

LOVE.

ABI. S. JACKMAN.

CHAPTER XXII—Continued.

"I can wait," was all Lauetta said, but there was a world of hidden meaning in her tone. It was the first time she had spoken either directly or indirectly to Gabrielle since she had been a captive in the old home on the river's bank.

"Well, my dear, you might just as well make up your mind to try and learn to love me," he said, going over to where the hapless young girl was lying upon a rude couch. "For if you will not do so of your own free will, why, then I shall be obliged to force you, that is all."

"You can force me to do nothing, Leon Costello," she answered, fearlessly, springing to her feet, and standing erect before him. "As I have said before, you may kill me, but you cannot conquer me."

"We shall see, my lady," he sneered. "Do not anger me, or I may make you suffer for it. Do not think that we are here alone, for the entire tribe is within call, all in this old house. If you kill me, as you have threatened to do, you can never hope to escape, for they would put you to death in an hour's time. Oh, I have you safe, fair Gabrielle!"

She made no reply but turned and walked toward the window, and seated herself on a low chair, and looked out across the gleaming river from whose dark, cold depths this man had rescued her but to torture her and make life a burden. It was that already, but if she had only been allowed to go away to some quiet nook with her sorrow, she could die in peace, she told herself, and that would end it all. God only knew how she longed for rest, and she felt as if she must die and leave the burden behind her.

What was her lover doing to-night, she wondered? Her handsome, noble lover, whom she had worshiped rather than loved. Was he thinking of her with divine pity and forgiveness, knowing that out of her great love, she had sinned? Surely he must know that it was love for him that had caused her to sin, and he would forgive her.

She stole a glance at Leon Costello, and she felt murder in her heart. What right had he to come between her and her own dear lover, who had been her only hope and happiness in life? She was but a young girl, and of the great, outside world to which she belonged she knew naught, when that gypsy had asked her to be his wife. Her life had been spent among the mountains and valleys of one place and then another! Her home was in a tent, and she was alone, unloved and a waif, picked up by that strolling band. Was it any wonder that she gave the dark-faceted gypsy her hand, and what she then thought was love, when she little dreamed what the word meant? Her heart was starving for love and kindness, and so she became his wife, thinking she was fortunate in winning his love, and at the same time she was heiress to one of the finest estates in England, and in her veins flowed the blood of a nobleman.

And then came her adored lover. Ah, how happy she had been for a few brief weeks, and that wretch over there had ruined all! No wonder that her heart was filled with murder as she thought of her sorrowful and spoiled life, and at that moment she would have plunged a dagger into his false heart if one was near at hand. She turned her face again to the window, and looked out into the night, her brain trying to form some plan to escape from these wretches, but she could not. A light touch suddenly fell upon her shoulder, and with a start, she saw him standing beside her, his face flushed a deep, dark red, his eyes burning, as he gazed into her face.

"Come to me," he whispered, his fingers clutching her arm in a feverish grasp. "Come to me, for I must have you and I will."

Her heart gave a fearful leap, and then almost stood still. She shook off the hated hand, and with blazing eyes, cried: "Take your cursed hands away from me, Leon Costello!"

"I will not," he answered, in a low, passion-choked voice. "You belong to me and I will have you."

He caught her in his arms, and pressed her to his breast. A feeling of murder was in her heart as she felt his arms close about her, and she struggled madly to free herself. His hot face was very close to hers, and his burning breath fanned her brow.

"You wretch, you coward!" she panted. "You have haunted me and ruined my life, and now you cannot let me die in peace!"

"I do not intend to let you die, my darling," he answered, pressing his kiss upon her unwilling lips. "I want you to live for me."

As she struggled to free herself, her hand came in contact with something cold and smooth, and a thrill of fierce joy ran through every vein, for she knew that it was a dagger, and maddened by those kisses, she was ready to commit any deed. Snatching it from his belt, she set her teeth, and plunged the keen blade again and again into his breast.

It was all done in a moment, and as he fell back, the hot blood gushing from his many wounds, she threw the dagger from her, crying wildly:

"I said I would kill you, if you dared touch your vile lips to mine, and I have kept my word."

