

LOVE.

—BY—

ABI. S. JACKMAN.

CHAPTER XXIII.—Continued.

Thick and fast fell the shower of stones, and it seemed to the agonized girl that each one cut deeper, and was more painful as she sped along, her panting breath coming through her parted lips with a labored sound.

She felt that she could not hold out much longer, for the loss of blood weakened her fearfully, and she could feel her strength failing her. Must she die, she asked herself, and at the hands of those hated gypsies? No, she would not! She would live for revenge upon that cruel woman who called herself her mother, but who was more like a bloodthirsty tigress, and with a mighty effort, she bounded on, her anger putting a new life in her veins!

She had passed through the line, and had reached the edge of a dense wood. Another moment and she would be able to conceal herself from those yelling devils in the thick undergrowth. The thought lent her new speed, and on and on she flew.

The queen saw that her victim was about to escape her, and cried out:

"Do not let her escape. She must not. Look! she is making for the wood, and once she is concealed there, we shall never be able to find her."

Gabrielle's heart sunk like lead, and with a moan of despair she was about to sink to the ground, when a voice near by, called in low tones:

"Here girl, here! Up with you, for God's sake, up with you, and we will escape those devils! Gather all your strength together, and I will save you. Now—there you are safe!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I WILL LIVE, AND THIS BEAUTY AND GRANDEUR MAY HELP ME TO FORGET! OTHER WOMEN HAVE LIVED WITH A DEAD HEART WITHIN THEIR BUSTS—WHY NOT I?"

She felt a pair of strong arms lift her up from the ground, and the next instant she was seated upon a horse's back, the same arms holding her firmly before the owner as the horse galloped madly through the wood, the iron-shod hoofs crushing the shrubs and tender shoots mercilessly beneath them as the splendid animal sped on, as fleet as the wind itself.

She could not turn her head to see her strange rescuer, so she could not tell what he looked like, and she had not the slightest idea who he might be. She did know, however, that he rode a magnificent, blooded horse, and the arms that held her safely before him on the saddle, were firm and strong as steel. She had escaped from those terrible gypsies, and she could have cried aloud for joy, and then he, the bane of her existence, the one black shadow on her life, was dead! She had killed him with her own hands, and a wild, glad feeling surged up into her heart! Never again could he torture and mock at her anguish, for he was dead, dead, dead!

She shut her teeth tightly together, and swore that she would live. She did not want to die now, for she wished to live for revenge and she would live.

The unknown had not uttered a single word since he had ordered her to mount the horse, and he was urging the animal directly toward the river, that gleamed like a broad belt of silver before her eyes.

A moment later, and it was reached. She wondered if he intended to force the brave horse to swim it with his double burden, and somehow, she did not fear. She felt that she was safe, and instinctively she trusted her rescuer, why she could not say.

With a snort, the horse sprang into the gleaming river, and it seemed to Gabrielle that he had no more than touched the water when he was upon the bank on the opposite shore, shaking the drops of water from him like a huge Newfoundland.

His master touched his glossy side lightly with the whip, and he was off again like a bird. On through a dark, gloomy wood where the moon now and then found courage to peep through the green tree-tops, and the boughs rustled mysteriously, they were borne, and then up a steep hill where the pathway wound its way between rows of tall trees.

At the top of the hill, the stranger drew rein before a high gate that loomed up before them, like walls of solid iron. He drew forth a tiny silver whistle from his pocket, and whistled sharply upon it three times. The gates of solid iron flew open as if by magic, and the noble horse galloped through.

Gabrielle could not suppress the cry of admiration that arose to her lips, for never before had she gazed upon a scene like that which stretched out before her enchanted eyes. She had beheld many beautiful places, but none could compare with this. It was more like a scene from fairyland than anything else.

There was one continual array of tropical blossoms, singing fountains and brilliant-plumaged song birds, and to the girl's dazzled eyes it seemed as if there must be a million different lights twinkling through the stately palms and the jeweled windows. The house itself was a large,

rambling mansion of purest white marble, and even to one accustomed to splendor and wealth it was a rare and wonderful sight.

