

LOVE.

—BY—
ABL. S. JACKMAN.

CHAPTER XXV.—Continued.

She looked at him suddenly, and said very softly:

"I am sorry for you. We have both suffered so terribly that we can sympathize with each other."

"Yes," he answered, a choking sensation in his voice. "I think we can be a very model couple. But when shall we be married? The sooner the better, I think. Are you of the same mind?"

"It might be better to marry at once," she said in a low voice that trembled as she spoke. "Better for us both for many reasons."

"Then let us say to-morrow night," he replied, looking searchingly into her eyes. "Or would you prefer to set the time?"

"No," she said simply. "To-morrow night will do. As well to-morrow night as a week from to-morrow night," she added, smiling such a wan, hopeless smile that his heart ached for her.

"Very well, then it is all settled, and I will attend to everything myself. All you need think about doing is to dress yourself in the wedding robes that will be brought to your rooms to-morrow, and now, so that you may appear bright and fresh upon your bridal night, I think you had better retire," and he kissed her hand again.

He did not kiss her lips and she was glad of it, for it seemed to her that no one but Sir Lionel had a right to do that, and she respected Prince Cordonna more than ever for being so considerate.

She left him standing there alone, the soft lights that shone through the crystal globes, casting pale gleams upon his sad, dark face, and she fancied she heard a smothered groan as she ascended the winding stairway that led to her suite of rooms.

"You may go, Lizette," she said to the girl, for she wished to be alone. "I will not need you to-night."

Alone she knelt down beside the open window, and leaning her head upon her arm, tried to think what it all meant. Was she dreaming, or was it real? Could it be that on the morrow she was to wed Prince Cordonna? Why, it was only a little while ago that she had knelt down thinking that the morrow would see her the wife of her own dear love, and now another was to take his place; and then, with a shudder, she remembered that her hands were stained with Leon Costello's blood. It was the first time that she had cast a single thought upon him, and even then she whispered:

"I am glad that he is out of my way at last. He it was who wrecked and ruined my whole life, and now, thank Heaven, even though my hands are red with his blood, I am free!"

Her sleep was calm and peaceful that night, and when the morning sunlight kissed her eyes, she opened them, thinking that it was her wedding day.

The hours crept slowly past, and when the stars twinkled in the evening sky, and the silver moon poured her mellow light over all living things, Lady Gabrielle was once more robed in the snow-white garments of a bride. As she cast a parting glance at herself before going down below, where they were awaiting her, she clasped her hand together, crying out with a wail of pain:

"Lionel! Oh, my love, farewell forever! To-night sees us further apart than ever. I shall live, my darling, but my heart is dead within my breast!"

She went to her bridegroom, and like one in a dream she listened to the solemn words that made her the wife of the man beside her, and not until she felt his kiss upon her lips for the first time did she realize that she was no longer Lady Gabrielle Thornydyke, but the Princess Cordonna.

Two years have passed away since the night that Lady Gabrielle became the Princess Cordonna, and in spite of the great sorrow that clouded her life, she had not been unhappy. Her life had been tranquil and serene, far from unhappy, and she respected and honored the man whose name she bore more and more each day.

They had traveled from one end of the world to the other, the entire two years being spent in travel, and at last longing for home and familiar scenes, they had returned to England, and were settled for the summer in a grand old place, many miles from Thornydyke Hall.

Gabrielle's heart was hungry for the beautiful lanes and blossoming hedges, and she had no fear of being known, for in two years she changed from a slender girl into a woman whose beauty was enough to drive any man mad with despair, for she was more like a beautiful statue of ice into which life had been just breathed, than a creature of flesh and blood. She had been lovely as a poet's dream when Sir Lionel Mannville won her girlish love, but now—ah, now words would fail to describe her! Did she love him still, you will ask, gentle reader? Does the golden sun ever cease to shine, even though it is hidden beneath dark, frowning clouds for days at a time? Do summer winds ever hush their ceaseless murmur, and yet they sink into mute silence at night-fall? No, she

could no more blot the image of Sir Lionel Mannville from her heart, than she could bid time be still.

