

LOVE.

—BY—
ABL. S. JACKMAN.

CHAPTER XIV.—Continued.

A sigh of relief broke from her lips, and for the moment she breathed easy, but oh, what a sharp and fearful sword of doom was hanging above her fair, young head!

Her brain was in a whirl. She could not think clearly. All she knew was that he was gone, but she felt that it was for only a little while. He would come back again, she was sure of that, and it would be at the very hour when the crowning joy of her life was about to be reached—when she was the happy bride of Sir Lionel!

"If he comes to claim me, I will plunge a dagger into his heart and then kill myself," she whispered desperately, raising her pallid face up to the clear, star-lit sky.

And then Sir Lionel came back, bearing in his hand a slender-stemmed wine-glass filled with a sparkling, golden wine.

"Drink this, my darling," he said, kneeling beside her chair and holding the glass to her lips, while he passed the other arm around her slender waist. "I had an awful time getting it, for there is such a crowd. Why, how pale you are, little one. Has anything happened to frighten you, dearest?"

"No," she faltered, leaning her head upon his broad bosom and feeling like crying out that something had happened—that the one shadow of her life had suddenly darkened, and that he, her lover, her hero, must be kind and tender with her, and forgive all, or else she would surely die. "No, Lionel, I am nervous, that is all, and I missed you, dear."

"Missed me?" he echoed, with his merry laugh. "You must care a great deal for my company, Gabrielle, to miss me when I am absent only a few moments," but her words pleased him, for he kissed the white hands over and over again.

"He will never kiss my hands again when he learns what my life has been," she thought in bitter, silent despair as she gazed into his loving eyes, "and my heart will surely break, for I cannot live without his love."

"Why did you stay away so long, Lionel?" she asked in her soft, musical voice, in whose sad tones sorrow and despair lurked.

"Why, my darling, I was only away for a few moments," he answered in surprise, "and I returned to you just as soon as I possibly could."

It was true. He had been absent but a very short time, and yet it seemed to the girl as though hours had passed while that mocking, evil face had been peering at her through the roses.

As her mighty love for this frank, noble lover of hers suddenly swept over her heart and soul, she threw her arms about his neck, half sobbing:

"Lionel, do you trust me in everything? Would you believe me against the whole world?"

"I trust you in everything, my darling," he answered, tenderly, "and if the entire world should stand up and declare that you were not a good, true woman, I would simply laugh in scorn. Why, Gabrielle, dearest, I would sooner suspect a white-robed angel from heaven of doing wrong, than you, for you are all that is pure and holy, my pet."

Her head sunk still lower upon his breast, and at that moment she wished that God would kill them both. For she felt that there would come an hour in her life when this man, whose lips were pressed to hers, would curse her instead, and she wanted to die with his arms about her, and while his love was still her own.

Suddenly she raised her head and looked into his tender, love-lit eyes, and she swore a solemn oath that she would never let anything in this world part them; no matter who might come to claim her, she would defy them, and he would believe her, for he had just said that he would believe her against the whole world.

"Other women have played a bold game for sweet love's sake," she said, resolutely to herself, suddenly growing brave and strong. "Why should I not do the same? Is it right for my life to be sacrificed because of that gypsy? No, and I shall fight the battle out to the end. If Leon Costello dares to claim I am his wife, I will defy him. If needs be, I will silence his cowardly tongue with my own hands."

CHAPTER XV.

"TO-MORROW IS MY WEDDING DAY, AND IF ANYTHING SHOULD ARISE TO

PREVENT IT I WILL TAKE MY OWN LIFE!"

To and fro underneath the sunset sky, Lady Gabrielle Thorndyke was slowly pacing, her soft, white dress brushing against the rose-bushes with a rustling sound. Golden days had passed and starry nights had fallen many times since that night that she had decided to bravely face the battle and fight it out to the end.

It was over two weeks now and she had seen nothing of that hated face, and she was beginning to breathe easy once more. Her father had listened to Sir Lionel's pleadings that the marriage be hastened, and he had at last consented. She had heard her lover's message, and her heart had leaped with joy, for she would soon be far away from the place where the blood-stained face of the gypsy had haunted her so long.

They were going away directly after the wedding. She had expressed a wish that they spend the first year in travel, for she reasoned with herself that it would be the easiest way to avoid Leon Costello if he lived, and she felt sure that it wasthe gypsy and not his spirit that had followed her so closely.

To-morrow was her wedding-day. This time to-morrow she would be robing herself in purest white to become Sir Lionel's wife, and her eyes grew soft and her heart throbbled gladly at the thought.

"Only let the marriage take place, and let me be far away when the day again dawns," she prayed, lifting her glorious face up to the dying sunset. "And, oh, how I wish that my wedding night might be Leon Costello's hour of death!"

She wished for the death of one whose bride she had been for such a little while, and whom she had once imagined she loved! Oh, if that marriage in the mountain of Colorado had never been! If she could only awake and find it all a dream.

"But I will not let it ruin my life when I am so near happiness now," she said, "for to give up my lover, whom I love so well, would kill me! I am playing for love and happiness, and I shall not fail."