The owner of all this grandeur dismounted, and leading Gabrielle by the hand up to the stately door, said, with a low bow:

"Welcome to a place of safety, my fair young friend. Does it please your fancy?"

She looked at him then for the first time, wondering why he should ask her such a question, and she started, for it was a handsome face into which she gazed, though worldly and cynical, with a tired, weary look, as if he had found all things in life changeable and fading. He was perhaps forty years old, though the dark, Spanish face did not show it, and the raven-black hair was thickly mixed with gray. In his great, dark, soulful eyes a buried past could be plainly read, and he spoke with a slight foreign accent. Taken altogether, it was a handsome face, and a good one, and one that a woman would trust, and yet in every line lurked bitter disappointment and denied happiness that his heart longed for, knowing it could never be realized. There was something about him that fascinated Lady Gabrielle, and still she knew well that she could never care for him save as a friend.

He laughed lightly as he saw her contemplating him, and with a shrug of his shapely shoulders, asked:

"Well, what do you think of me? You are studying my face so intently, what can you read in it?"

She started, blushing a little, and then answered:

"If you wish me to tell you what I read in your face I will do so. I may be wrong, but I can see broken hopes and dreams and bitter disappointment in your eyes. Am I not right?"

"You are right," he answered, his face growing grave again. "But I forget that you are both cold and wet, and suffering from your wounds. Pardon me for being so selfish," and taking one cold little hand within his own he led her up the broad, marble steps, and into the great entrance hall, whose magnificence would dazzle anyone.

He touched lightly a silver bell, and a pretty mulatto girl suddenly appeared, smiling broadly.

"Show this lady to the guest chamber, Lizette," he said, and with a low bow and another smile she obeyed him, conducting Gabrielle through the flower-decked hall, and into a chamber gorgeous in its furnishings.

With a sigh of relief Gabrielle sunk into one of the satin chairs, and leaned her head against the soft cushion, for she was both lame and weary.

The pretty mulatto knelt before her and removed her shoes and stockings, bathing her feet with some sweet perfume that seemed to remove all pain and soreness. Then she brought warm water and soft sponges and bathed and dressed the wounds made by the cruel stones; and when that task was completed, robed her in garments of daintiest silk, and made her drink a bowl of fragrant, steaming liquid after she had sought the pretty lace-hung bed that looked like a great frosted rose.

In a few moments Gabrielle was sleeping soundly, her sorrows and troubles all forgotten, and she did not awaken until the next evening, when the silver moon came peeping in at the casement, kissing her bronze head and waxen lids.

Lizette was standing beside her couch when her beautiful eyes opened, and when she saw that her new mistress was awake, she said with a smile:

"Will my lady be dressed now? My master, Prince Cordonna, awaits her in the conservatory below, and he bade me tell her he would like to speak with her."

Lady Gabrielle put herself under Lizette's hands, and in half an hour's time she was dressed and ready to meet the friend who had saved her from her fearful fate. She drank a glass of golden-hued wine before going down, and just tasted a few fruits.

Lizette had robed her in a dress of soft, clinging silk, the color of sunlight when it shines through sparkling champagne, and a few yellow roses, set in a slight wreath of their own emerald leaves, were her only ornaments. But, oh, how beautiful she was to look upon!

So thought Prince Cordonna as she glided into the conservatory where he sat in the midst of flowers and lights, a caged mocking-bird singing over his head, a crystal fount playing at his feet, and his heart gave a great throb, not of love, but of ardent admiration at her wondrous beauty.

She came and stood before him, and he led her to a seat beneath the shade of a gigantic oleander in full bloom, and sitting down beside her, took one hand in his, saying:

"I sent for you to-night because I have much to say to you. I rescued you last night from a band of cruel gypsies who were stoning you to death, and I know that you must be friendless and alone, or else you would never be among them. I do not know you. You know still less of me. I do not believe in love. Your face tells me that you have loved and lost. You will never love again. Neither shall I. I shall not ask you what your past may have been, for again your face tells me that your life has been good and pure. I am lonely and alone in spite of my great wealth. So are you. And I will tell you frankly that you are the only woman in

the world to-night that I would trust. You shall have all that wealth can buy and go wherever you please. We will be good friends and nothing more. Now, will you be my wife?"