With the cry of a pantheress robbed of her young, Princess Lauretta was upon her, and clutching her by her slender throat, hissed:

"Yes, you have killed him, and now I will strangle you, curse you!"

And in another moment she would have accomplished her purpose, but the queen hurled her to one side, crying:

"You fool, let her alone! I will attend to her!" And putting a tiny silver whistle to her lips, she blew a sharp shrill, blast. A dozen dusky-faced men were in the room in an instant, and pointing toward Lady Gabrielle, who stood like a lovely fawn at bay, she cried:

"Seize her, men, she is a murderess! My beautiful Lady Gabrielle, you are about to be punished for taking your husband's life—you shall be stoned to death."

CHAPTER XXIII.

"WHY DO YOU NOT KILL ME AT ONCE AND END MY MISERY? OR DOES YOUR CRUEL HEART REJOICE AT THE SIGHT OF SUFFERING."

In spite of her composure and self-control, Gabrielle started violently, her face growing deadly pale, for surely no child ever listened to such awful words from a mother's lips before. And as she looked into those dark, evil faces before her, she knew that she could expect no mercy. She set her teeth together, determined to ask no pity of such wretches. No matter what happened, or how they tortured her, she would bear it in silence.

"She is a murderess, men!" cried the queen, "and she must be punished! Do you understand me?"

The sullen-looking group around her bowed their heads in silence, and turning to the pale-faced girl standing before her helpless and alone, the woman hissed, her black eyes blazing like two coals of fire.

"You need hope for no mercy here, Lady Gabrielle Thorndyke, for none will be shown you. A woman who will slay her husband as you have done, shall be punished as she richly deserves!"

"I expect no mercy," Lady Gabrielle answered in her low, clear voice, her head held proudly erect, gazing calmly into the passion-inflamed face of the other, and that other, God pity her, was her mother! Her mother! ah, Heaven! what a bitter mockery it was! "Nor do I wish any mercy from such as you!"

The queen's face grew livid, and springing forward she cried hoarsely:

"Curse you, I will wring your very heart strings for those words! How dare you speak to me like that, and I your mother?"

"You have shown plainly that you are unworthy the sacred name of mother," was the bitter reply. "And you may kill me by inches, but I will never plead for mercy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" the queen laughed mockingly. "We shall see, my fine, young lady. Wait until you know what is before you, and then you will not be so brave. What a sight it will be to see the beautiful daughter of Lord Thorndyke and the bride of Sir Lionel Mannville flying for her life from a band of roving gypsies, bent upon stoning her to death! And the one who heads that gallant band—the one whose hand shall cast the first stone at the figure flying from a just punishment will be—her mother!"

A thrill, not of fear, but of horror, ran through the girl's veins, as the full meaning of those awful words flashed over her, she cried:

"Wretched woman! why do you not kill me at once, and end my misery? Or does your cruel heart rejoice at the sight of suffering?"

"At the sight of your suffering, yes," the queen answered quickly. "And if your proud father and your bonny, handsome lover could only witness your sufferings and pains my revenge would be complete!"

The young girl made no reply, but she swore to herself that if she did escape and regain her freedom, they should suffer, and most bitterly too.

"But there is no hope for me!" she whispered to herself; none at all. I am doomed, and the sooner they end my misery the better. Ah, God, what fiends! and the cruelest of them all is my own mother!"

Just then Princess Lauretta, who had been kneeling beside the prostrate form of Leon Costello, pillowing his head upon her breast, covering his lips with kisses, and calling him by every endearing name that the human tongue can utter, sprung to her feet, and pointing one hand at Gabrielle, cried wildly:

"There she stands, cursed murderess! Look at her, the pale-faced fiend! Look at her! She has murdered my lover, and she rejoices over it! But she shall not escape, I swear it! I will kill her with my own hand first!" and seizing the blood-stained dagger that had given Leon Costello such a fatal wound, she rushed at the young girl like a demon, shrieking:

"Die, murderess, die! You have robbed me of the only man I ever loved, and now you shall pay the penalty!"

