

LOVE.

—BY—
ABI. S. JACKMAN.

CHAPTER XXXI.—Continued.

Suddenly a wild burst of laughter filled the air, ringing out upon the starlit sea and seeming to rend the very heavens above with its shrillness and bitter sorrow. He shuddered, for he was sure that she had gone stark mad when she reached out her hands toward the gleaming waves, wailing: "I have robbed a little child of its father, beautiful sea! I have taken a loving wife's husband away from her, and she will curse me! Ah, me! why was I ever born?"

"Listen to me, darling," he pleaded, frantic with fear, going to her side, once more and endeavoring to soothe her, "you have done no wrong. You love me and I love you. You have left a husband that you do not love, I a wife. Why should you regret it?"

"I thought you were free, Lionel," she wailed. "I did not dream that you had a little one at home! Oh, Lionel! you should have told me all, dear!" and then with a sob she darted forward and threw herself upon his breast, moaning:

"Am I dreaming? Or is the starlight on the waters slowly driving me mad? Tell me, Lionel, my king, is it but a dream?"

She clung to him with her soft, round arms, kissing his lips over and over again, crying out that if it was true she would throw herself into that shimmering sea that seemed to mock her, for she would rather die than rob his little one of its father! And she could not live without him now! And he, holding her in his arms, prayed for God to kill them both!

"Tell me, Lionel," she said suddenly, lifting her head. "Tell me of your wife. I am calm now, and I can listen to you. Is she fair? And does she love you?"

"She is fair and pure," he answered, thinking to humor her. "Her eyes are blue like violets, her hair like spun gold, and she has a sweet, gentle face. But she is no more like you than a winter sunbeam is like the rays of the tropic sun at noon. She is pretty—you are divinely beautiful."

"Thank Heaven she is not like me!" she sobbed, "for she would not rob me of my husband as I have robbed her! What is her name, Lionel? Tell me her name?"

"Her name is Ethel," he answered, wondering how he could calm her, and cursing himself for the anguish he was causing her, when he would have died to save her a moment's pain.

A horrible pain darted through her heart and then she knew who it was she had wronged so cruelly, and once more putting aside his clasping arms, she wailed:

"Dear Heaven! what a poor, wretched sinner I am! My sin is beyond pardon, but I will atone for it, I will atone! Oh, Lionel, I am a better friend than you are, for you would rob your old friend of his wife, but I will not take my friend's husband away from her! Nay, more, I will restore him to his little one. Look at me, Lionel, and see if you do not know me. Ah, your own heart must whisper to you that I am your first and only love, and my dear friend Ethel is your wife?"

Then for the first time the truth dawned upon his dazed brain, and looking into the pale, lovely face before him as if he had seen a ghost, he cried:

"Gabrielle! My God, it is Gabrielle come back from the grave!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

"YOU ARE DEARER TO ME THAN MY GOD, AND YET FROM THIS NIGHT OUR PATHS MUST FOREVER LIE FAR APART!"

The echo of her piteous cry melted into the restless murmur of the silver sea, and the caressing night wind sounded like a wail of pain as it sobbed softly about the lovers keeping time to the song of the waves. She raised her pale face up to the starry sky, wondering if the gentle moon was dying, for there seemed to be a pallid shadow upon her smiling countenance.

He was looking at her with startled eyes, his breath coming and going in fierce little gusts, his lips parted as though he fain would speak, and yet feared to address one who had but arisen from the grave. In that death-like silence, the wild throbbing of the two burning hearts could be plainly heard.

"Lionel, my love, why do you look at me so strangely?" she half sobbed, holding out her hands appealingly. "Why will you not speak to me, Lionel? Are you not glad to see me? Ah, you loved me once, dear, surely you must love me a little even now! Speak to me just once! Anything but that frozen state of horror! I cannot bear it, indeed I cannot, Lionel!"

Her voice died out in a bitter sob of anguish, and the beautiful tear-wet eyes were lifted to his face, as if she sought pardon for coming back from the grave after he had believed her dead for two long years.

"Gabrielle standing before me!" he whispered hoarsely to himself, passing his hand across his brow in a dazed manner. "Gabrielle, my little love of olden times, alive! Why, I saw her in her coffin! I knelt beside her as she lay dead, and prayed for God to kill me, too, so that in death

we would be reunited! She deceived me, poor little girl, but it was all through love for me! Oh, no! I must be dreaming! It cannot be true! It is a dream, a vain, vain dream!"

