

LOVE.

—BY—
ABI. S. JACKMAN.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—Continued.

After his first outburst of joy at seeing his old friend again after years of separation, Prince Cordonna became once more his sad, reserved self, and thus the princess and Sir Lionel were thrown together almost constantly.

One starry night, when all nature was hushed and silent, apparently awed by the beauty of the hour, and the lime-trees scarcely stirred in the feeble breeze, it suddenly dawned upon Sir Lionel's bewildered mind that he was learning to love this peerless woman who reminded him so much of his lost love. A hot flush of shame crimsoned his handsome face, seeming to scorch the waves of fair hair that fell over his brow, and with the knowledge of the truth that he did love her, hopelessly and madly, the mighty fire of passion but flamed the higher.

And she was his friend's wife—the friend who loved and trusted him as a brother! This was how he was repaying him! And he, Sir Lionel Mannville, had stooped to rob his true friend of a wife's love, for he knew that she loved him better than her own life. He could read it in her eyes that gleamed with happiness whenever he was near; in the tremulous quiver of her voice when she answered his questions. He could feel it in her dainty white hands as they lay trembling within his warm clasp, and in a hundred different ways he could read her love for him, and he was but human if his heart thrilled with pride at the thought that he alone had changed her from a beautiful, living statue into a passionate woman to whom love was all. Little did he dream that for long years she had loved him, and wept for his caresses until she could weep no more.

And still he loved his first love, but it seemed to him that in loving Princess Cordonna he was loving the memory of poor, lost Gabrielle even more. But this new love—it was stronger, deeper, truer than he had ever felt for any living woman, and it grew upon him day by day until he swore that he would possess her or die; not once did he think of his fond, faithful wife at home, and his baby boy who looked back at him with great, questioning blue eyes when he held him in his arms—not a single pang of regret or remorse filled his heart, for there was room there for but one idol, and that one was his beautiful love and his friend's wife!

How beautiful, ah, Heaven! how beautiful she was, he thought, as he gazed into her face, and noted the rich color mantling even her brow. Her eyes were like the stars above; her hair a crown of living, burning bronze, and her lips looked like an open rose, eager for the hot sun's kisses, to brush away with his lips the dew of early morn. Surely God never before fashioned out of flesh and blood a creature so divinely beautiful, so perfect for man to love!

Her eyes met his ardent gaze, and she drew back with a thrill of delight. In a moment his arms were about her shrinking form, and she was crushed to his breast, while a shower of kisses scorched her ripe, red lips that longed, yet feared!

"My queen, my love, kiss me!" he panted, his face against hers. "I love you! This is madness, I know, but whether it be right or wrong I love you better than my own life!"

A low cry of joy broke the silence of the perfumed air, and although she did not speak she obeyed him, and her lips sought his, madly, passionately, persistently.

"Speak to me?" he pleaded, forcing back her head so that he might look into her eyes when his eager mouth had been satisfied with kisses. "Oh, speak to me and tell me that you love me!"

"Love you?" she echoed in her flute-like voice, choked by love. "Love you, my king? Yes, better than anything upon this great, green earth—ay, better than I love my God!"

"And I," he responded passionately, "I love you so dearly that life without you would be well-nigh impossible! I could not exist away from you now, my queen—out of the sound of your sweet voice—away from the glance of your tender eye—oh, it would be death! I never lived until I knew you, my own beautiful one, I only existed! But now, ah, now we will live!"

She was silent a moment, unable for very joy to speak, and then passing one trembling hand over her face, she whispered fervently:

"I can never in words prove to you the strength and depth of my mighty love for you! Oh, Lionel, my Lionel, this is life—life!"

His answer was a kiss that drew her very soul into his, and thrilled her through and through. Then she asked:

"Do you love me as well, Lionel, as you love her? I mean the—the poor young girl who was to have been your wife. Tell me truly, for I must know. I am not jealous of the dead love, but tell me that you love me as well as you once loved her, Lionel! She loved you with a young girl's first, innocent love, but I—I love you with a woman's strong love that even death cannot alter nor kill!"

