

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 could not shake the insane idea from his mind that this young girl might, by some miracle, prove to be the pretty, willful child he had wooed and won, and then so cruelly deserted that night in the rose arbor, to face her father's bitter anger alone.

He purchased a bouquet of rare white rosebuds, attaching his card to it, upon which he has hastily scribbled the startling sentence: "I know you—you are Rosebud Fielding—my wife."

He motioned a keen-eyed lad who stood watching him to his side.

"Do you see that pretty, fair-haired young girl sitting yonder by the fountain?" he questioned.

The boy nodded and grinned.

"Do you want me to take that bouquet to her?" he inquired, peevishly.

"Confound your inquisitive impertinence. What makes you think so?" said Percy, scowling.

"Oh, you needn't get so huffy. I'm sure," retorted the boy, angrily. "Guess I know what it means when I see a fellow make eyes at a pretty girl, and then walk straight off and buy a bouquet. Why, half of the fellows flit with bouquets, and they always give me half a dollar for taking flowers to their girls."

"So that is the sum and substance of this whole rigmorale, is it? You want half a dollar for taking the flowers. Humpf!" remarked Percy, inwardly amused at the way the boy had beaten about the bush. "Well, he's your cash, boy," he added, tossing the coveted amount into the boy's palm. "Be sure you say as you hand it to her. With the compliments of the gentleman who passed her a moment ago."

The boy nodded knowingly, and darted off in Rosebud's direction, quickly followed by Percy, who stationed himself close by behind a clump of flowering shrubs, where he could hear and observe all that transpired without being seen himself.

When he had passed without speaking or claiming her, a wild hope had sprung into her foolish little heart that he had not recognized her.

"I will beg Raymond to take me away from here at once," she thought, confusedly. "If he did not know me I could defy the world to recognize me, and cling to Raymond's love. I have passed the crisis of my life," she told herself, exultantly. "Heaven has heard my prayer, he did not know me, and Raymond's love is still mine."

Poor little Rosebud's triumph was destined to be but of short duration.

A bright-eyed lad, with his cap in one hand and a bouquet of rare exotics in the other, stood before her.

"If you please, miss, the gentleman as passed you a minute ago send you these with his compliments."

All the bright crimson color faded in one instant from Rosebud's face as he held out the bouquet. She had read the startling words written upon the swinging card. The letters seemed dancing before her eyes like tongues of flame.

"I know you! You are Rosebud Fielding—my wife!"

A wild thought born of reckless desperation occurred to her.

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"You have evidently made a mistake, boy. This bouquet is not intended for me," she said, proudly, and the very sound of her own voice frightened her. All the sweetness and music seemed to have died out of it in a single instant.

"I am sure there is no mistake, ma'am. The handsome young gent pointed you out. There's no mistake. Take the rosebuds—they are for you."

A proud, indignant flush rose to her cheeks. Perhaps he was watching her, she thought. Summoning a look of indignant amazement to her face, she waved the boy and the roses aside, and moved on with the throng.

Every instant she expected Percy Fielding to step to her side, and with his handsome, dark, reckless face distorted with passion publicly proclaim that she was his wife. The torture of suspense was terrible.

If she knew what he intended to do it would be easier to bear. What if Raymond should be at the entrance to meet her? She would not have Raymond and Percy meet for words. Percy would claim her, then a deadly combat would ensue.

Oh, the pity and shame of it! She would fall down at Raymond's feet in the dust and humiliation of deathly despair, and confess the terrible deception she had lent herself to all for love of him.

Rosebud never realized how quickly she threaded her way through the gay crowd. A thousand confused plans were occurring to her to outwit her foe.

As she neared the entrance her heart stood still. There stood Raymond—handsome, noble, stately Raymond—the man whom she so madly loved—the man whom she called husband—eagerly waiting for her, with a smile on his lips and love-light in his eyes. A warning instinct in her heart told her she must avoid him at all hazards, for Percy Fielding was in all probability following her.

Once she glanced over her shoulder. Dear Heaven! it was too true! The dark, sinister face was close behind her.

"Oh, what shall I do?" she wailed, in a hushed, broken voice to herself. "I dare not go home! What shall I do? Where shall I go?"

She remembered of once reading a story of a young girl who was relentlessly pursued by a discarded, revengeful suitor, who watched her home for the purpose of abducting her, and how she cleverly outwitted him by stealing away one sunny day to a little isolated boarding-house, where she remained until he ceased to search for her, believing she had left the city.

The plan was simple enough. Often the simplest plan outwits the deepest and most carefully laid scheme.

"Why couldn't I do that, too?" thought poor little Rosebud, frantically; the thought was like an inspiration to her.

Numerous cabs stood around the entrance. She watched her opportunity, and when Raymond's glance was turned for a moment in another direction, quick as a flash of lightning she sped past him, entering the nearest cab.

