

Life at Stake



Somewhere in the world life is at stake every minute of the day. Right at our own doors, perhaps, is going on a struggle as grim and fierce as any fight or flight on record. You hear the hollow tearing cough; see the ooze of blood which tells of the wounded lungs; mark the emaciated body and hectic cheek, and know a life is at stake.

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A FORBIDDEN MARRIAGE.

BY LAURA JEAN LIBBEY.

(Continued.)

He considered it quite a fine mark to insinuate, wherever it was not known otherwise, that he was single free to woo and win any fair maid who might please his fancy.

"It could do no harm to Reine, carrying out this little joke," he told himself, complacently.

He liked to see young girls' eyes brighten at his approach—to know that their hearts beat quicker at the sound of his voice; and that their blushes were for him. Of course, all this would be at an end if they were to find out he was married; so, why inform them of the fact when the information was not called for?

When they had no visitors at home, or had no invitations out, Waldemar Waldron spent his time as he liked. Perhaps it was quite as well that Reine did not know how he spent the hours that she found so sad and lonely.

Three months had passed; and those months had made a sad change in Reine. She was thinner and paler. The lovely blue eyes looked as though showers of hot tears had dimmed their lustre. The fair, rounded cheek had lost its delicate contour; and if one came upon her suddenly, they might have seen tears on the lovely, drooping lashes.

But she was so loyal to her handsome, debonaire husband; she would not even own to herself that she was disappointed in her marriage. She was so young and loving. She longed for kind words and caresses. She longed for such expressions of fondness as Waldemar had shown her before she had married him.

It almost seemed to her that the whole world knew that her husband did not care for her, and that she was a neglected, desolate bride.

It was a sad thing for one so young to be so lonely, and to be so utterly neglected. Once or twice she had timidly gone to Waldemar, with tears in her lovely eyes, to plead with him to show a little more consideration toward her.

He caught up his hat and gloves, looking at the tear-stained, griefed face with an impatient frown.

"If there is anything I do detest, it is a crying woman," he observed, angrily. "Do not repeat this scene again, Reine. I really cannot endure it. I shall not return home until I feel quite certain you are over this weeping scene."

He strode out of the room, and again the wretched girl-wife fell face downward on the velvet carpet. There, long afterward, the servant found her, unconscious still.

In vain they chafed the little white hands and blue-veined temples. The fluttering breath grew fainter and fainter. Kindly hands unfastened the amber satin dress she wore, and took from the twining golden curls the pale roses that clustered among them, laying her on the lace-draped couch, and a physician was quickly summoned.

When he heard the moans and bitter sighs that quivered on the pale lips of the miserable young bride, he knew perfectly well it was not a case for drugs.

"Who could minister to a mind diseased?" He left her a quieting compound, and recommended that her husband should be sent for.

"In vain messengers were sent here and there for him. Waldemar Waldron was not to be found. That evening, while strangers gathered around Reine's pillow—who had summoned the physician again, for she was growing rapidly worse—at the same moment the physician was gravely counting the strokes of Reine's pulse, solemnly shaking his head, while those around her were weeping silently—at that moment Waldemar Waldron was seated at the head of a banquet table, odorous with the breath of roses, making a speech of welcome to the gay, piquant opera singer whose dashing beauty had taken New York by storm, and in whose honor he had given this elegant supper.

It was three days ere the notion occurred to him that it was about time to return home to Reine.

He quite expected a storm of reproaches and tears as he entered his wife's pretty blue-and-gold morning-room. The slender, girlish form he expected to see was not there. He ran lightly up the stairs to her boudoir. She was seated, in a white cashmere wrapper, before the fire, gazing thoughtfully at the pictures the glowing coals made.

She was looking woefully thin and pale and dull. She greeted him gravely, answering his questions when he spoke to her, in clear, steady tones.

He would not believe that she had been ill.

"It was quite an ingenious little story to greet him with," he declared, "but she could not make him believe it."

He never did credit it—not until the doctor sent in his little bill, days after.

"I had intended taking you to a grand concert to-night," he said. "I secured the tickets already."

"We cannot go, Waldemar, because I am so ill," she said plaintively.

"If you choose to stay at home, that will not alter my intention," he said, brusquely. "I shall go all the same."

And, without a word of compassion or pity for her illness, he left the house again—left her alone in her pitiful despair. Only the angels knew what she suffered in the hours that followed, while her husband was thoroughly enjoying the lights and music at the grand concert, amusing himself by scanning the prettiest faces in the audience.

There was one lady whom Waldron had introduced to Reine to whom she had taken a decided dislike, much to her husband's annoyance.

"Mrs. Smith wants to be fast friends with you," he declared, with a frown on his face,—"what's the reason you don't like her?"

"I do not know, Waldemar," she returned, slowly, "there is something about her—not quite congenial."

The frown deepened on his face.

"She is not an educated lady," she went on; "her manners are quite vulgar, and—she paints her face."

Her husband laughed long and loud at that.