"I love you, my peerless queen, better than I ever loved any living woman—better than I loved her, my poor lost Gabrielle, but in loving you I seem to be true to her, for you resemble her so much! The love I feel for you is deeper and stronger, and yet I shall always think of her with tenderness, for she was my first love. But you—you are queen of my heart, and so you shall always be! As you sit before me now with the moonlight falling over your face, I could swear that Gabrielle was with me, only a hundred times more beautiful than when I last saw her."

For a long time they remained silent, clasped in each other's arms, the song of the nightingale seeming to set to sweetest music their love, and he raised her face so that he might see the glad, happy light in her eyes, and said softly:

"When I look at you, my darling, I can scarcely realize that you are the same beautiful, but cold, statue of a few short weeks ago. Now you are a woman in whose veins love flows instead of blood, and one kiss from your lips is worth dying for. Men have gone mad with love for women like you, but so long as I hold you in my arms I shall not go mad. What has changed you so, sweet? Is it love for me?"

"Yes," she answered softly; "love for you, Lionel, my king!"

"Then you can tell me what the future shall be?" and his eyes seemed to burn their way into her soul and vanish all thoughts save of him.

"What do you mean, Lionel?" she asked, lingering over his beloved name as though it were sweetest music. "I do not understand you, dear?" and yet her heart throbbed madly as she awaited his answer.

He folded her close to his bosom, and he could feel her heart throb against his own, and it filled his soul with a new bliss as he said in a low, eager voice:

"I mean that we must be together! I mean that you love me, and I love you, and that sacred love binds us closer together than the laws of man ever could! We were intended for each other. I know it, I feel it, and we shall not be separated. Why should we make our lives wretched for the sake of the world? Why should two loving hearts be broken because the law demands it? We will live in a world of our own! Surely, my darling, you love me well enough to sacrifice all for my sake? I would give my heart's blood for you, and I know that you love me the same as I love you! Answer me, dear—"

"It shall be as you say, Lionel," she answered, burying her face upon his breast. "You are my all, and should I not obey you? Wherever you may go, I will go, too. All my life long my heart has hungered for love like this, and at last my prayers have been answered! My life belongs to you from this night out, and it is yours to do with as you will! I can bear anything if you are with me. Sickness, pain and hunger, so long as I have your love! Only give me time, and I will prove to you how dearly I love you, nay, adore you!"

"You will have no need to prove your love for me!" he replied, kissing her as he spoke. "For I know how much you love me. You say that your life is mine from this night out, and that I may do with it as I will. I will care for you, and cherish you as no man ever loved and cherished a woman before. You shall never know one single hour of pain or weariness, for I will shield you, my darling, from every rough wind that blows. No choice flower was ever guarded one-half so closely as I will guard and watch over you! Ah, my queen, my beautiful love, kiss me again!"

She kissed him, and as he felt those clinging, passionate lips upon his own no thought of wife and babe came to him, for all that he loved in the great, wide world was in his arms.

Suddenly the sound of a piano broke the silence of that love-haunted summer night, and then as if to call them back from their dream of love and passion, and to reproach them for their falseness and wrong-doing, Prince Cordonna's voice sang the song:

"Oh, murmuring trees, oh, fragrant breeze, Oh, waving, whispering limes: Oh, there to be again with thee, My love of olden times!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

"I WOULD GO THROUGH SEAS OF FIRE WITH YOU, MY DARLING, AND CALL IT HEAVEN, FOR THE SAKE OF LYING IN YOUR ARMS FOR JUST ONE SHORT, SWEET HOUR!"

That deep, rich voice, filling the perfumed air with its sad, sweet melody startled the two, who, clasped in each other's arms, drinking in the delicious madness of forbidden love, had forgotten the very existence of the singer, and with a little, smothered cry she drew back from his warm arms, her love-lit eyes fastened upon his beloved face, whispering:

"I had forgotten him; oh, Lionel, my love, I had forgotten that there were others beside us in the world! What shall we do?"

"What shall we do?" he repeated, catching her in his arms again, and drawing her close to his breast, while he covered her mouth with fierce kisses. "We will go on with our love, of course. What would there be for us to live for now without it? Would not life be a blank forever? Answer me, my darling, and tell me if you could live away from my kisses and caresses, knowing that love is all? It is the only precious gift that is given to us, and

why should we refuse it because the law says you are bound to one that you do not love? No, no, dearest, we are one from this night out! Kiss me and put the past away from you, and be glad!"

