

A Cruel Revenge

BY LAURA JEAN LIBBEY

Author of "A Broken Betrothal," "Parted at the Altar,"
"The Heiress of Cameron Hall," Etc., Etc.

(CONTINUED).

He sprang to his feet in an instant. He saw his young wife kneeling before him, her pretty, dimpled face strangely white and worn.

Heavy dark circles were around her blue eyes, and her white lace dress was soiled and crumpled, as though it had not been removed since last he saw her.

A warm flush of pride rose to his face as he gazed silently, almost sternly; a sudden remembrance of the cruel note she had written him flashed quickly upon him as her eyes met his.

He did not take her in his arms as she had expected he would; anger, pride, and love were warring in his breast as he folded his arms across his broad chest and stood gazing at her with the first angry light blazing in his eyes she had ever seen there.

"Raymond," she faltered, with a suspicion of tears in her voice, "don't look at me like that. What have I done?"

For answer he drew forth the note she had written him and placed it in her hands.

"What is the meaning of all this mystery, Rosebud?" he cried, hoarsely. "I am not a school-boy to appreciate a practical joke of this kind. Where have you been?"

He saw the question strike her as lightning sometimes strikes a fair tree. The color faded from her lips as she tried to answer, but the words died away in a faint murmur as she buried her face in her little trembling white hands.

"Where were you last night, Rosebud?" he repeated, gravely. "As your husband, I have the right to know."

"Dear Rosebud! In her reckless desperation she uttered the first excuse that entered her poor, little, tortured brain.

"I was at the house of a friend," she stammered, "and sent the note—just for a joke—to try your love—to see if anything could make you angry—with me."

In a moment he had caught her in his strong arms, covering her pale face with passionate, forgiving kisses.

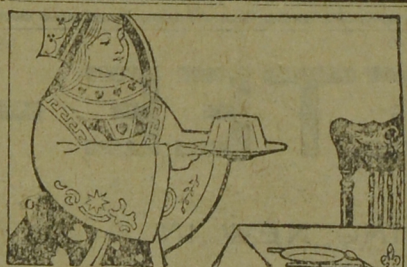
She was scarcely more than a child, this artless, pretty little bride of his. All young girls were more or less roguish and mischievous; Little Rosebud, although a wife, was no exception, he thought, quite ashamed of himself for greeting her so rudely.

"I hope you will never try my love in that way again, darling," he cried, fondly. "Why, I lived over ten years of torture in that one night!" he said, drawing her arm within his own and walking toward the house.

"Do you love me so much, Raymond?" she questioned, eagerly. "Love you?" he repeated. "Words can not express how much! All the brightness of my life is centered in you. I never quite realized until last night how much you are to me, my darling."

He felt the slight form tremble like an aspen leaf in his fond, caressing clasp. A day came, not far distant, when he looked back at that scene and knew why.

"But you have not told me at whose house you were, dear," he said, suddenly.



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Rosebud raised her blue eyes in startled alarm to his face.

"You are not to ask me anything more about it," she replied, evasively. "until I choose to tell you of my own accord. You must begin to take your first lesson in patience to-day. Perhaps one of these days I shall have a grand surprise for you."

She had answered his question at random, and trusted blindly to fate to help her out of the terrible strait by some happy thought. If she could only gain time—just a little time, to think it all out!

Raymond never once imagined the deception being practiced upon him.

He never once imagined but what she had met some lady friend at the flower-show, with whom she had dined and passed the night, sending the note to tease him into jealousy.

"He would never ask another question about it," he told himself, gayly, ashamed of himself for making a mountain out of a mole-hill.

"Why, where is your ring, Rosebud?" he asked, suddenly, missing the ring from the little trembling hand he held clasped in his. "Why, your wedding-ring is gone!"

Again poor Little Rosebud felt like crying out. The question had pierced her heart sharp as a poisoned dagger.