"I do not like her lady friends whom she brings here with her, any more than I like herself—they actually seem to have lived in a different world from me—I do not understand them."

Again Waldron laughed loud and long, although Reine could not see anything particularly amusing in what she had said.

"I have invited Mrs. Smith to accompany us to the opera," he said; "see that you treat her well—she don't like your cold way—mind, she's not to be slighted."

"It would not be agreeable to me to have her accompany us, Waldemar," said Reine; "you ought certainly to have consulted me before asking her."

"Nonsense," he declared. "She's the rage of New York—there's not a man but—" he stopped short, and looked a little embarrassed, Reine thought—"but," he added, after stopping to cough slightly, "but would be delighted to have her in their box—with his wife."

Reine sighed, telling herself silently that the presence of Mr. Smith would spoil her pleasure of hearing "Norma."

"I invited her here to dine with us," he explained, "thinking that would please you."

Mrs. Smith arrived late, and when she had thrown off her wraps, Reine looked at her in amazement—her style of costume was a little peculiar. Mrs. Smith evidently observed it. She said, nonchalantly.

"I came prepared to go to the opera,—we must go early, my dear Mrs. Waldron. It is to be a gala night; there will be quite a crush of all the upper crust of New York—all the elite I mean."

Reine did not reply.

Very soon Waldemar joined them, and it almost seemed to Reine her husband actually forgot her presence, he was so engrossed in bandying jokes—yes, jokes—with the golden haired Mrs. Smith.

For a few moments after dinner, Reine found herself alone with her husband,—she hurried to his side with a pale, perturbed face.

"Oh, Waldemar," she cried in distress, "I cannot go to the opera with Mrs. Smith in that—that dress. I—I—should die of mortification."

"What is the matter with it?" he demanded. "I thought it was something stunning."

Reine's face flushed in dismay—"I should think you would see for yourself, Waldemar," she murmured,—"there—there is not much—to—to—the waist."

"Hump!" sneered Waldron, "that's only your prudish taste. That's called décolleté by women of fashion; I should think you would know that."

"I call it by another name, Waldemar," she replied; "it is—immodest. I—I—think I should die of shame if I had to sit beside Mrs. Smith in that dress."

"Don't make a fool of yourself, Reine," he cried, seizing her arm roughly. "Don't dare tell Mrs. Smith that; you would make an enemy of her for life."

"Well, what if I do?" she answered, spiritedly.

"You would rue it to the last day of your life," he hissed. "You shall go to the opera with her and make yourself as agreeable as you know how."

Reine went, but it was with one of the heaviest of hearts. As she had expected, all the lorgnettes in the house were repeatedly turned to their box. Reine shrank behind the silken curtains. Mrs. Smith seemed to enjoy this close scrutiny hugely.

It was a great relief to Reine when the long evening was over, and they were en route home.

"I never enjoyed myself so well in all my life," declared Mrs. Smith, enthusiastically, as she parted from Reine. "It was a grand social triumph for me."

Those words puzzled Reine for long hours afterward. She was to know the meaning of them all too soon. On the day following this event a lady called, whose friendship Reine prized highly.

She greeted Reine with a grave face, and during the course of the conversation, the lady brought around the subject of the opera of the previous evening.

"I saw you in your box, Mrs. Waldron," she said, "but—for the moment, I could hardly persuade myself that it really was your box."

"Why?" asked Reine, smiling.

"I do not know as I should speak about it; still, I feel it is my duty to enlighten you, my dear," returned the lady. "Please remember it is only the friendly interest I feel in you that forces me as it were, to speak; to put it plainly, the person who was with you, is a creature no lady who values her reputation can be seen speaking to. Of course you did not know; she is a near neighbor and appears to be a woman of wealth, but ah, my dear, such as she are the world's sharks. I pray you, close your doors against her. Do you comprehend me?"

Reine was too shocked for utterance.

"I told my husband from the very first I did not like Mrs. Smith," she said.

"Smith!" cut in Reine's friend; "why, my dear, that is not her name, she is called the notorious Madame Eglantine. She has wealth and beauty that a princess might envy, but good women shun her as they would a scorpion."

"It is so strange that my husband did not know," said innocent Reine; "but then we have not been long in New York city."

"Very strange," repeated the lady; and she soon after took her leave, congratulating herself as she rolled away in her carriage, that she had opened Mrs. Waldron's eyes to what was going on; it was her duty to do so.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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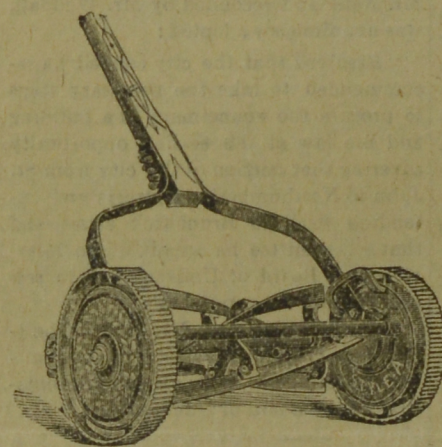
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