"It is no dream, Lionel!" the beautiful unhappy girl cried, wringing her clasped hands in an agony of grief and despair.

"It is true. I am Gabrielle Thorndyke, the girl you once loved so well. I swear before God that it is true. Oh, Lionel, my love, do you not remember how we first met? Have you forgotten the day when I knelt by the lake, longing to behold in its clear depths the wonderful dream face of my lover, whom I had dreamed of for long days and nights? And you came and folded me to your breast, silencing my lips with kisses that thrilled every vein in my body with bliss! Ah, God, those kisses! I can feel them yet! And they give unto me a new life. Kiss me, Lionel, kiss me, for my soul is dying with longing."

She advanced toward him, her red lips parted in a tempting arch of sweetness, her white arms reached out like pillars of snow and her bronze hair forming a glittering halo around her perfect face. She forgot everything else upon earth save that she loved this man better than her own life, and she was conscious only of the fact that she was starving for his kisses and caresses.

A great cry burst from his lips, and in another instant she was folded to his breast as his passionate lips were pressed to her quivering mouth, and in smothered tones he whispered:

"Gabrielle, my darling, my darling, I know you now! Oh, my beautiful one, my only love, no wonder that I loved you from the first moment my eyes rested upon you as the Princess Cordonna! You are mine—mine in both soul and body, and no power upon earth shall part us! You are not dead, my queen, thank God, you are not dead!"

Weak and trembling in every limb, she leaned against his breast, all strength and power to resist him leaving her for the moment his lips touched her face. His kisses fired her blood, and she prayed in mute, fierce silence for Heaven to kill them both before that warm clasp was broken. But Heaven did not answer her prayers, and she was forced to live, and withdrawing gently from his embrace, for she could not breathe, she whispered faintly:

"Then you do love me after all, Lionel? You do not hate me because I once deceived you?"

"Love you?" he echoed, falling upon his knees before her, and catching both hands within his own he covered them with kisses. "Love you, my darling? I love you a thousand times better if it were possible since I have learned that you are my lost Gabrielle! Ah, how blind I have been not to see before that she and the Princess Cordonna were one!"

"I never intended that you should know Lionel," she answered, bending over him and softly weeping. "I intended to keep my secret until I died."

"But I know it now, my queen," he whispered, gazing into her face with his adoring eyes. "And you are mine tonight more than ever! My love has been yours all the way through, for when I loved the Princess Cordonna I loved my own true love. No wonder that I forgot myself so far that I could rob my friend of his wife, for I had a stronger claim upon her affection than he ever had. You are mine, dear. Mine in the eyes of both God and man!"

A thrill of delight ran through her at his words, for she had suffered so much, and her poor heart was so hungry for his love, and then she suddenly remembered that her friend, her dear, true friend was this man's wife. More than that, she was the mother of his little child, and she had no right to come between them and she would not. No, whatever happened, she would never be guilty of that sin. She might suffer, but she would bear it, for she remembered how true and faithful Ethel had been to her when her own father had turned against her, and putting aside his clinging arms once more she stepped back saying with a smothered sob:

"We have both been weak and foolish, Lionel, but we must atone for it. Oh, my love, we must atone for it!"

"What do you mean, Gabrielle?" he asked, looking at her in surprise. "What has changed you so suddenly? There is a dark shadow resting upon your sweet face. Let me kiss it away, dear!"

"Lionel, you and I are no longer free to love each other. You have a wife—the dearest, truest wife that man ever had—and she loves you so well that were she to learn of your love for me it would kill her. And you have a little child, Lionel, a little life that is for you to guard and watch over until its first helpless years are over, and you must not, you shall not falter in your duty toward that little one. Oh, Lionel! what happiness it must be to love a child so pure, so sweet, that the breath of heaven is always about it." Here a sob arose in her throat, but quickly forcing it back she went on:

"You have something to live for, but I have nothing. You shall not spoil your life because mine is spoiled, and it is because I love you so, Lionel, that we must part. You are dearer to me than my God, and yet from this night our paths must forever lie far apart!"

