypsy maiden, clad in robes of almost barbaric splendor, was standing upon the edge of a small lake nestled among the mountains of Colorado, its silver bosom gleaming like a jewel in the dying sunset. It was an unusual sight to behold a band of the dark-browed rovers in the far-away West, and the wild flowers growing close to the rugged rocks, seemed to gaze up in meek-eyed surprise at the passionate words of the angry princess.

A burst of laughter, sweet, yet mocking, rang out upon the quiet air, and then a musical voice cried fearlessly:

"I do not fear your anger, Princess Lauretta? Why should I? Am I not as free as the winds that sweep over you mountain? Why then should I care whether I incur your displeasure or not? Answer me that question if you will be so very kind? Why, even the bold eagle who knows neither master nor fear, is not one-half so free as I am? Ha, ha!" and the girl threw back her dainty bronze-crested head, and faced her companion defiantly, her great wine-brown eyes all aglow with a new, strange light.

What a beautiful little creature she was! From the crown of that glittering, sparkling head which gained for her the name of "Little Firefly," to the tips of her pretty toes she was a vision of perfect loveliness. The slender, lithe form, the sweet red lips, through whose rosy portals the gleam of pearly teeth flashed whenever she smiled, would cause any man's heart to thrill with longing and desire to kiss that rosy mouth where bloom and freshness had never yet been marred by a lover's kiss. Though her fairy-like form was robed in the gaudy dress of a gypsy, surely no gypsy's blood ran in those blue veins that showed so plainly beneath the satiny skin.

"Why should you fear me?" the gypsy maid repeated, her swarthy face flushing a dark, dangerous scarlet at the girl's words. "You ask me why you should fear me, and I will now tell you why! If you dare come between the man I love and my heart I will kill you!"

She hissed the last few words through her set teeth, her sullen, black eyes fairly blazing with rage and jealousy. She shut her hands tightly together, wishing in her treacherous heart that she could close her cruel fingers around that fair, white throat and silence the sweet, mocking voice for evermore.

Again the silvery, rippling laughter rang out and filled the air with music, and with her moist lips curved in a smile the girl said:

"Your lover! Why, dark-faced Princess Lauretta, he is not your lover, nor was he ever your lover! His love is given to me and me alone! Even were you queen of the tribe to-day, as you hope to be, and will be very soon now, he would never make you his wife, for he loves me, and no power upon earth can take his heart away from me."

A low, broken cry of rage burst from the gypsy's lips, and springing forward she grasped little Firefly by the arm, crying in a voice choked with anger:

"You pale faced beggar you! Who are you that you dare defy me like that? You are homeless, nameless and without one friend in the world! My mother, who now lies dying, took you when you were a helpless babe, and nursed you and cared for you as tenderly as though you were her own child! You were the same as a sister to me, and this is how you repay her! You reward the love and devotion of years by stealing my lover's heart away from me! Tell me, where would you be to-day were it not for the dying gypsy queen? And have you one single friend in all this great world aside from her?"

Little Firefly's face was pale, even to her very lips, but she was calm and composed, although every word cut like the sharp thrust of a knife. Bowing low her head before the angry Lauretta, she answered in her slow, musical voice:

"You are quite right. The gypsy queen who had been like a mother to me was my only friend and protector. And you were, perhaps, a sister, but—a very unkind one! And you seem to have forgotten that I have one friend who will turn his back upon the whole world for me, and that one is my lover, whose promised wife I am!"

An awful cry burst from the gypsy's lips—a cry that little Firefly never forgot while she lived—and darting a look of the bitterest hatred upon the girl as she stood with both arms folded proudly across her heaving bosom, she raised her hands up to the blue heavens above, and there swore a fearful oath of vengeance.

"Listen to me, little Firefly," she cried. "Listen to me, and then dare brave my anger! Long before the sun rises above you mountains I shall be queen of the tribe, for the gypsy queen, my mother, who lies dying, will be sleeping her long,

last sleep before the moon casts her pallid light over the lake to-night! Then my word is law, and there is not one in all our band who will disobey me, and I swear that if you do not promise me here and now that you will never look upon Leon Costello's face again, I will have you put to death, for I am a desperate woman when I am once aroused; and then he will be mine!"

Firefly's answer was a taunting laugh. "Would it not be better, Princess Lauretta, to wait until the breath departs from your mother's body before you call yourself queen of the gypsies?" she asked, her superb lips curled in scorn. "And do you not think it is your place, her only child, to remain beside her death-bed when you know her hours are numbered, instead of following me out here to threaten me, because Leon Costello sees fit to bestow his affection upon me? I am not her own flesh and blood, but I am going to her, and will remain with her until all is over. Will you kindly step aside and allow me to pass? This path is very narrow and one misstep might hurl either one of us down to our death upon the rocks below."

