

A Cruel Revenge

BY LAURA JEAN LIBBEY

Author of "A Broken Betrothal," "Parted at the Altar,"

"The Heiress of Cameron Hall," Etc., Etc.

(CONTINUED.)

Then with the most pitiful quivering voice that ever was heard—so hollow and so mournful—she answered slowly:

"No! I am not your wife," the words dying away on her lips in a moan.

Raymond Leslie would have sprung forward and clasped the terrified, miserable little creature in his strong protecting arms, but Percy Fielding stepped between them.

"It is natural she should take refuge in a cool denial," pursued Fielding, coolly. "You will permit me to offer proofs to substantiate my side of the story."

Raymond Leslie's arms fell to his sides and he leaned back heavily against the marble mantel. The trial was so hard and cruel that great drops fell from his brow, and his limbs trembled.

Little Rosebud's flower-face quivered an instant with the keenest pain. The lovely pansy-blue eyes drooped in deadly despair, but they were quickly lifted again and met the cold, smiling, exultant gaze of Percy Fielding unflinchingly. "I will die hard," she told herself, recklessly. "My heart is turned to stone." Her head drooped low on her breast. She was waiting to hear her doom.

Percy Fielding stepped to an adjoining room and summoned his witnesses, who had all banded together, aroused from their slumbers by the unusual commotion in the hotel.

The magistrate glided into the room first—sleek, smooth, and oily—rubbing his palms expectantly together, his keen, beady, black, glittering eyes taking in the scene in a sidelong glance, in a single instant.

His wife followed him, with a slow hesitating step, a high nervous flush on her face, and her fingers twitching the handkerchief she held in her hand with spasmodic jerks, quite in contrast to her liege lord's suave and easy manner.

Next came Paul Howard, his glittering eyes fairly glowing with triumph, as he made a low mock bow to Raymond Leslie.

It was as much as Raymond Leslie could do to restrain himself from springing forward and bodily thrusting his foe from the room. Yet he set his teeth all the harder and resolved to bear it manfully.

"There is one more witness," said Fielding, impatiently. "Where is your daughter, sir?" he asked, addressing the husband.

The nervous wife gave a frightened, timid glance toward her husband.

Sleek Mr. Sharp was equal to the emergency, however.

"I am sorry to say my daughter

refuses to be mixed up in this affair," he explained; "and to avoid it she has given us the slip—as we of the law put it. She disappeared from this hotel two days ago or more. Young girls are so timid—it's their nature, my good sir. Her evidence, although an additional witness, is of little consequence. There are enough of us here without her."

Percy Fielding crushed an oath between his teeth. "It will not signify, as you say, Mr. Sharp," he answered. "You know why I have called you here, Mr. Sharp," he continued. "Please step forward, and tell if you know this lady," he said, pointing to Rosebud, who stood pale as death before them, never lifting her anguished eyes.

Mr. Sharp glided forward and peered in her face.

"Certainly; this is Rosebud Fielding," he answered, promptly. "She is the late Judge Arden's daughter, of Charleston, South Carolina. I myself performed the marriage ceremony between this young lady and Mr. Percy Fielding on the 21st of September, 18—"

Her pale lips quivered, but no words fell from them.

"You see she does not deny it," cried the magistrate, blandly; "she could not."

"You recognize this young lady, do you not, my dear?" he said, turning with a great show of tenderness toward his confused wife, who was now turning from pale to red by turns, "You saw the ceremony performed, did you not, Mrs. Sharp?"

Mrs. Sharp rose slowly from her seat and came forward, evidently avoiding the meaning glance of her husband's eyes.

"Is this not the young girl whom you knew as Rosebud Arden?" asked the magistrate, in a thin, peculiar voice.

"Yes," she answered, brokenly, "I would have known that bonny, merry face of hers anywhere, framed in those flaxen curls, for she is like none other. She is Rosebud, Judge Arden's daughter."

"You saw me perform the ceremony I speak of?" asked the magistrate, carefully picking his words lest she should refuse at the last minute to answer.

"I saw you perform the ceremony," she answered, confusedly.

With a cry that was terrible to hear, poor little Rosebud threw herself at Raymond Leslie's feet.

"Oh, must I go with him, Raymond?" she cried, wildly. "Oh, I can not, my love, I can not! Kill me—strike me dead at your feet here, and now, with your dear hand, and I will bless you for it. Oh, must I go with him, Raymond?"

"Certainly," replied Fielding, "What a question! What need to answer it. A wife's place is by her husband's side."

She did not heed him.

"Raymond, my darling, are you certain that I must go away from you?" she wailed.

"I am certain, whether he is or not," put in Fielding.

Raymond Leslie's face had grown haggard in a single moment; he could not bear the pathos of her dear voice and the terrible anguish of her upturned death-white face.

"Are you satisfied, Mr. Leslie?" asked Fielding, again stopping between them. "I can only add, we had a certificate. Rosebud will tell you what became of it."

Raymond Leslie lifted his white set face and looked at the bride who was never more to rest in his arms, with a world of ruined, hopeless love in his eyes.

He saw her white lips part with a great, tearless sob. She forgot she had denied all of Percy Fielding's accusations, and flinging her white arms up toward Raymond, she cried out in a great, passionate moan:

"I—I destroyed the certificate that night!"

Her own thoughtless words had convicted her at last.

She was tortured beyond all endurance by her terrible woe, and she had betrayed herself.

Then Raymond Leslie knew he had hoped vainly against hope. The ceremony had been performed, and Rosebud had been given the certificate, which she admitted she had destroyed. She had cruelly deceived him, and she loved her so! She was Fielding's wife. Good God, what a mockery of fate! She had never been his. He turned from her outstretched hands and staggered blindly toward the door.

"Raymond," cried poor Rosebud, "take me in your arms just once."



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love! Kiss my face and say goodbye to me. I have sinned past all forgiveness. Kiss my face once, Raymond, then, perhaps, God in His mercy will have pity on me and let me die!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"No," said Fielding, following up his advantage; "how dare you ask such a thing? It would be an insult to me! Do you imagine I could stand tamely by and see the man who has won your love from me dare to press your lips?"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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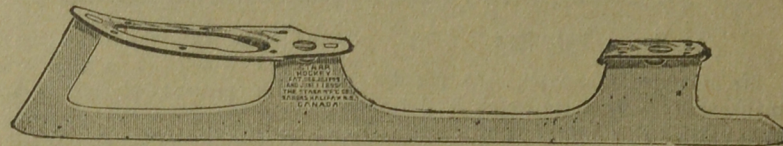
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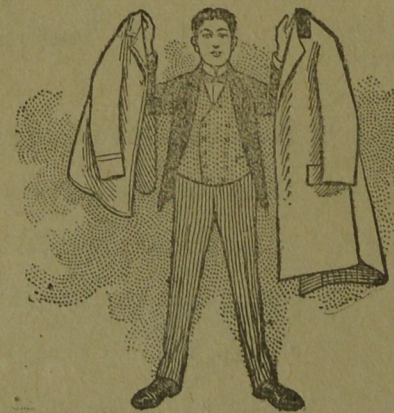
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