

A Cruel Revenge

BY LAURA JEAN LIBBEY

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

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

(CONTINUED).

Men jumped excitedly upon the seats and cheered; ladies clapped their hands and waved their handkerchiefs.

Another instant more and the gallant milk-white pony swept bravely ahead again fully a yard in advance of all the rest, and amid the prolonged cheers of the spectators bore its lovely, breathless burden triumphantly up to the judges' stand.

The little flower-girl, who had vainly endeavored to dispose of her rosebuds, was immediately besieged by anxious young men, who bought every rosebud she had at a dollar apiece to wear in the lapels of their coats.

Percy Fielding was fairly beside himself with delight.

Little Rosebud had lost her cap, and the wind blew her flaxen curls about her glowing face, forming a beautiful picture as she sat so demurely upon her milk-white pony.

The judge highly complimented her, voicing the sentiments of all the people as he handed down the beautiful silver, gold-lined cup and a wreath of roses which he dexterously slipped upon her head.

Maud Arden's face was as white as death.

"I shall never forgive her for this," she muttered, "never!"

She did not notice the stranger, who stood almost beside her, with his hat pulled over his face, or even dream he had heard the threat her revengeful lips had uttered.

With a deadly purpose flashing in her black eyes she rode quickly around to Little Rosebud's side.

Most of the crowd was pressing eagerly toward the entrance gate. She saw she was quite unobserved, and reaching suddenly forward, she gave the milk-white pony a sharp, unexpected blow with her riding-whip.

The pony reared and plunged, maddened with the stinging blow, and the next instant Little Rosebud was dashed headlong from the saddle.

Quick as a flash, Percy Fielding sprang to her rescue, catching her as she fell.

For one brief, mad, intoxicating instant the fair head was pillowed against his beating heart, and he passionately closed his arms around the little creature he had so miraculously saved from instant death.

The terrified, childish blue eyes were swiftly raised to the fathomless, beautiful dark eyes gazing soulfully down into her own.

Rosebud had not fainted, she was only dazed, bewildered, and she struggled to free herself from Percy's passionate embrace.

In an instant Maud was beside her.

"Oh, dear," she cried, in apparent distress, "is Little Rosebud hurt? It was all my fault, I dropped my whip, and it scared her pony."

Percy's eyes flashed ominously under his broad-brimmed hat. He never would have believed that Maud Arden could so deliberately utter a lie. He had seen her aim the treacherous blow.

"Don't feel badly, Maudy dear!" cried sweet, forgiving Little Rosebud, tossing her flaxen curls back from her face. "It was only an accident, you couldn't help it, you know; I'm all right now."

Somebody helped her to mount her pony.

"I'm much obliged to you, sir, for saving me," she said, looking sweetly back toward Percy. "And I'm sure papa would like to thank you too. I'm Judge Arden's daughter."

Percy bowed profoundly, without raising his hat, however, for he knew that Maud's eyes were at that moment upon him.

The next moment Maud and Rosebud surrounded by a score or more of merry chattering girls and admiring lovers, were galloping swiftly toward home.

On the wide stone porch Maud and Little Rosebud parted. Maud to go quickly up to her mother with the unwelcome news, while Little Rosebud, gathering her riding-habit over her arm, danced joyously in the direction of her father's library, with the wreath still crowning her bonny flaxen curls, and the silver cup in her little white hands.

The library door was slightly ajar and she peeped in.

"Oh, Mr. Joe, isn't papa in?" she cried, disappointedly.

Joseph Hart, the judge's secretary, jumped to his feet, throwing aside the book he was reading with something like a blush on his honest, manly face.

"He is not in now, but I'm expecting him every moment. Won't you

placing a chair for her.

"I guess I'll come in and wait," she replied, dancing playfully in. "I don't like that chair, I'll take this one, Mr. Joe," she said, throwing herself carelessly down on a cushioned seat opposite him.

"She is like the rest of her sex," thought poor Joe, sighing. "She will choose in life that which promises her the most luxury and ease."

"See, I have gained the prize, Mr. Secretary; don't you see it in my hand? Isn't it lovely? Why don't you congratulate me?"

She held the cup out toward him, and her little fingers touched his hand as he took it from her, and it dropped on the floor at her feet.

"Oh, how awkward you are growing Mr. Joe!" she cried, quickly, recovering her prize. "I shall not trust you with it again. I'll come back when papa comes," she said, dancing toward the door.

There was no more reading that day for the judge's secretary. A pretty flower-like dimpled face crowned with silky flaxen curls danced before him on the page. He closed his book in despair, wondering why the room had suddenly seemed to grow so dark and dreary, although the sunshine lay in thick golden bars on the moss-green carpet.

Meanwhile, Little Rosebud bounded quickly up the broad stairway to her own room, which was directly across the hall from Maud's.