"Drive around the corner quick—as for your life!" she gasped, "then I'll tell you where to drive to from there."

"Whew! there's crooked business afoot here, I'll just bet," muttered the man, as he gathered up the reins quickly and cracked his whip over his mettlesome horses.

"Why, Leslie, that looks like your wife getting into that coach," said a young man, with whom Raymond was pleasantly chatting while he waited. "She looked directly at you, too," persisted his friend, laughingly adding: "We bachelors have the advantage over you married fellows. We have no young wives pouting their pretty red lips because we can't take them here and there. A fellow is at his wits' end humoring these capricious young wives. They expect a fellow dancing attendance upon them every hour in the day. They don't care a continental about business—that's a second consideration with them."

Raymond Leslie laughed good-humoredly.

"Do you know it is the greatest pleasure of a man's life to humor these pretty little whims of theirs," he remarked, earnestly. "Why, confound it, I refused to attend this flower affair this afternoon with my wife, because business demanded my attention. But I've been so uncomfortably wretched about it somehow, that I couldn't attend to business after all. I shouldn't be a bit sur-

prised if Rosebud was a little piqued at me; but that was not her, you saw driving off just now. She is expecting me here with our own coupe; but the crowd seems to be thinning out, and if you will excuse me, I think I will go inside and look around for her."

The two friends shook hands pleasantly and parted.

"Good Lord! how love-stricken a fellow!" muttered the bachelor friend, gazing after Raymond. "Poor Leslie is completely metamorphosed. These bright-eyed young wives seem to play the very mischief with a man. Yet I wouldn't mind it myself if I had just such a little fairy of a wife as Leslie's—what does he call her—Rosebud! Well, she is the prettiest little flower I have ever seen. No wonder half the men in San Francisco envy Leslie so much beauty, sweetness and love. Still, that was his wife I saw," he mused, turning leisurely away. "And there was the strangest look on her face I ever saw there—a look of tragedy!"

CHAPTER XXV.

Raymond Leslie walked leisurely through the fragrant blooms eagerly searching for Rosebud, but no Rosebud was to be found. "I can not understand it," he mused, as he entered his coupe again and gave the order—"home."

"It was particularly arranged that I should call for her; perhaps my friend was right after all, it must have been Rosebud whom he saw getting into the cab. The little wretch intends to pique me for not attending this affair with her."

Turning these thoughts over in his mind, the eager young husband leaped lightly from the vehicle as it reached the entrance gate, running quickly up the broad, marble steps.

He quite expected a shout of rippling, silvery laughter to greet him as he entered the hall, and the dimpled arms of his young wife to be thrown about his neck, and the cherry-ripe lips to tease him for the anxious look upon his face.

No Rosebud came to meet him; the house seemed to be dark, cold and deserted.

Raymond went to the library, giving the bell a violent jerk as he threw himself into his arm-chair, leaning his head against the marble table.

"Has your mistress returned yet, Mrs. Lane?" he asked of the house-keeper who answered the summons.

"No, sir," replied the woman, respectfully. "When she went out she said she did not know when she would return, that we need not wait lunch for her."

TO BE CONTINUED.]

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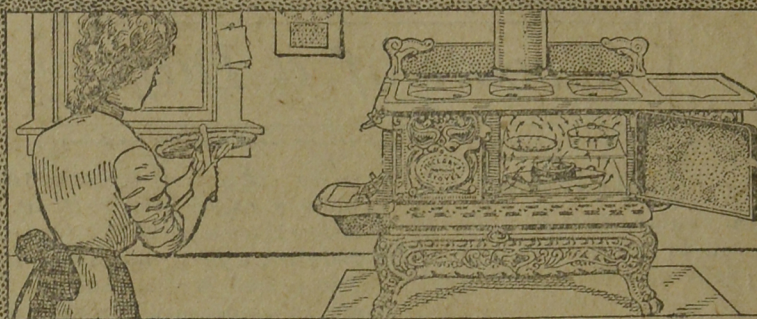
"But do you take Dr Agnew's Cure? If not, you know, I couldn't risk accepting it," she said.

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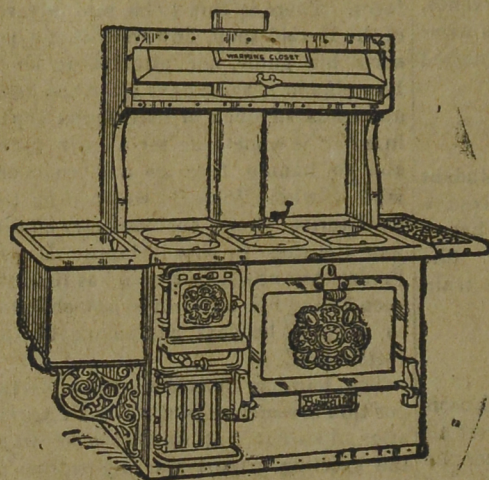
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