

A Cruel Revenge

BY LAURA JEAN LIBBEY.

[CONTINUED.]

In that vast throng one pair of eyes were fixed upon the thrilling tableau with a fascinating gleam.

"By the Lord Harry, if it isn't that little beauty, Rosebud Arden!" cried Paul Howard, excitedly through his clenched teeth. "And saved by that infernal Leslie, too!"

Amid shouts and cheers the daring young man had cleared the last dozen rounds of the ladder by a desperate jump, just as it broke in twain beneath the double weight upon it.

Paul Howard pressed as near to the spot where Rosebud and her rescuer stood as he possibly dared. A subtle plot was working in his fertile brain—to gain possession of bewitching Little Rosebud again. He well knew nothing short of the most adoring love had induced the wealthy young banker to undertake such a hazardous feat in the very jaws of death. While he was pondering how he should manage the affair, an unlooked-for opportunity suddenly occurred.

Raymond Leslie had left Rosebud in charge of friends while he hastened in search of a coupe.

Now here was the opportunity. It was a daring venture, but Paul Howard was just desperate enough to carry it successfully through. He was unknown. He weighed his chances in an instant. Rosebud had fainted—he had nothing to fear from her.

The walls of the building fell in with a loud crash, and, while all eyes were turned in that direction, Paul Howard quietly lifted Rosebud's slight figure in his strong arms and bore her quickly to the first vehicle in waiting.

The affair had been managed so adroitly, and under their very eyes, no one noticed Rosebud's absence until Raymond Leslie, with a coachman at his heels, dashed breathlessly into their midst a few moments later, to find her—gone!

Immediately the greatest consternation prevailed. Raymond was almost wild with anxiety. In an instant his handsome face grew as white and haggard as if years of the cruellest suffering had fallen upon him in that brief space.

No one could tell how, when, or where she had gone. If the earth had suddenly opened and swallowed her, she could not have been more completely lost to him.

He could not groan or utter any cry, with the eyes of that curious throng fixed upon him.

The thought suddenly occurred to him. "Some one might have spirited poor Little Rosebud away, believing she was the daughter of the wealthy Waldrons, in hopes of a large reward for her return," and he offered a reward that was a fortune in itself to any one who would bring the young girl whom he had rescued from the burning building to his mother's elegant mansion on Fifth Avenue.

Could it be possible Rosebud wished to escape him, and had fled on her own accord? Or, more terrible still, could it be possible she had a lover?

"How foolish I am!" he sighed, with a forced laugh, sinking back in his seat. "No thought of love or lovers ever entered that child's heart until I asked her yesterday to marry me. No one save myself has ever pressed a rapturous lover's kiss on those sweet, quivering, cherry-ripe lips. She is mine—she belongs to me," he told himself. "What would the world be to me without Little Rosebud's love?"

Even then he could feel the warm clasp of those white arms around his neck and the weight of that lovely, flaxen-crowned head on his breast, as he bore her from the grasp of death through the terrible, scorching heat that nearly blinded him—only to lose her, at last.

CHAPTER XVII.

When Rosebud awoke to consciousness, she found herself lying on a

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Sofa in a strange darkened room.

"I wonder where I am, or how I came here?" she cried, gazing blankly around her, and springing quickly to her feet. At that moment her eyes fell upon her singed dress, and like a flash the horrible proceedings of the previous night returned to her confused mind. "I remember," she cried, gaspingly, "the terrible sea of flame, and my cries for aid; and when I fell fainting by the window, Raymond's voice calling me back to life, his arms enfolding me, and bearing me out of the intense heat into the cool night air. I must have fainted in his arms," she thought. "Oh, Raymond, my darling, my love, I owe my very life to you. He must have brought me here," she told herself, looking curiously around the room. "I wonder what place this is? I expect he will come to tell me all about the fire this morning, and, oh, dear, there isn't a looking-glass in the room, and I'm sure I must look terribly in this burned and singed dress."

Even to a nature so unsophisticated as Rosebud's, the thought suddenly occurred to her: "Raymond Leslie must certainly love me very dearly indeed to have risked his life to save mine." She remembered with a painful blush the great flood of happiness that rushed over her heart, as she met the calm, steadfast glance of those dark, passionate eyes, and felt his warm, thrilling breath on her cheek as he strained her so closely to his beating heart, whispering: "Trust me, my darling, I will save you, or we will perish together." Poor little Rosebud! she was just beginning to realize how dearly she was learning to love handsome, dark-eyed Raymond Leslie, how all the happiness of this world might have been hers, but for that one act of girlish folly she had committed in that dark past.

Poor Rosebud was just learning what love was like. "Why should I dash the cup of happiness from my lips?" she asked herself recklessly. "Raymond would never know my terrible secret, and never knowing it he would love me; I can not give him up. Heaven would surely forgive me, for I love him so! Raymond may never find it out. I will bask in the sunshine of his love from day to day. I am so young to live such a long lonely life without him. Oh, my love, my love, I could not do it; I could not!"

It did seem hard, most pitifully hard, for such a sweet young life to be so cruelly blighted by the frost of love.

