

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 saw the question strike her as lightning sometimes strikes a fair tree, and she looked up at him with tears swimming in her pretty pansy-blue eyes as she answered, faintly:

"No. Have you been away from the garden, or spoken to any stranger, or received any letters since you left this room an hour ago?" she faltered, turning deathly pale.

"I have not been away from the garden, nor have I spoken with any stranger or received any notes," he replied, briefly. "But why do you ask? Are you expecting anything of the kind?"

He heard her sigh of relief at his answer, and a bitter smile crossed his face as he guessed accurately the reason.

"I can not understand why you speak so—so cross to me, Raymond," she said. "I—I—"

He hoped she was about to make a revelation of the pitiful secret that lay like a chasm between them, but her words broke off in a pitiful sob, as she nestled her fair flaxen curls down on his shoulder.

It was hardly in human nature to resist the impulse to clasp that little lace-clad figure madly in his arms, and tell her of the dark shadow that seemed hovering above them. He would have given the world for the old sweet happiness and implicit trust that filled his heart two short hours ago. Now all that was changed, and the demon jealousy was lurking in his heart, goading him on to madness.

He never offered to caress the bowed little head so near him, and in a very few moments Rosebud stole quietly away to have a good cry all alone by herself.

"There was something the matter," she told herself.

Yet she could not imagine what it was.

It was not the terrible secret which she dreaded, for had it been, Raymond would have come to her straightway with flashing eyes and scornful, curling lips, accusing her on the spot of wilfully deceiving him.

As soon as the sound of her little pattering footsteps grew faint in the corridor without, Raymond Leslie went directly to the fire-place and extracted those torn bits of paper.

With little difficulty he arranged them, and spread the note out before him.

The chirography was elegant, and the style scholarly, yet those gracefully shaded curves looked hideous in the eyes of the infuriated young husband. It read as follows:

"My Charming Rosebud,—Will you kindly meet me at the same place we met last! I flatter myself you will not refuse me, knowing how much hangs upon the issue. If a compromise could be effected, I can imagine how grateful you would be; all rests with you, my darling. I know you will not find it in your loving heart to say me nay. I shall refuse to accept any note Marie might bring. Come to me, my first, my only love, about dusk.

"Yours lovingly ever,
Percy."

In the lower left hand corner was appended a few lines of a poem:

"Although the weary soul may hold
My fattered heart awhile from thee,
To thee it springs when uncontrolled
In all the warmth of liberty.

The magnet may awhile detain
The needle from its destined course;
But when not withheld by force
It travels to the north again."

He threw the shreds on to the floor, grinding them into the pale-pink roses of the velvet carpet with his heel.

"A model lover; but by the God above he shall rue the day he dared send a love letter to my wife!"

If his dearest friend had shown this to Raymond one short week ago he would not have believed it.

His own senses he could not doubt.

Had the shining sun fallen from the blue heavens above he could not have been more shocked.

Then, after all, women were all alike, there was in them no truth, no goodness; the whole world was alike.

The fairer the flower the sooner withering blight marked it for his own.

He understood now why some men chose desperately homely women for wives; there was little fear of lovers; their love and their honor was not in such jeopardy in their hands. Yet he owned to himself he loved this beautiful flower-faced young girl whom he had married with all the strength of his manhood.

And Rosebud, his wife, was it possible she cared for this handsome, debonair young fellow?

Was it possible she, whom he had thought but little removed from the angels above, was false to him?

It goaded him almost to madness when he thought how blind he had been in not inquiring more closely into the exact cause of Rosebud's absence the night of the flower-show.

He could not forget how earnestly his friend had insisted that it was certainly Rosebud, his wife, whom he had seen enter the coupe and drive rapidly away.

Raymond Leslie was the most miserable young man imaginable as these thoughts flashed rapidly through his mind.

Would she keep the appointment? He would wait and see.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"Could it possibly be that Raymond had tired of her?" she asked herself with trembling lips, and woman-like she crept straight to the mirror to discover why it was she was losing her hold upon Raymond's love.