"I don't know, and I'm sure I don't care where the horrid little thing is now, most probably parading the cup and her victory, and my defeat, down in the servants' hall," she heard Maud say. And she knew they were talking of her.

"I foresee no end of trouble with that girl," she heard her step-mother say, fretfully. "All my persuasions have failed utterly in trying to get the judge to send her off somewhere—to boarding-school, visiting, anywhere to get her away from the Willows until you are safely married."

"I never will be able to make a good match as long as she is around," declared Maud. "We must get rid of her before Percy Fielding comes. He is very much in love with me, and worth half a million." "He has not seen Rosebud yet," said Mrs. Arden, shaking her head thoughtfully. "Young men's hearts are fickle as the wind—liable to change with every pretty face they see. It is natural, my dear. Depend upon it, she shall not see him if I can help it."

"I hate her! yes, hate her!" groaned Maud. "I don't see what made you ever marry a widower who had a daughter when you had one of your own."

"Judge Arden's wealth, my dear," replied her mother, coolly. "Heaven knows what would have become of us but for that; we might have been beggars."

"What good will it do us when she becomes of age or marries? We will be beggars then, anyhow. My only hope seems to be in marrying some wealthy man before either of those events transpires. If I should marry rich," she went on, exultantly, "wouldn't I queen it over that Rosebud Arden with her pink-and-white baby face! I will show her what I will do when I marry Percy Fielding."

"She may never live to see that day," said her mother, significantly. "Young girls have been known to die suddenly; and if she should, the judge would leave all his wealth to me, and what is mine is yours, daughter."

Both mother and daughter laughed a harsh little laugh that was not pleasant to hear.

"So they think I am liable to die, do they?" thought innocent Little Rosebud, with a jolly laugh, little dreaming the terrible under-current of meaning their words held. "I'm sure I don't look much like a sick girl. Percy Fielding—what a pretty, romantic name—I wonder who he is? I wonder if he is as handsome as that young man who saved me today? I didn't he have splendid eyes, though!"

The pink carnation flush dyed her flower-like face as she thought of the handsome, graceful stranger; and she wondered, too, if he really would ever come to The Willows for her father to thank him.

At that moment, a pretty little maid tapped at the door, announcing tea.

"I shall not come down just yet, Susette," she said. "I am going to wait for papa."

"The judge, yer pa, won't come home to supper," Miss Rosebud. H.

all. I'm not hungry. I don't want any tea."

"Shan't I bring you up some nice toast, then, and a glass of milk?" asked the maid, who was greatly attached to little Missie Rosebud, as she called her.

"You can bring me the milk and some nice strawberries, Susette, if you want to, but I couldn't eat any toast."

A few minutes later Susette appeared sobbing at the door again.

"She wouldn't let me bring 'em to you, Miss Rosebud," she said, nodding her head toward her step-mother's apartments. "she met me with the tray and made me carry it back to the kitchen again. She said if you did not want to come down to your meals you could stay up here and starve, for all she cared."

"Never mind, Susette," cried Rosebud, with flashing eyes. "I'll go down to the garden and pick some strawberries for myself," and, like a flash, she bounded down the steps, rushing blindly forth to her fate.

CHAPTER III.

Little Rosebud's eyes were filled with indignant tears.

"If papa had been home, she would not have dared to treat me so," she cried out, as she buried her pretty face among the luscious, growing berries, which were not more crimson than her own flushed cheeks and ripe red lips. "Oh, dear, how I wish papa and I could go away from here this very night, and never come back again—never!"

"Excuse me, I have taken advantage of your kind permission to call," said a deep, thrilling voice beside her. "Is Judge Arden at home?"

Rosebud started to her feet with a crimson, dismayed face, the glowing berries she held in her hands scattered in all directions.

A handsome young man stood leaning with careless grace, hat in hand, against the garden gate. The red-gold rays of the setting sun fell upon his boyish handsome face, and caressed the dark, waving curls that were pushed back from his broad white brow.

got a telegram an hour ago, an' went away. He ain't comin' back for a week, he said."

"Papa gone away!" echoed Rosebud. Then, I won't come down at

TO BE CONTINUED.

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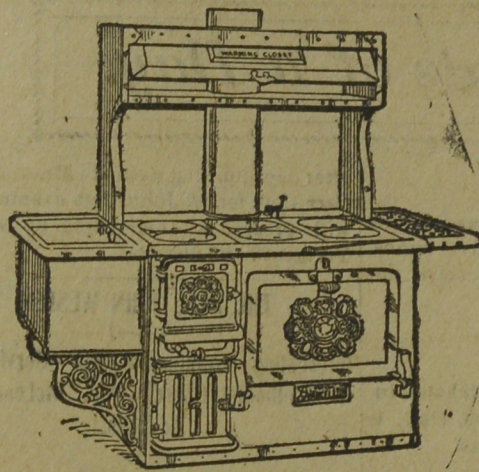
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