"He is the rock of hope to which I cling," she sighed, blushing rosily, as if reluctant to admit the sweet truth, even to her own heart. "Raymond is surely my fate," she told herself—"has he not said so himself? and does not her own heart plead its great love for him?" She repeated the beautiful words of the poet to herself, softly; those words that had more than once come to her mind since she had met Raymond Leslie: "Two shall be born the whole wide world apart, And live in different climes, and have no heed, each of the other's being. And these from unknown lands over unknown seas shall cross, Escaping wreck, defying death, and all unconsciously shape every act, That one day out of darkness they shall meet; And read life's meaning in each other's eyes, and this is fate."

As the last word fell from her crimson, trembling lips, Rosebud arose from the sofa and hastened to the window opposite, drawing back the heavy curtains with her white hands, little dreaming of the sight which would meet her gaze.

She drew back with a low, startled, astonished cry. The window was fastened and protected by heavy iron bars as near together that she could not get even the palm of her hand through them.

God's beautiful sunshine drifted

through them in a cloud of golden light.

Rosebud drew back the curtains with trembling fingers, then hastened quickly to the door. It would not yield to her frantic efforts to wrench it open—it was securely locked.

Rosebud had always been a brave, daring little creature, but in the face of such an unlooked-for denouement, her courage completely gave way at finding herself securely locked in a strange room. She did exactly what any other terrified girl would have done, sank down on the floor with a piercing cry.

A moment later the key turned in the lock, and the door swung open to admit Paul Howard.

Rosebud sprang to her feet in dismay. She flushed angrily, for she recognized him at once. Then she would have made her escape instantly through the door if he had not quickly seized her with one hand, and closed the door after him.

"What is your object, sir, in forcing your obnoxious presence where you're not wanted?" panted Rosebud, indignantly. "Open that door at once. I know you are a very bad young man, and I will not have a word to say to you."

"Whew! what a fiery little vixen it is!" cynically commented Paul Howard.

Then he seated himself upon a sofa, the only article of furniture of which the room boasted, save the table at the further corner.

"Who brought me here and locked me in this room?" demanded Rosebud, her cheeks flushing angrily and her blue eyes fairly blazing.

"Supposing that I should answer Raymond Leslie," he answered mockingly, "what should you say, my pretty little fury?"

"I should say it was the worst untruth you ever uttered, and I should not believe it. Mr. Leslie saved me from you once, and he would not willingly place me in your power again."

"Ha! ha! so the wind blows in that quarter, eh? You're in love with Leslie. By Jove! that gives additional spice to the affair!" he chuckled, while the ominous flash in his black eyes deepened maliciously. "You may as well desist in your efforts of trying to force that door open; it is a spring lock, and I alone possess the key. You may as well come here and sit quietly on this sofa beside me. I'm not an ogre, and I won't eat you. I'm too much in love with you for that. I simply wish to have a little chat with you concerning our future."

TO BE CONTINUED.

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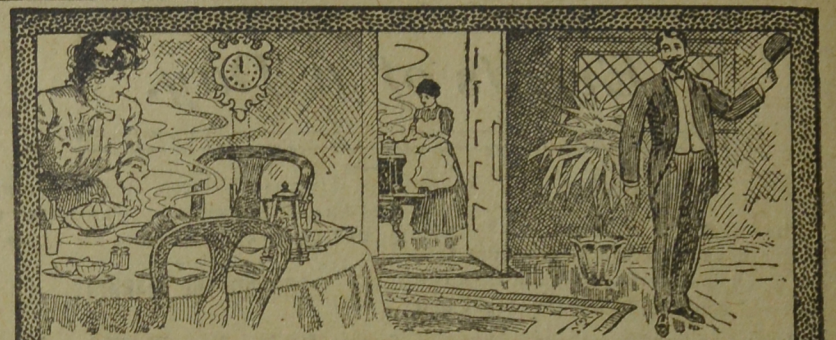
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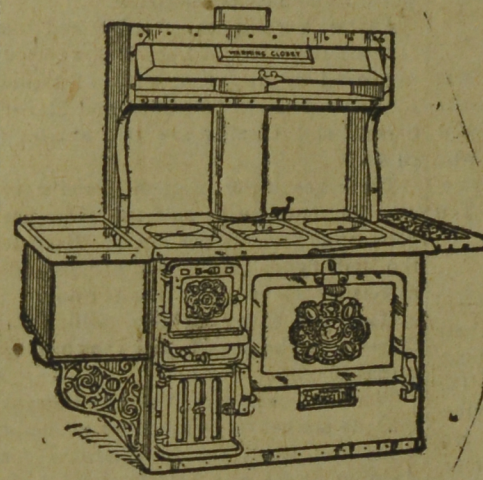
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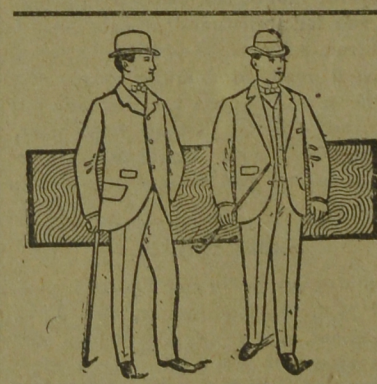
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