

LOVE.

—BY—
ABI. S. JACKMAN.

CHAPTER XVIII.—Continued.

But not for a single moment did the proud heart of Lord Thorndyke soften. He thought of the shame and disgrace that would stain his fair name, and he almost hated the girl who was the cause of it all.

"No, Lady Ethel, you plead in vain," he answered slowly. "I cannot forgive her. She has ruined her own life and mine, too. If she lay before me dead, I might be able to forgive her, but not until then."

Little did he dream that, as he uttered those words, the waters of the lake had just closed over his erring child's bright head. If he knew, he might have been kinder and more forgiving.

Lady Ethel cast one last, pleading glance into his face, then turned away, for she knew it would be a hopeless task, and then she walked slowly from the room, her golden head bowed in deepest sorrow. She went up to her friend's room, and knocking lightly upon the panels of the door, whispered:

"I will comfort her, my poor Gabrielle."

Again and again she knocked, but received no reply from within. At last, growing alarmed, she pushed open the door and entered. The room was empty. No one was visible, and she searched every nook and corner, her heart throbbing in fear and nameless terror.

"Gabrielle, Gabrielle dearest, where are you?" she called, and her voice sounded strange even to her own ears.

Suddenly her eyes fell upon the letter lying among the articles on the toilet table, and she snatched it up and saw Sir Lionel's name there. With a low cry she fairly flew down the stairs and into the long drawing-room, and thrusting the letter into Sir Lionel's hand, panted:

"Read it, for Heaven's sake! I found it in her room, and she is not there!"

He read the written words, his face growing paler at each sentence, and with a cry that rang in Lady Ethel's ears for many a day after, staggered back, crying hoarsely:

"My God! she is dead! She has drowned herself!" and then springing forward he cried:

"There may be time to save her yet, for see, the ink is not yet dry on the paper! Hurry, for God's sake, all of you men hurry! Here James, John, Henry, all of you, fly to the lake and see if we cannot find her, for she must be saved! She must and shall be saved! Follow me, men, and fly, as you value your own lives!"

CHAPTER XIX.

"YOU ARE MY WIFE, AND RATHER THAN SEE YOU RECEIVE ONE SINGLE KISS FROM YOUR LOVER'S LIPS, I WOULD PLUNGE THIS DAGGER INTO YOUR HEART!"

With those words, Sir Lionel rushed from the house, followed by all the servants. Panting, breathless, his hair tossed by the night wind, he reached the lake, and it seemed to him that it was hours before they arrived upon the scene, all ready to drag the lake in search of their fair young lady's body. They whispered to each other that the young man must be mad, and half crazed by their slowness, he shouted:

"Make haste, for the love of Heaven! She wandered to the edge of the lake and has fallen in. Hurry! hurry! I say, or you will be too late!"

All through the long hours of the night he stood upon the banks of the lake wringing his hands and crying out that they had driven her to her death, while the men worked wearily to find the young girl's body. Lord Thorndyke was with him, striving vainly to calm him, and Lady Ethel, wrapped in a long, black cloak, would not leave the spot. Among themselves, the men whispered and said that the young lover mourned for his bride far more than did the father, for Lord Thorndyke's face was like marble, so cold and stern it looked there by the dim lights of the many lanterns.

Ah, what a terrible night it was! Lady Ethel could never blot out the memory of those long, dark hours between the midnight and the dawn, and it seemed more like a horrible dream than reality.

Just as the morning broke they found something, and Lord Thorndyke tried to urge Lady Ethel to leave the spot, but in vain. She would not go.

"No I will not go now," she said. "I loved her and was true to her through all, and I will not go away and leave her now."

He said no more, but his cold face grew a little paler, as the men lifted a slight figure, robed in white, with a torn, tattered veil clinging to the face, from out the lake, and laid it tenderly upon the soft green grass, and stood with bowed heads, awaiting for him to say something.

Sir Lionel recoiled, and would have fallen to the ground had not Lord Thorndyke caught him in his arms. But Lady Ethel was calmer of them all. She did not faint, she did not cry out, she walked

overt to where the motionless form was lying, and kneeling down beside the dreamless sleeper, drew the wet veil away from the face of the dead.

For the first time a cry burst from her lips, and she covered her eyes with her hands, and no wonder, for the face hidden beneath the folds of filmy white, was so cruelly scarred and burned, that not a single trace of the once marvelous beauty remained.

"Look!" she panted. "Oh, Sir Lionel, look at her. That cowardly gypsy has thrown vitriol into her face, and you would never dream that it was Gabrielle who lies here. There has been foul play here. She has been murdered. Oh, Gabrielle, my dear friend and sister, what a cruel fate has been yours."