"Gabrielle, my darling, are you going mad?" he cried, grasping her hand within his own. "You do not know what you are saying, dear. I cannot live without you, neither can you exist away from my

arms. Why should we part? We love each other. Life is too short for sacrifices that end only in misery for all concerned. If Ethel knew that you still lived and I loved you, do you think she would wish to keep me from your side? No, she would tell me to go to the one I loved, whether it was right or wrong. And you do not love your husband. Why should you go back to him?"

"Hush, Lionel, for God's sake, hush!" she sobbed, turning away her head. "Do not tempt me, for it must be so! I shall go to my husband and tell him all. He is generous and good, and he will pardon me, for he knows how I have suffered. He has suffered himself. Oh, my heart is breaking, my heart is breaking!"

She was sobbing aloud, and as he listened to her, something like a curse fell from his lips, and she raised her head, and drying her tears, looked at him, saying reproachfully:

"I am a better friend than you are, Lionel. I am truer to my friend, your wife, than you are to your friend my husband!"

"But you do not mean to part?" he asked her, longing to snatch her in his arms and cover her red mouth with kisses. "Oh, my beautiful love, you surely do not mean that?"

"I do mean it, dear," she answered very gently, and there was a ring in her voice that he had never heard before. "Listen to me, Lionel. We are both brave enough and strong enough, too, not to give way to our feelings. We must fight it out and bear our sorrow in silence. By so doing we are the only sufferers. If we let love be our guide, your wife and your little one, as well as my noble husband, must suffer with us. Ah, Lionel! we never thought once of his sufferings when we took this fatal step. Let us be patient, dear. Go back to your wife and child, and I will go to my husband, and whatever our crosses are, we will bear them in meekness and silence! It is best so my own dear love, it is best so!"

"This is death!" he groaned, covering his face with both hands, and then as he lifted his eyes once more, intending to implore her to stay with him, a cry of alarm burst from his lips, for she had vanished as completely as though the silvery sea had swallowed her up!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"I LOVE YOU, BUT I SWEAR THAT IF YOU LAY ONE HAND UPON ME I WILL SPRING INTO THE SEA!"

The moon still cast her silvery rays over the bosom of the murmuring deep, and the stars twinkled in the heavens above, but the slender form of his love was nowhere in sight. Where had she gone? he asked himself in agony and despair. Was there a treacherous bar of quicksand near by that had swallowed her like some angry monster? Would he ever see the lovely face and tear-wet eyes again? Oh, God! it was awful, awful!

The roll of the star-drenched waters seemed to mock at his anguish, and he cursed the moon because she smiled so calm and serene above him.

"Gabrielle, Gabrielle, my darling, where are you?" he called, but only the echo of his own voice came back to him across the shimmering waves, and he wrung his hands in hopeless agony, crying out that his beautiful love was lost to him for evermore.

"Where is she?" he half sobbed. "Oh, silvery sea, where is my love? Tell me, calm, smiling moon, where shall I look for my darling? Is she dead, my twinkling star? Oh, is she dead?"

But no answer met his cry of woe, and with a great sob he fell face downward on the gleaming sands, and lay there as motionless as the dead.

Suddenly he felt a pair of soft, round arms encircle his neck, and a dear, familiar voice whispered:

"I cannot see you suffer so! Oh, Lionel, I cannot see you suffer so!"

With a cry of joy so deep, so intense, that it was more like pain, he sprang to his feet and clasped her in his arms, covering her face with hot kisses.

"Let me go! Oh, Lionel, in sweet pity's name, let me go!" she panted, struggling to free herself. "I must go. I cannot stay where you are."

"But you shall stay where I am!" he cried in triumph. "You can never escape me now."

"I thought you loved me, Lionel, indeed I did!" she sobbed piteously, trying to avoid his burning kisses. "But you do not. If you did, you would not be so cruel!"

"Cruel!" he echoed. "Cruel to you? Why, my darling, I would die for you at any moment!"

"Then leave me alone!" she whispered, her very lips growing pale at the thought and yet she knew it must be done. "If you love me, Lionel, in sweet pity's name go away and leave me!"

His arms dropped reluctantly away from the slight, quivering figure, and as she drew back from him he said sadly:

"You say that you love me, Gabrielle, and yet you shrink from me."

"I do love you," she sobbed. "You cannot doubt that, but I shrink from you for your own good as well as mine. Oh, why can you not understand me?"

"I do understand you. I will understand you," he said gently, even though his heart ached so horribly that he wondered why he did not fall dead at her feet.

(TO BE CONTINUED)



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