She laid her beautiful head upon his breast, passing her snow-white hand over his face with a tender, caressing motion as though it were a pleasure to touch him, and with a sigh of contentment she whispered:

"You are right, Lionel. It is not wrong for us to love each other, for, my love, what would we do? how could we exist away from each other after the divine happiness of this night? I would go through seas of fire with you, my darling, and call it heaven, for the sake of lying in your arms for just one short, sweet hour?"

"Look up, my queen," he breathed passionately. "Look up, and I will tell you your future! The future that is to be such as no living man or woman ever knew before! It will be fairer than anything in this world has ever been yet—fairer than the delights of heaven! And to-morrow night it must begin! Do you hear me, my beautiful love? To-morrow night our new life begins!"

"To-morrow night?" she repeated, her voice trembling in spite of her attempt at self-control, her entire being thrilling and throbbing in eagerness and longing. "Do you mean that to-morrow night I must leave this place and go with you? Is that what you mean dear?"

"Yes, that is what I mean," he answered, with a kiss, and that was all he said. And she, pressed to his heart, only nestled closer to him, the silence broken by her rapid heart-throbs.

For a long time the stillness of the starry night was undisturbed save by the ceaseless song of the fountain as it rose and fell and the gentle whisper of the wind among the trees. To the hour of her death the beautiful woman could never listen to the murmur of the waving limes nor hear the ripple of the silver fount without living over again that love-filled hour beneath the glow of the golden stars and the mellow moonbeams, and the blood would leap in her veins at the memory of that night, destined to bring both joy and sorrow into her fair, young life.

"Yes, Lionel," she whispered very gently, and there was a ring of sorrow in her voice, "yes, dear, love rules the whole world. Kings and queens cannot avoid it, for hearts are alike after all."

"Even my queen cannot resist sweet love," he replied, with a smile, "and her heart seemed made of coldest marble until I warmed it to love and life!"

She was about to make some reply, when the sound of footsteps near by stopped her, and they sprang apart like guilty things, just as Prince Cordonna came up to them, and said slowly:

"What a beautiful night it is, and yet I feel so lonely. Why it is I cannot say, but there is a feeling of deep depression that I cannot shake off. It is as though something terrible were about to happen. I never remember feeling so before in all my life. Did you ever feel that way, Lionel?"

"Yes, many times," Sir Lionel answered, his face flushing guiltily in the moonlight, and for the moment the thought that he was a scoundrel rushed over him, and he hated himself. What! he, Sir Lionel Mannville, upon whose proud name there had never been a stain—was it possible that he had fallen so low as to rob his friend of his wife? Good God! no, he would not, he could not, commit such an unpardonable sin!

And then his eyes rested upon that lovely face so near him, looking in the mellow moonlight like the face of a sinless saint out of Paradise, and became oblivious to everything save his mighty love. Pride and honor were forgotten, and love reigned supreme over all.

Her beautiful eyes were fastened upon her husband's face, and she noticed how pale and sad he looked, and for the first time she wished that she could love him. He was noble and true. It showed plainly in every line of his face, and the thought that she was going to bring disgrace and shame upon his proud old name cut like the sharp thrust of a knife. But with set teeth she whispered that it was all for love's sake, and she could not live without her lover. Shame or no shame, she would go to the ends of the earth with him, for love was more to her than honor—yes, far more than life!

"I may be foolish," Prince Cordonna went on, raising his eyes up to the summer-night sky, "but I have a presentiment that my life is nearing its end. I have been worldly and have never given death a thought, but to-night as I sat at the piano singing that old song my mind wandered back over familiar, half-forgotten scenes, and lingered about old friends that have been dead for years. It is the first time I have ever given them a thought, but somehow they all seemed to be with me to-night as I sang. Ah, well I suppose it is as it should be!"

He sighed deeply, his eyes still fixed upon the stars that twinkled in the sky overhead like so many diamonds, his lips parted in a sad smile.

His words seemed to pierce the hearts of both his false friend and his wife, and it was all they could do to keep from crying out, for he looked so noble and brave standing there, his dark hair blowing about his brow, as it was stirred by the evening breeze—that he seemed far above treachery and deceit.

(TO BE CONTINUED)



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