Then her eyes wandered over the beautiful scene before her—the lovely blossom whose sweetness made the very air heavy with perfume; the white statues, that appeared to peep timidly from behind masses of green shrubbery, and the rippling fount that rose and fell in a happy little song, and over all the dyingsunlight cast its faint shadow of rose and gold. It was indeed a fair scene for any one to gaze upon, and with a thrill of pride she remembered that she was mistress of it all.

But dearer far than the possession of all these fair, broad acres was the thought that she would be the wife of the man she loved better than her own life. She loved him so dearly, so truly, that she would have deemed it but a pleasure to be allowed to clasp his hand within her own and go out into the great world with him, all of this grandeur and wealth being sacrificed for his dear sake.

A sob arose in her throat, and clasping both hands over her bosom that was throbbing with passionate love, she whispered tremulously:

"My darling, my own dear love, how could I live without him now? I would rather die than cause him an hour of pain or sorrow. To-morrow is my wedding-day, and if anything should happen to prevent it, I will take my own life."

A nightingale listening, heard her whispered words, and began to sing a plaintive song that went straight to the girl's heart. A sudden pain shot through her breast, and she murmured with a half sob:

"What if he should cease to love me? Oh, God! what if he should learn all at the very last hour, and his love were to turn to hate?"

The thought made her grow sick with terror, and with a smothered sob she bowed her head and was about to give way to her sorrow, when she felt a light touch fall upon her arm, and she turned quickly to see her dearest friend, Lady Ethel Sommerville, standing beside her, a death-like pallor upon her sweet face.

"Why are you in tears, Gabrielle?" she asked, with a smile. "To-morrow is your wedding-day, and here I find you weeping alone. Ah, Gabrielle, you ought to be the happiest girl in all the world to-night. Why do you weep, dear?"

Her arms were around the slender figure, and she had pillowed the bronze-crested head upon her breast. The last rays of the sunlight shone over them as they stood thus, and it never shone upon a fairer picture.

For one brief, fleeting moment, Gabrielle was tempted to tell her true friend all, for she knew that she could trust her to the death. But a silent hand seemed to be laid across her lips, and the sorrowful tale was left untold.

"I—I do not know myself why I am in tears," she answered, endeavoring to smile. "I heard a nightingale sing, and the song was so sad and mournful that it made the tears start."

Lady Ethel returned with a smile. "He can cheer you up if any one can."

Gabrielle did not answer, but sat with her eyes fastened upon the crystal fount, her lips half parted in a smile that was all gladness.

Suddenly she turned to her friend and said slowly, while a strange light shone in her eyes:

"I was reading a book only a day or so ago that has interested my fancy strangely."

"What was it?" Lady Ethel asked, thinking what a wondrously beautiful girl Sir Lionel's bride was, "and who is the author?"

"I have forgotten who the author was," Gabrielle answered. "But it was so sad that it was really fascinating. It was the story of a young girl who thought she loved a gypsy well enough to marry him, and so they were wedded secretly. They had been married only a day or so when she learned that she was an earl's daughter, and her father found her, and took her to her home at once without ever learning of the secret marriage. Then she met one whom she really and truly loved, and she feared to tell her father of the past because he was proud and stern, and she knew he would disown her, so she kept silent, trusting to a kind fate to smooth out the tangled web."

"After awhile she learned that the man she had wedded secretly was dead, and then she promised to become her lover's wife at once. He knew nothing of her secret, and she thought it best not to tell him."

"The wedding-day drew near, and she had partly forgotten her great mistake, when either the man himself or his spirit appeared to her. She was in an agony of fear and doubt, but she resolved through all to cling to the man she loved, and defy the other if he attempted to claim her. That is as far as I have read in the book. How it will end I cannot say."

She uttered the last sentence in a smothered voice, and she looked questioningly at Lady Ethel.

"I would like to read the book," Lady Ethel said, in her slow, soft voice. "Did you say that you had it?"

"I—I have it somewhere," Gabrielle faltered. "I will try and find it for you, Ethel. I am sure you will like it."

"I do not like the heroine's deceit," Lady Ethel answered quietly. "She had no right to deceive the man who loved her and whom she loved."

"Do you think she was wrong?" Gabrielle asked, her face growing very pale as she spoke. "Would you call her a false, wicked woman, Ethel?"

"I think she was a weak, cowardly woman," Lady Ethel replied. "One could not call her wicked, and yet she knew that if her husband still lived she would be committing a fearful sin against her God, as well as the man she loved, by marrying him when she knew she was not free. It was selfish on her part, too, for had she been a true and noble woman she would have told him all in the beginning and borne it bravely. Instead of that she would make a criminal out of herself and bring disgrace upon the honorable object of her selfish love."

"Do you think he would ever forgive her if he should learn the bitter truth?" Gabrielle's white lips managed to ask, for every word that her friend uttered was like the sharp thrust of a knife.

"I cannot say as to that," Lady Ethel answered, thoughtfully. "It would depend entirely upon how much the loved her, and even if he loved her very dearly, when he learned that she was capable of deceit and treachery like that, his love might turn to hate and disgust, for there is nothing that men admire so much as truthfulness in women. I am afraid that she would lose her lover and his love at the same time."

Gabrielle made no reply, but she raised her white face up to the clear sky, as if seeking pity. Oh, God! how would it all end?

"But perhaps she loved him so very dearly that she could not live without him," she said, desperately. "That might be an excuse for her deceit, dear."

Lady Ethel shook her yellow head, saying with a slight frown:



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