

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 wondered why she turned as pale as death and cold drops of perspiration came out like dew on her marble white forehead.

A day came in the near future when that scene came clearly back to him; and, God help him! then he knew why—an hour when the bitterness of death would have been light to the sorrow that crushed him—when the words of the poet seemed to mock him as he repeated them:

"Am I mad, that I should cherish
That which bears but bitter fruit?
I will pluck it from my bosom,
Though my heart be at the root."

Now but one thought occurred to him—a few minutes more, and the happy dream of his life would be realized—pretty Little Rosebud would be his wife.

The rosy morning light shone in like a benediction through the parted silken curtains; the first faint chirps of the birds were heard in the swaying trees outside; all the world seemed to breathe of love—the same sweet story of love.

Solemnly the words of the marriage service were pronounced. They were promised to each other, for better or for worse, for weal or for woe, never to part until death parted them—to be each other's world.

It was all over—Little Rosebud was his wife.

"I shall claim that rose you are wearing, darling, as a memento of this precious hour."

As he spoke he touched the rose she still wore on her breast.

In an instant she had torn the poisoned rose from his fingers, and, with it clasped in her hand, fell back, white and speechless, on the nest seat.

"Oh, sir!" cried the rector's wife, drawing Raymond quickly aside, "Heaven protect you both from ill! See! she has been married in her burial robe!"

Raymond Leslie staggered back as though a heavy blow had suddenly been dealt him. The pure white floating dress upon his bride was the robe she had been buried in—a shroud!

So great was his agitation he quite forgot about the rose. The whole world seemed to be suddenly transformed.

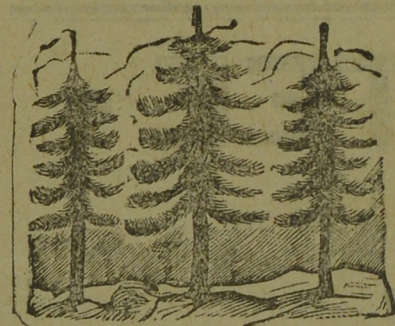
"My darling," he cried, passionately, "may our lives ever be as cloudless as the sunny sky above us!"

Ah, if he had only known what was in store for them!

CHAPTER XXIII.

"I wonder what Percy Fielding will think of that?" cried Maud Arden, spitefully, as she carefully sealed and addressed the letter to Percy which contained Rosebud's death notice. "I am glad the little minx is dead. How little I thought when I accepted this invitation to spend the season in New York I should meet Rosebud here," she thought, triumphantly. "Now I shall catch Percy's heart on the rebound. I shall never forgive him, though, for his fickleness—never!"

While Maud Arden passed up and down her pretty boudoir, triumphantly holding the paragraph between her jeweled fingers, away down in Charles-



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ton poor Joe Hart (whom the reader has not forgotten as Judge Arden's secretary) sat in his office, with his head bowed on his hands, gazing at the fatal announcement.

"Little Rosebud dead," he muttered, brokenly. "I can not believe it." A thousand thoughts flashed through his brain. "Could Percy Fielding have had a hand in this," he cried, savagely, "or is it possible she—If there is a mystery here, or any stain resting upon Little Rosebud's name it shall be the work of my life to clear it. My God! can it be that my lips have been sealed too long? If I find a shadow resting upon Rosebud's name the bitter secret I have carried in my breast so long shall be given broadcast to the world."

The misery, shame, and disgrace can not hurt her now she is dead. And the next morning saw Joseph Hart, poor Joe, faithful to the last, on the train bound for New York.

How little he knew how it was to end.

True to his promise, Raymond Leslie had taken his pretty little bride direction to California.

Rosebud had never felt free until she had left New York far behind her.

She clung to Raymond's love from day to day with a strange, delicious happiness in spite of the sword that ever hung suspended by the slightest thread above her hapless head. She loved him so madly she would have made any sacrifice for him except to tell him of the terrible folly hid like a skeleton in the closet of her past. He would never discover the fearful deception she had practised to hold his love, which was dearer to her than life.

"When he finds it all out, and the hands that have caressed me push me from him, and the lips that have so rapturously kissed mine shall curse me, perhaps he will pity me when I fall down dying at his feet, crying out despairingly that my love for him tempted me, and my love was my life!"

Life opened out like a golden dream to Rosebud when they reached San Francisco.

Raymond was delighted with the change in his pretty little bride. Every day she grew more like the merry, winsome Little Rosebud of old.

In the dizzy, absorbing happiness of the present she quite forgot the old dreaded fear of Percy Fielding ever finding and claiming her.

Even in San Francisco, the golden city of the far West, where there are so many beautiful women, no one was so much admired as Rosebud. No social gathering was complete without her. There were beautiful, peerless brunettes there and scores of golden-haired, pretty blondes, but none were so pretty as Little Rosebud, with her fair, dimpled face and curling, flaxen hair; her peculiar beauty stood out quite alone.

There was one thing which the adoring young husband could never understand. If they were invited to any gathering and Rosebud found out by chance that any of the guests were from New York or Boston, she would beg her husband piteously not to go, and he wondered why such a look of fear would creep into the pansy-blue eyes raised up to his, and why she shivered so in his arms.

"Every one will begin to believe I am a jealous, exacting fellow to keep such a little beauty hidden from the eyes of the world. It is not natural for youth to choose seclusion instead of gaiety."