"Have a care, fool, that I am not tempted to hurl you down upon them this very moment!" the gypsy princess hissed, clutching Firefly's wrist in a grasp of iron. "Promise me that you will never see Leon Costello again and you shall go. If not—"

"Well?" Firefly questioned, a calm smile wreathing her lips as she gazed into the distorted face of the other. "Well, what will you do if I do not make such a promise?"

"I will kill you with my own hand!" she cried in a voice hoarse with rage, maddened by Firefly's coolness and mocking smile.

"I do not fear you, nor will I make any promise!" Firefly answered proudly, drawing herself up and shaking off the detaining hand as if it was merely a feather. "My love will protect me," and she was gone, her gold-brown hair glittering beneath the rays of dying sunlight as she walked down the winding mountain pathway.

"Curse her!" the gypsy cried, her dusky face convulsed with wicked passion. "Curse her, she shall die before she ever becomes his wife. Oh, my God, take her out of my pathway is all I ask! I can win him back again once she is away where he cannot see her! She must die! I swear it, and I will slay her with my hand!"

She raised her eyes up to the fair, azure sky where floating clouds seemed to smile down upon the rugged mountain, and a scowl, dark as midnight, swept across her face.

"Is there a God?" she asked fiercely, her black eyes heavy and sullen, and then in a spasm of anger she cried:

"No, no, there is not! I can have faith only in the Father of Darkness! But he will aid me; I know he will, even if my soul must be sacrificed to pay the price! Hear me, and know that I will keep my oath; Leon Costello shall be mine, even if I have to stain my hands with the heart's blood of a thousand who stand between us! And before he shall ever call another woman wife I will kill both him and myself!"

The echo of her words yet filled the air, and after a moment's silence she vanished in a thicket.

Meanwhile little Firefly wended her way carefully down the mountain pathway, her lips parted in a dreamy smile, her dimpled chin resting upon her breast, lost in thought of her lover.

"I am his promised wife," she said softly to herself. "Since yesterday I have been his own, and he has not kissed my lips as yet. He loves me, that I know. And I—ah, do I love him?"

She paused, and let her eyes wander far out over the broad bosom of the valley that stretched out serene and peaceful at the foot of the frowning mountain. And as she gazed with soft, misty eyes at the wonders of Nature something awoke and stirred to life within her, and whispered that she was fitted for a life higher, nobler and grander than that of a gypsy's bride, and for the moment she almost regretted the promise that bound her to handsome, dark-browed Leon Costello. But it passed away in another moment, and with a half sad smile she whispered:

"Alas! Why should I wish to be among people who are so much above me in everything? I have passed my life among the gypsies, and why should I not wed one of their band? I know no other life. Ah, well! it is fate, and I must be content."

She sighed wearily, her bright face growing grave and serious, her sweet lips having a sad droop. Her thoughts certainly were not happy ones.

"I wonder who I am?" she mused. "Have I a father, a mother, living, who mourn the loss of their child, or am I a poor outcast who would be only a mark of shame? I wish I knew, for I feel so lonely."

She clasped both little hands across her young bosom, and lifting her eyes upward whispered:

"Oh, to know a mother's love! Was I ever clasped fondly to a true, loving breast, the pride, the joy, the darling of a mother's heart! Was I ever rocked to sleep, soothed by a gentle voice, and when my baby eyes opened in the morn-

ing did they rest upon my mother's face? Or have I been a poor, homeless waif from the hour that I was born? Ah, what a mystery surrounds my life! Shall I ever know?"

She resumed her way down the mountain-side, and just as she was passing through a green, leafy grove, she heard footsteps behind her, and turning her head she saw a tall, distinguished looking man, clad in a hunting costume, a gun slung across his shoulder, coming toward her.

He stopped suddenly, and looked searching at her, and she cast one single, frightened glance at the stern, grave face and then fled like a deer through the trees.

Panting and breathless she threw herself down under the shade of a large, spreading tree, and pressing both hands to her throbbing heart whispered:

"Why does my heart seem to stop beating at the mere sight of a stranger, and then almost burst with longings? I know him not; I have never looked upon his face before, and yet—and yet—"

She buried her face in her hands, and was silent. Every nerve in her body was quivering with excitement.

"Dare I hope!" she murmured, lifting her face and letting the cool breeze fan her hot brow. "Ah, dare I hope?"