They all gathered round her, and looked at the poor, scarred face. Alas! what a change, what a wreck. Was it possible that this repulsive looking object was bright, beautiful Lady Gabrielle? It did not seem possible, and yet it must be so, for there were the white satin bridal robes veiled and all, that she had worn, the only thing missing being her jewels. Of these she had been robbed, and it was hapless Lady Gabrielle beyond a doubt.

They carried her into the home where she had once been the joy and pride, and laid her in the drawing-room where her bridal flowers yet filled the air with sweetest perfume. They took white roses from the marriage bed under whose fragrant shelter she stood beside her lover, only to feel the shadow of doom cloud her life for evermore, and placed them in the dead hands, burned and scarred as was her face. They covered her face with the folds of her veil, and left her there alone in her long, last sleep.

Through it all Lord Thorndyke had not shed a single tear, and Sir Lionel wandered from room to room, unable to sleep, refusing food, trying to think. But, oh, what a hopeless task it was!

Only once did he enter the room where the flower decked form lay, and then he was alone. What he whispered into those silent ears was never known, for not a sigh, not a sound was heard, and when he emerged from the chamber of the dead his face was pale but calm.

At last came the day when Lady Gabrielle was borne forth from her home and laid to rest in the family vault, where slept the dead-and-gone Thorndykes of many generations, and she, the youngest, the fairest of them all, slumbered among those stately dames and noble men, the only one upon whose fair name a stain was cast.

So thought Lord Thorndyke as he turned away and left his erring child sleeping there with the rest, and his heart was still hard and bitter against her, for he could forgive all but the disgrace and shame she had left upon his name, and that he could never forgive.

Her name was never mentioned, and to all outward appearances she was forgotten, and yet how often through the long, dark hours of night did Sir Lionel awaken and reach out his hands with a cry of heart-hunger and longing for his love, whose beautiful dream-shape had been with him only a few short moments before. And Lady Ethel? There was not a day, not an hour, that she was untrue to her friend, whose memory was very, very dear to her.

"I loved her," she whispered to herself one night, as she was walking slowly to and fro under the waving limes. "I loved her then and I love her now. And I would gladly sacrifice my own life could I but see her once again, as happy and free as when I first knew her. I cannot sacrifice my happiness," and here she smiled sadly, "for I have done so sacrifice. But to-night if an angel should come right down from heaven and ask me to choose between Sir Lionel's love or my friend's happiness and honor, what would my answer be? I would say: 'Restore Gabrielle to her lover and give her back her freedom and her good name, and—let me suffer, let me suffer!'"

She looked up at the night sky, and it seemed to pity her, and then the night-gale began to sing, and with a great cry she threw herself down upon the soft grass by the fount, and for the first time in many days, wept for her own sorrow.

As our readers no doubt have surmised, it was not Lady Gabrielle whose body was found in the lake, but as the form was clothed in bridal robes, and the face and hands were eaten away, it was only natural that the dead girl should be mistaken for Lady Gabrielle, but at the very hour that the body was laid away in the vault the hapless girl was a prisoner in an old stone house, many miles away from Thorndyke Hall.

When she closed her eyes and sprang into the lake on her wedding night some one saw her, and that some one was Leon Costello, the gypsy who had followed her from the house, and no sooner had the waves closed over her bright head than he was in the water after her, and as she arose for the second time he caught her in his arms, and soon had her safely on the bank of the lake, where the two veiled forms were waiting.

He knelt beside her and laid his ear to her breast. Her heart still throbbled. He looked up and nodded.

"She lives," was all he said, but there was a world of meaning in his voice, and his black eyes twinkled with devilish light. He pulled a small sponge from his

pocket, and pouring some pale, golden-colored liquid from a tiny bottle, upon it, held it close to the nostrils of the unconscious girl for a second.

"There, she will not awaken until I wish her to," he said, and lifting her in his strong arms he vanished in the midst of the green trees, followed by his two mysterious companions.

When Gabrielle opened her eyes the first objects they rested upon were the veiled figures beside the bed upon which she was lying. At first she did not understand what it all meant. She could not realize where she was or who those ghostly looking forms were, whose somber robes cast a gloom over the small room.

She raised herself upon one elbow and passed her hand over her brow, and tried to think; at first it was all in vain, and then like a flash it rushed through her brain, and she remembered all that had happened. She remembered, too, her great love, and with a low, bitter wail of anguish she sunk back, covering her face with her hands.

A mocking, familiar laugh rang through the room, and she sprang to her feet, and stood trembling in every limb, waiting for, she knew not what, but she knew well whose evil, ringing laugh it was, and she set her teeth, vowing that if he laid one finger on her arm she would kill herself!

Presently he emerged from behind a curtain, and bowing low before her, said with mock politeness:

"So, my dear, we meet again?"