Day and night he was with her. When she closed her eyes and slept, he was in her dreams, always tender and true, as he had been in their first days of happy courtship and love, and when the world was flooded with sunlight, he was with her still. Did she gaze up at the blue sky she seemed to see his handsome face in the azure dome, and when her lovely eyes were fixed dreamily upon the crystal waters of lake or river, there in the silvery depths she beheld that beloved face. The night winds whispered his name. The wild birds sang it, and when she turned her face in a bunch of fragrant roses, she fancied that the dew-drops kissing her beautiful face were his lips moist with ardent love. When the grave closed over that fair bosom, and not until then, would she cease to think of him.

She was reclining in a hammock beneath the waving limes, and with her head resting upon one hand, she was idly dreaming of the past. The hammock swayed gently to and fro, and inside she could hear her husband's rich, full voice singing one of her favorite songs, and she listened, a dull pain gnawing at her heart.

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

"My love through all time and eternity!" she whispered in a sudden passion. "My own dear love, whom I love better than my life, and Heaven forgive me, I am the wife of one of God's own noblemen! But I cannot forget him! Oh, I cannot! He is as dear to me as the day on which we parted. Lionel, my love, ah, how I long for your love and kisses!"

Suddenly the sound of a well-remembered voice fell upon her ear, and she thought she was dreaming, for she heard the words:

"The mere sight of that beautiful face brings back the memory of my poor, lost Gabrielle!"

She sprang to her feet with a stifled cry, and the next moment stood face to face with Sir Lionel Mannville!

CHAPTER XXVI.

"SO LIKE HER, AND YET SO COLD! I MUST BE MISTAKEN, FOR GABRIELLE HAS BEEN DEAD FOR TWO LONG YEARS!"

Fate had brought them face to face once more—the two who had loved each other so madly in the past, who loved each other now—and for the first time in two long, dreary years of heartache and loneliness they gazed into each other's eyes!

She stood looking at him, her eager eyes fastened upon his face, that never for a moment had been absent from her mind, either waking or sleeping, one fair hand pressed to her breast, as if she faint would stifle those wild heart-throbs before he heard them. Ah, kind Heaven! how well she remembered that dear face! How many times she had kissed the lips beneath the drooping, silken mustache and pillowed her head upon his breast, listening to the passion-laden throbs of his heart!

And as her great and mighty love arose within her, almost overpowering her with its fierce strength, she felt as if she must throw herself into his arms and tell him that she loved him still—that she had loved him through all!

And he stood like one suddenly awakened from a dream, his eyes fastened upon her lovely face in wonder, his own face very pale. For a moment he thought that the beloved dead had arisen from her grave and confronted him, for, in spite of her sin, Gabrielle was still the one love of his life. He had never forgotten her, nor could he ever, and his first impulse was to spring forward and clasp her in his arms. But calm reason returned, and he told himself that this beautiful woman, with her cold, marble-like beauty, could never be his lost love, and besides, the girl who was to have been his wife was dead. For two years she had been sleeping with the other dead-and-gone Thornydykes in the old family vault, and he had seen her as she lay in her coffin. Why, of course she was dead, and he was weak and foolish to be startled by a mere resemblance. But even then he could not remove his gaze from the bronze head and clear, calm eyes.

And thus they met. Ah, me! what a tangled web life is!

With a fierce hot throbb at her heart she heard that rich, tenor voice chanting over and over again the song she loved so well, but, oh, how it hurt her at that moment:

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

Why did he sing that song? she asked herself in anguish. Oh, why did he not cease?

And then he spoke, and a thrill of delight, mixed with keenest pain, swept through her, for she remembered how her entire being used to quiver at the sound of that voice in the old glad, happy days! Oh, God! was it true? she asked herself with a mute wail of pain. Was it true that she was the wife of another, and her lover, with his blue, tender eyes and bonny, golden hair stood before her as brave and handsome as ever, and—she could never again be her own.

She turned away her graceful head, closing her eyes to shut out the picture that only seemed to mock her.