Suddenly she burst into a wild storm of sobs that shook her slender form as a rough wind would move a delicate flower. So absorbed was she in her loneliness and sorrow that she did not hear familiar footsteps approaching, until a pair of strong arms lifted her to her feet and held her close to a broad breast, while a musical voice said:

"Little darling, don't weep so bitterly, or you will break my heart. Look up and tell me what it is that makes my little Firefly so distressed, and I will strive to comfort her."

## CHAPTER II.

### THE MIDNIGHT MARRIAGE.

It was the voice of her gypsy lover, Leon Costello, and obeying him she raised her tearful eyes and looked in his face.

It was a handsome face into which she gazed, but for all its beauty it was the dark, fickle face of a gypsy, and the bright, black eyes were neither honest nor truthful. And still a happy little thrill shot through the girl's heart, for she was his promised wife, and aside from him she was lonely and alone.

"What is grieving my little Firefly?" he asked tenderly, lifting the sweet face with one hand. "Tell me, little one, and I perhaps can comfort you."

"I was a little lonely, that was all," she answered with an attempt at a smile. "It was very foolish of me, but you know our queen is dying, and she has been very kind to me ever since they found me, a little helpless babe, and brought me to her. She has always been kind and gentle, and it grieves me sorely to think she will soon be no more."

"Yes, she will soon be beyond all sorrow or suffering," he answered, reverently lifting his hat, for the dying gypsy queen was very dear to all the band. "She will leave us ere the sun rises and sets again."

He was looking into little Firefly's downcast face, and his heart grew strangely tender toward her. Pressing her suddenly to his heart he whispered:

"Do you love me, little sweetheart? Lift up your pretty face and say yes."

"Yes, I love you," she answered, not knowing how soon she would regret ever having spoken these same words. Ah, had she only waited, how different her life would have been.

And then for the first time he pressed a kiss upon her sweet, red lips, and fired by the mere touch of that lovely mouth against his own, he whispered passionately:

"My little love, my queen, you do not know how I love you! That one kiss has made me love you a thousand times more than ever. Oh, you will never know how much you are to me!"

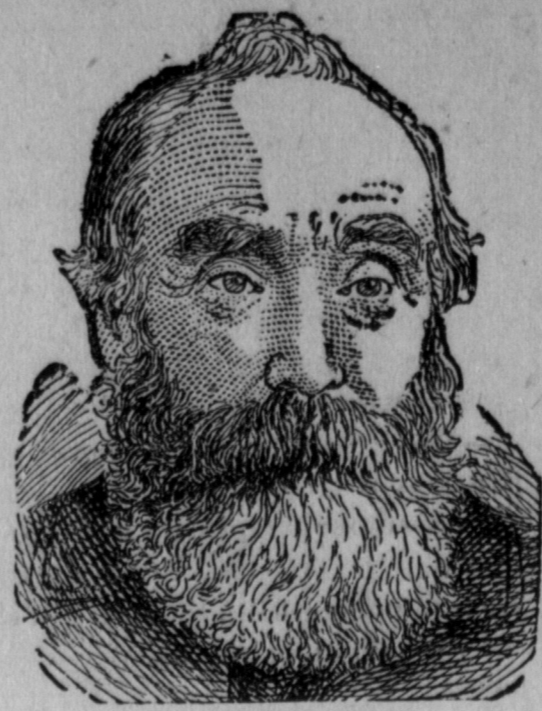
She made no reply, for she did not feel that same passionate love for him. She was fond of him and looked to him for protection, but love him—ah, she did not know the meaning of the word love! But some day your heart will surely awaken, little Firefly, and the thrill and throb of true love will make life a heaven upon earth.

A slight rustle in the leaves near by caused the girl to start, and she glanced in the direction from whence the sound came, and there beheld the dark face and gleaming eyes of Lauretta, the gypsy who was so soon to be queen!

A shiver crept over little Firefly, for those burning black eyes boded her no good, and she crept closer to her lover. He would shield her from all harm. Of that she was sure, and winding both round arms about his neck in sudden tenderness, she laid her curly head upon his breast.

In an instant he was on his knees before her, and looking up in her face with adoring eyes, he whispered passionately:

"Little Firefly, little princess, how I love you! Ah, I cannot express in words the great and mighty passion that fills my heart and soul? From the time that your dear face appeared before my eyes I have loved you with a love that is as firm and unchangeable as you tall mountain. I would go through seas of fire to save you a single moment of sorrow. I would have my limbs torn one by one from my body if I could vanish forever



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