She did not answer him, but stood like a statue facing him, her face even whiter than marble, and she prayed for God to strike her dead, before that vile man laid his hated hand on her.

"You do not seem overjoyed to meet me, sweet little Firefly," he said lightly. "How little I guessed the night that we were wedded that my bride was beautiful Lady Gabrielle Thorndyke. Ah, but I was in luck that night for sure. Come now, and give me a kiss, my pretty wife," and he took a step forward, as if to clasp her in his arms.

"Stand back, Leon Costello!" she said in a low, intense voice. "Stand back, I say, and do not dare lay your hand upon me, or I swear that I will kill myself."

"Why my dear, you seem to have forgotten that I am your husband, and all but risen from the dead," and he grinned wickedly.

"I wish you were dead," she answered passionately. "I had hoped that my father's bullet had ended your career, and set me free. I am your wife, God pity me, but I will take my own life, rather than let you touch my hand. I hate you, I wish to God that you were dead."

"So you would be free to wed your noble lover?" he sneered, his face fairly livid with rage. "But you shall never look upon his face again. You are my wife, and rather than see you receive one single kiss from your lover's lips, I would plunge this dagger into your heart. And I have still another surprise for you. Allow me to present to you an old friend who will make your captivity doubly interesting, and—your mother."

The veils were suddenly thrown back from the faces of the two women, and Gabrielle's horrified eyes rested upon Lauretta, the wicked gypsy princess, and the gypsy queen, whom she believed sleeping in her grave among the mountains of Colorado.

CHAPTER XX.

"I AM YOUR MOTHER! YOU NEED NOT TURN YOUR HAUGHTY HEAD AWAY, FOR YOU ARE FLESH OF MY FLESH AND BLOOD OF MY BLOOD, LADY GABRIELLE THORNDYKE."

Had the blue heavens fallen at Lady Gabrielle's feet, she would have been far calmer than she was at that moment when her eyes rested upon the dark, revengeful face of Princess Lauretta, and the beautiful, but evil gypsy queen, who stood before her, smiling mockingly. For one fleeting instant she forgot what Leon Costello had said, and with a startled cry she faltered brokenly, holding out her hands as if to shield herself from those burning black eyes:

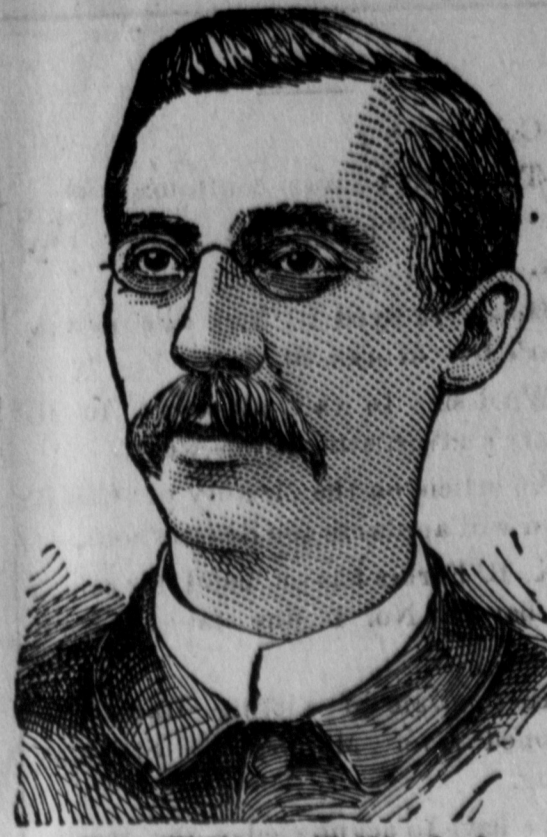
"You? I thought you were dead? What does it mean?"

A rippling burst of laughter fell from the full, curved lips, and throwing back her dark head, the queen answered in her rich, musical voice:

"My dear little Firefly, you were deceived for once in your life. I did not die, although I came very near doing so, and when I awoke from the stupor that overtook me, and which the entire tribe, as well as yourself, thought was death, I found that you, my bonny Firefly, had flown. Forgotten were the long days and nights of illness when I watched over you, and nursed you back to health and strength. Ah, how ungrateful you were. You deserted one who loved you, and had been your friend always, for a stranger. But it is well."

"I deserted no one!" Gabrielle cried hotly. "My father rescued me from a band of roving gypsies who had stolen me when I was a mere child. That you were kind to me, queen, I admit. You were ever gentle and tender with me, and but for your life would have been one of daily torture. But to think that I, Lord Thorndyke's only child, should pass her life with a hated band of gypsy lovers!"

(30 BE CONTINUED.)



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