"Pardon me, but I have lost my way,"

he said, in his musical voice, and to this woman whose heart was starving, the sound was sweeter by far than golden harp-strings touched by an artist's hand. "I have lost my way, and awkwardly blundered upon your private grounds."

She did not speak. She could not, for her sole desire was to fall upon her knees before him, and cry aloud: "Lionel, oh, Lionel, do you not know me, my darling? Do you not remember these lips that you have kissed so many times? Kiss them again, my beloved king, and then you will remember!"

And then she heard him whisper to himself:

"So like her and yet so cold! I must be mistaken, for Gabrielle has been dead for two long years! She is like my lost love, this beautiful woman, but, oh, so much colder—so icy—in spite of her marvellous loveliness and grace!"

God only knows what would have happened next, for she felt that she must touch him, or die, but Heaven saved her, for her husband's voice broke the silence by saying joyfully:

"Sir Lionel, my dear old friend, is it possible that I behold your face again?"

She turned her head quickly and saw Prince Cordonna and Sir Lionel standing with clasped hands, their faces beaming like those of two school-boys, and then with an expression that she had never before seen upon his face, her husband called to her:

"My dear wife, come here and let me introduce you to my old friend, Sir Lionel Mannville, whom I thought had completely forgotten me! Sir Lionel, the Princess Cordonna."

"I am most happy to meet the Princess Cordonna," Sir Lionel said graciously, bending his head over the white hand he clasped, little dreaming how often he had held that beautiful hand in days gone by. "But I am afraid my abrupt entrance has startled you, princess. You look pale."

"It did startle me a little at first," she answered with a faint smile. "I was lost in day-dreams when you spoke to me."

He did not dream what an effort it was for her to utter those words so quietly, and he little guessed that the mere touch of his hand had set her blood on fire.

"My dear boy, you must come right into the house and we will talk over old times," the prince said, as delighted as a child, and his usually calm face was all aglow with happiness. "Of all the friends I had while in Paris you are the only one I have seen since I left there. It makes me think of the days when we were young and free from all cares. I was some years older than you, but we were always good friends, were we not?"

"Yes," Sir Lionel answered with a little laugh. "We were always the best of friends."

"Let us all go into the conservatory," said the prince. "It is very pleasant there."

He offered his arm to his wife, with all the grace and tenderness of a lover, and slipping the other arm through that of his friend they entered the large, circular conservatory that was like a garden in fairy-land.

Gabrielle seated herself under a huge orange-tree that shadowed her completely, and where she could feast her eyes to her heart's content upon the beauty of the face that forever dwelt within her heart. She sat there and listened to the sound of his voice, closing her eyes and fancying she was back, living over again those days when love filled the cup of happiness to overflowing.

"I do not like the nightingale's song," Sir Lionel said slowly, his eyes fixed intently upon the pale face of the Princess Cordonna, and his voice mingled with the splash of the fountain. "For I always seem to see a face from out the dead and buried past—a face fair and sweet as an angel's, but forever lost to me! And I have no right to even think of her, and yet—"

He did not finish the sentence, but sighed deeply. And she, sitting so near him, pressed her hands tightly over her aching heart, unseen and aided by the blessed shadows that hovered over all.

"It is strange how sometimes a trifle will open a wound," Prince Cordonna said thoughtfully, "and I do not believe that there is a heart in the world but has in its secret depths a hidden grave."

Sir Lionel said nothing, but he looked at the lovely woman, whose face was faintly visible in the misty twilight, and he wondered if she had a hidden grave in her heart.

"Will you sing for me, prince?" he asked suddenly, turning to the other. "You remember your voice was the envy of all the others in Paris, and you would sing for us when we had tired of all other amusements. Sing something that you used to sing, and it will bring back old days."

Prince Cordonna arose and went inside, and presently the notes of the piano filled the air, and then he began to sing a jolly drinking song that they used to sing in Paris when they were a merry, careless group, fearing nothing or nobody, and Gabrielle, watching Sir Lionel, saw a bright smile creep around his lips, and his foot kept time to the music.

Gradually the strain changed, growing sweet and low and sad, and then he sang again:

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

(TO BE CONTINUED)



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