She looked up into his face, and for a moment she was silent. She had no intention of refusing him, for she remembered that she was free to wed him now if she chose. Her lover would never forgive her, and her life was only a poor, spoiled one at the best. What mattered it now so long as it was filled up with something to keep her alive from day to day? She put her hand in his, saying slowly:

"I will be your wife, Prince Cordonna."

He kissed the hand he clasped quietly and calmly, as if it were that of a loved sister, and she, gazing up at a tiny star that twinkled in the fleecy clouds, whispered to herself:

"I will live, and this beauty and grandeur may help me to forget. Other women have lived with a dead heart within their breasts—why not I?"

CHAPTER XXV.

"THE MERE SIGHT OF THAT BEAUTIFUL FACE BRINGS BACK THE MEMORY OF MY POOR LOST GABRIELLE!"

For a moment they were silent, and then he spoke, his voice low and gentle:

"I think we can pass a very tranquil and pleasant life together, you and I. It would be madness to say that you would ever learn to care for me, or I for you. While I admire your beauty, and know you are a pure, good girl, yet the power to love any living woman is dead. I loved a woman once, as false and treacherous as she was fair, and she killed my heart with a single blow. We will be good friends and companions—nothing more, nothing less. When we tire of the world we will fly to this secluded spot, and then when we long for bright scenes and gay faces, we will emerge from our seclusion, and seek the fickle world again. We will make the most of two ruined lives, will we not, my fair bride?"

She shuddered, as she heard him call her by that name, for she could not bear the thought of any other lips, save Sir Lionel's, calling her by that endearing title, and she realized that she was putting a barrier between them that no power on earth could break, and once more that mad, passionate love filled her heart and soul.

Oh, dear God! Was she never to see him again? she asked herself. Never to look upon his face in all the years to come and go? No matter how much gold could buy, it could not purchase happiness and love! and for the moment she bitterly regretted the promise she had just made to Prince Cordonna.

She raised her beautiful eyes up to the silver moon that came peeping in through the palms and ferns, and wondered why her young life must be so blank and desolate. She would have all that any woman's heart could wish for—wealth, jewels and a noble title, all but love, and that was what her heart longed for most.

"But he no longer cares for me," she said sadly to herself. "He would not forgive me, and he will soon forget me! and in time he will learn to love another! That will be my punishment, the awful knowledge that another will have the place in his heart that once was mine! It is bitter—more bitter than death itself!"

She clasped her hands tightly together, and the tinted nails cut into the tender flesh. She was thinking what life must be until the end, and in spite of the dazzling scenes that would ever surround her, she grew faint and sick at the very thought. There would be no such pictures of domestic bliss as she had once fondly imagined. There would be no balmy moonlight nights now when she would lie in his arms folded close to his brave breast, and listen to the crickets chirping cheerily outside in the dew-wet grasses. She could never open her eyes when the golden sun came streaming in through the window, and the fresh, sweet air of early morn came with it, and find his dear eyes seeking her own, still heavy with slumber. No, God pity her, that could never be! It was all past and gone, and nothing remained but the lost, dead dream.

But then the bitterest, saddest thought of all came to her, and she bit her full under lip to keep from screaming aloud in her anguish and sorrow. Some other woman who would love him, would have those same blessed privileges—some one who would not—who could not love him half so well as she had loved him—and he would forget the girl who had sinned only because she feared to lose his love, and in sinning had lost all. He would hold that other one in his arms, and kiss her lips, and she would return kiss for kiss the same as she, poor, loving sinner that she was, used to do. But she would go mad if she dwelt longer upon the painful thought, and with a sudden, firm resolve she looked up into the kindly, dark face that was bending over, wondering if she would ever be able to call him husband.

"The old pain hurts you to-night, does it not?" he asked gently, and then added with a sad smile:

"You need not answer me, for I can read in your eyes that you suffer. Ay, and suffer as few women do suffer! I know, I can read every line of the human face, for I have borne so much agony myself and lived through it, that the face of every man and woman I meet is like an open book to me. Why we poor wretched mortals were ever put here in this great, wide world only to be tortured, is more than I can tell. Bah! what mockery life is!"

(TO BE CONTINUED)



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