She was upon Gabrielle in an instant. The dagger flashed through the air, and

in another moment it would have been buried in the fair white breast, but the queen stepped forward, and grasping the infuriated creature by the arm, drew her back, saying harshly:

"Wait, you fool, wait! Are you mad to disobey me? I have given orders that she is to be stoned to death, and you will know that my commands are always obeyed!" and turning to the men who crowded around her, she said:

"Go, men, and gather together all the stones that are near. Make haste, for time is precious, and before the body of the murdered one is cold I want this murderess to be lying dead beside him."

The men all bowed low before their queen, and hastily left the apartment, the tread of their footsteps echoing through the bare, empty rooms of the old stone house with a hollow sound.

"No, she shall not lie beside him when she is dead," Princess Lauretta cried fiercely, springing to her feet. "She murdered him, and she shall not be near him even when she is dead. Oh, Leon, my love, my king, speak to me, speak to me just!" and again she fell across the prostrate body, sobbing and wailing in her grief and madness.

It seemed to Gabrielle that hours must have passed since the men had left the room, when in reality it was only a few moments, and she found herself wishing they would return and end her misery, when the door opened, and they entered.

"All is ready, queen," one of the leaders said, advancing to where the woman was standing, her black eyes fastened upon the young girl's face, bitter hatred shining in their murky depths.

"Lead the murderess out then," she answered, "and see that she does not escape."

Two sullen-looking, swarthy-browed gypsies advanced to where the girl was standing, pale and calm, her wonderful, bronze hair glittering like a halo above her white brow, and seizing her roughly by one arm, dragged her from the room out into the mellow moonlight that shone like a veil of silver mist over all.

Their cruel fingers left great bruises on the soft, fair flesh, and a shudder convulsed her slender form as her eyes fell upon a large pile of stones near by, and every stone in that unsightly heap was to be hurled at her until she was left lying upon the ground a mangled and quivering corpse, bleeding from the many wounds that would soon cover her body.

But she did not utter a word. She set her teeth, swearing to herself that she would die a thousand deaths rather than cry or beg for mercy.

She saw the gypsies range themselves in a long row on either side of her, forming a passage through which she must run for her life, and each one held his arms piled high with stones, all ready and eager to cast at the young girl who had slain their favorite and leader. Hatred and revenge were in their eyes, and she could feel the many hot breaths fanning her face like fiery blasts from the deepest pits of hell!

And then she saw the queen take her place at the head of the line, her right hand, clutching a huge stone, ready to hurl it at her child. Surely the pitying angels up in heaven never looked down upon a sadder sight than that, and no living eye ever witnessed a mother stoning to death her own flesh and blood!

Gabrielle raised her eyes up to the clear, starry sky. Ah, how calm and serene it was out there under the golden moonlight, Nature seeming to rejoice and be glad, but the smiling moon slowly withdrew her face beneath the shelter of the floating clouds, and wept behind her fleecy shelter because of the fair young girl's awful fate!

"Are you ready, men?" the queen called out in her clear, ringing voice, and the answer was: "We are ready, queen."

She turned to the girl who stood so quietly before them, knowing that the end was near, and said slowly:

"You will be given the chance of escaping, Lady Gabrielle Thorndyke. If you are fleet-footed enough to dodge the stones that will be hurled at you, you may live. If not, your life must pay the penalty for murdering your husband. Remember, men," she added, turning to the gypsies with a horrible smile, "that this woman is a murderess, and should be dealt with as such. So let your aim be true and firm."

Alas! poor, helpless Gabrielle! What chance was there for her? None. She was at the mercy of those fiendish gypsies, and she knew she could expect no mercy or pity.

She turned away her beautiful head, wondering what Sir Lionel would say did he know of her awful fate, and then a fearful cry of pain burst from her lips, for the stone held in the queen's cruel hands suddenly shot through the air, striking her upon the shoulder with such force that the ragged edge of the stone cut a deep, ugly wound in the soft flesh.

That was the signal for the sickening work to commence, and a perfect shower of stones were hurled at the helpless girl, every one striking her in some part of her body.

Faint and blind with pain, the blood streaming from a dozen different wounds, she stood for a few brief moments, gazing about her like a dazed sleeper suddenly awaking from a nightmare, and then with a cry of anguish, darted like a bird down the long, narrow passageway of human beings.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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