She had hoped against hope that he would not miss it until she had had time to redeem it.

"I—I—lost it," faltered the miserable little culprit, recklessly, sobbing outright.

"Was that why you remained away with your friend?" he asked, suddenly. "Surely you have not been searching for it all night—surely my Little Rosebud has not been so foolish as all that! Is that the mighty secret you were so anxious to keep from me? I have heard that it is an unlucky omen to lose one's wedding-ring. Still, I am not superstitious; and, if it can not be found, you shall have the finest diamond money can buy to replace it."

Rosebud looked up into his face in eloquent thankfulness.

She looked so pretty, so bewildered, between sorrow and joy, yet so piteously uncertain, that Raymond gazed at her will ill-concealed mirth as he kissed the sparkling tear-drops from her blue eyes.

"You have not rested well, dear; I see it in your face," he said, bending tenderly over her. "I want you to go to your room and rest now," he said, authoritatively; "after that I will show you a letter I received from New York yesterday, which I have been almost afraid to show you."

"A letter—from New York—you feared to show me!" she gasped, reeling against a marble statue that stood in a niche in the corridor, her blue eyes widening with a nameless dread. "Was the letter about me, Raymond?"

A sudden impulse to tease her came over her young husband.

"What would you say if I were to answer 'yes'?" he replied, quizzically.

She looked at him with all of her yearning heart in her eyes. A mad, wild thought had entered her brain for one brief moment; to throw herself on her knees at her young husband's feet, and confess all, crying out blindly that if he cast her from him she would die then and there at his feet!

Should she throw herself on his mercy and trust to his adoring love? "Ah, God help me, I dare not! Even though it broke his heart and crushed his love, honor, pride, and justice would compel him to turn from me!"

Poor Little Rosebud kissed the strong white hands that held her own so tenderly, and the touch of her sweet lips was like velvet.

"I would cry out to Heaven never to take you from me!" she cried out, vehemently. "My darling! my darling! how I love you! I could not live if—if you ceased to care for me!"

Raymond Leslie could hardly believe it was Little Rosebud, who had always been so shy and reserved in her expressions of love for him, who poured forth such an eloquent torrent of love which almost startled him. And these words haunted him all that sunlit summer day.

Little dreaming of the terrible consequences which would arise from that one action, and without mentioning the fact to Rosebud, Raymond Leslie inserted an advertisement in the morning papers for the lost diamond, thus dealing the winning cards of merciless fate directly into the hands of Percy Fielding.



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CHAPTER XXIX.

"Well," said Paul Howard, folding up the paper Fielding had just handed him, "what do you propose to do about it?"

"Do about what?" asked Fielding, indifferently, puffing blue clouds of smoke from his cigar which he held daintily between his white fingers.

"Why, the diamond ring, of course," replied Howard, impatiently. "It would afford you an excellent opportunity for an interview with Raymond Leslie. Shall you take advantage of it?"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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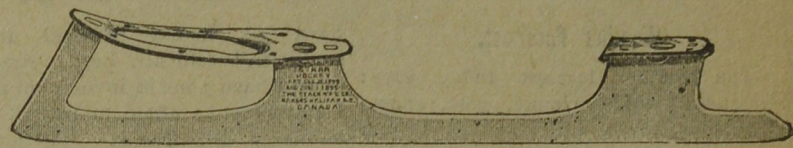
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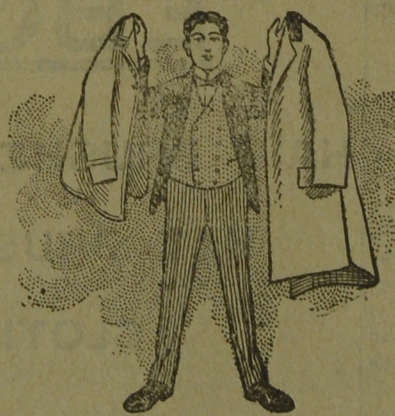
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