"Let me be happy as long as I may, dear," pleaded Rosebud, "let me be happy in my own way."

But as time wore on Little Rosebud forgot her usual precaution.

"She was safe," she told herself, "Why should she not give Raymond his own way? Wealth, love, and beauty were hers, why should she hold aloof from the bright, gay world? Gaiety and youth went hand in hand."

A year slipped by. In all the long after-years of her life, Rosebud never forgot that blissful year.

One day Rosebud put her arms around her husband's neck, and said to him:

"This is too bright to last, Raymond dear; it is impossible."

"Why, Rosebud?" he asked, in astonishment.

"It is perfect happiness," she answered; "and that never can last on earth; it is made only for heaven."

"Shall I do anything to make you a little less happy?" he inquired, with a smile. "Shall I, for instance, make love to some of the bewitching beauties of the neighborhood? Shall I be impatient or quarrelsome?"

Rosebud gave a little cry. The very suggestion of her handsome, stately young husband even glancing at any one else made her more miserable than she would have acknowledged. They were sitting in a shady nook for worlds.

on one of the garden seats of their beautiful home, within sight of the broad, glittering ocean.

Raymond threw his arms round the graceful little figure, and kissed the pretty little face. The simple expression of great happiness had touched him inexpressibly.

"Are you really so well content, Rosebud?" he said.

"I am almost afraid to say it, but I am perfectly happy."

Should he broach the news to her that that very morning he had received a letter from New York, saying that business required his immediate attention there for the next six months at least? He was trying to think in what words he should break the news to her. He looked up to find her eyes fixed wonderingly upon him.

"A sigh, Raymond, and such a deep one!" she said. "I have often heard that people who sigh are not quite happy. Tell me, Raymond, do I not fill your life? Are you not happy with me?"

For answer the happy young husband took her again in his arms and kissed the grieving, cherry-ripe mouth until she cried out for mercy.

"Let that be my answer, bonny Little Rosebud," he whispered, gaily.

"We have been married all this time, Raymond," she said, "and you kiss me as if we had only been married a day or two."

"My pretty sweetheart," he cried, "every day of my life I love you more and more!"

"Do you really, Raymond?" and again a burning flush stole over her fair face, and the fair, flaxen head drooped with bitter shame as she thought how unworthy she was of such love. The rosebud he had gathered to his bosom was surrounded with thorns, which were to pierce that noble, trusting heart with the cruellest of wounds. "Ah, Raymond, love is too bright, too beautiful to last!" she faltered.

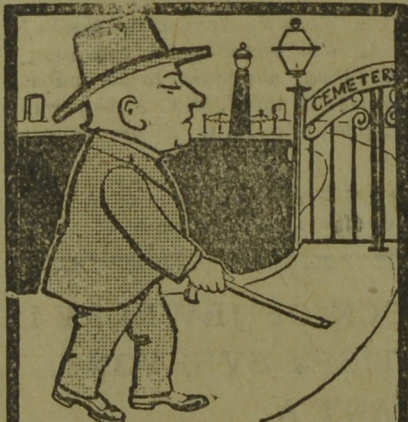
He kissed her again, and told her that "they would never be less happy, because they could never love each other less;" and Rosebud was satisfied, although still a little anxious.

TO BE CONTINUED.]

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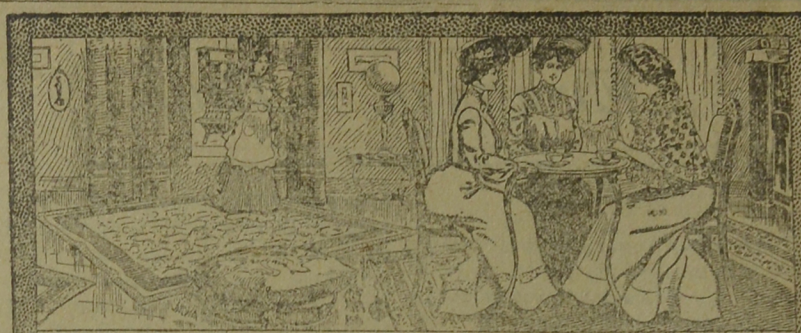
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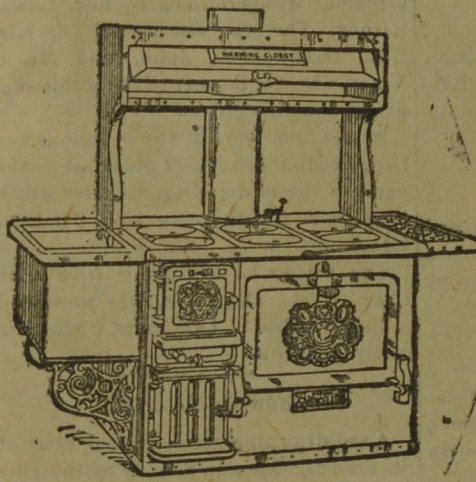
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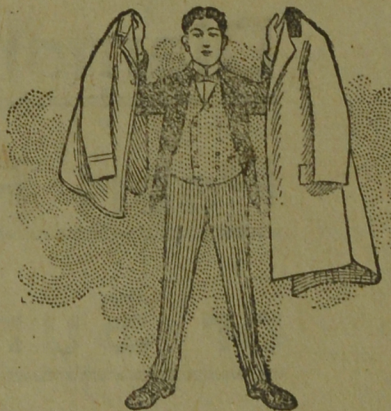
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