She looked long and wistfully at her own face reflected there. At the dainty, slender, lace-clad girlish figure. At the dainty little head poised so gracefully on the slim white neck, around which a band of moonlit pearls gleamed softly. At the dark velvety blue eyes, the soft, round peachy cheeks, and the long curling flaxen hair, among which a spray of pale-pink buds was nestling.

Little Rosebud was not vain. Yet she told herself over and over again she had lost none of the beauty Raymond loved to praise as he gazed upon her.

The setting sun touched her fair hair with a last, loving, lingering caress sinking softly behind the western hills as she gazed.

Dusk would soon follow.

"Shall I meet that miserable wretch at dusk, or shall I not?" she asked herself, bitter anger for a moment making her forgetful of her intense fear of him.

Her anger and indignation were most violent, outrivalling her despair.

What did he mean by saying it was in her power to compromise? Could it be he could be bought off with money to go away and leave her in peace with the dreaded secret untold?

If Percy Fielding would only consent to that she could almost bless him for it. She would give him all her jewels, a fortune in themselves, if he would only guard her secret from Raymond yet a little longer. She would have purchased his silence with her very heart's blood if she could.

The very thought of purchasing his silence so elated her that quite unconsciously a gay little song burst from her lips, which, coming to Raymond's jealous ears at the further end of the dim corridor, made him more bitterly jealous than ever.

"My coldness has little effect upon her, it seems," he thought, gravely; "her heart is happy and gay at the near approach of the time set in the note for meeting that jackanapes."

"If I can only compromise with him," thought Rosebud, gleefully, "I can gain time; I will buy him off with my jewels and hurry Raymond away at once lest Percy Fielding relent."

Could it be Percy pitied her after all, when he heard how she loved Raymond?

Should she admit, after denying her identity so strongly, that she was Rosebud after all?

"I will buy his silence, but I will never admit that I was his wife, even in name."

From her bureau she took a handful of crisp new bills Raymond had given her that morning, which, together with all her valuable jewels, she stowed carefully away in the pocket of her dress.

Rosebud took from her wardrobe a thick warm shawl, and drawing it over her head she stepped noiselessly down the staircase that led from her suite of rooms to the garden.

How fair and beautiful the night was! A young moon appeared hanging like a slender jewel in the starlit sky pouring a flood of soft, mellow light on the distant restless ocean, on the sleeping flowers and the trees.

She had not lingered to look around the pretty white boudoir as she was leaving it, and her eyes had dwelt but a moment on the light in the library window where she supposed Raymond to be.

Deeply she felt the humiliation of stealing out from her husband's house under cover of the night to

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keep an appointment made with a criminal, but the thought of Raymond nerved her for the coming ordeal.

Let this one night pass, and a life-time of happiness lay before her.

The night wind moaned pitifully among the trees, and the soft beauty of the balmy June night lay over the land.

She crossed the garden, lovingly caressing every flower and shrub she passed with her little white hands, and the moon cast strange weird shadows upon the broad white path before her as she sped quickly away.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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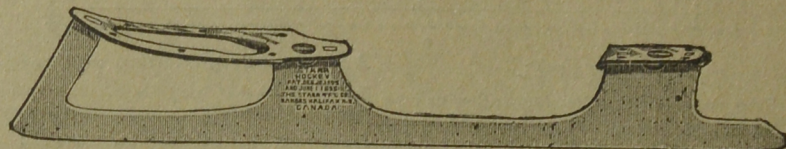
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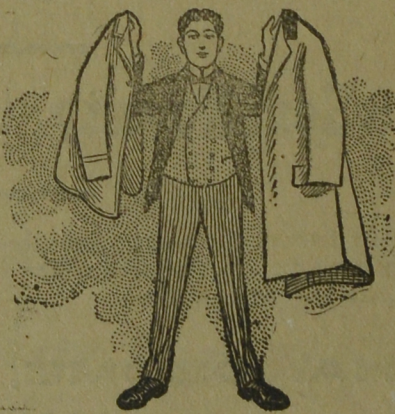
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