

A FORBIDDEN MARRIAGE

BY LAURA JEAN LIBBEY

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(CONTINUED.)

He pushed open the first door he reached, and found himself in a room tastefully furnished.

This, in all probability, was one of the inhabitable apartments the heir of the Towers had casually referred to. He pushed his search still further—drawing back the velvet hangings, which were closely drawn before the arched doorway of an inner apartment.

He stood quite still and motionless, gazing upon the scene from within which met his view.

Like the outer apartments, this room was also tastefully furnished. A silver-shaded lamp stood on a marble centre-table, casting a subdued, mellow light over the bright-hued velvet carpet—the easy lounging chairs, cottage piano, and general bric-a-brac.

A bouquet of wild flowers, pansies and mignonette, filled a vase on the dresser, and a bouquet of the same flowers adorned either side of the velvet-draped mantel.

It was evidently a room such as a lady would use—a lady of taste and refinement. And in the centre of the room, seated on a low rocker—her face half revealed by the silver lamp and half concealed by its shade of crimson crystal—sat a young and lovely girl, running her white, shapely fingers over the strings of a guitar, accompanying the music, now and then, by a few notes of a singularly sweet and bell-like compass.

This was the sound that had reached the young detective as he sat in Waldemar Waldron's apartments below.

The detective's heart gave a great throb of exultation and triumph. Had success crowned his valiant efforts at last?

One rapid, eager glance, as the face was turned more fully toward him in the soft glow of the lamp, then his hopes fell with the keenest disappointment, as it flashed over him that the young girl before him was not General Hastings' daughter.

Long and earnestly he scrutinized every feature of her face. It bore not the slightest resemblance to the smiling, dimpled face of the lovely little blonde whose photograph reposed at that moment in his breast pocket. Not one feature resembled the pictured face of the general's missing daughter.

He had stumbled upon a hidden romance; but it mattered little to him since it was not the one in which he was interested.

With a keen sense of disappointment, he turned and retraced his steps to the apartment in which Waldron still sat. He had scarcely regained his seat ere the young heir opened his eyes with a start.

"Did I fall asleep?" he asked, in the utmost astonishment. "How long have we been sitting here? I must have dozed off a minute or two since, just as you were relating your very interesting story concerning General Hastings' plans. I certainly beg your pardon for being such an inattentive listener. I was quite interested, however, I assure you."

"It is my turn, I should say, to beg pardon for encroaching so long upon your hospitality. It is time I was taking my leave."

There was nothing more to be learned from the housekeeper's nephew, Waldemar Waldron told himself. Therefore he did not press him, any further than common courtesy required, to prolong his stay. And it was with a feeling of relief that he saw the heavy iron gate shut to with a bang after his retreating form.

"Can it possibly be true the old idiot intends willing every dollar of his property to that infernal Chesleigh?" he cried, grinding his fair moustache between his white teeth in impotent rage. "It must not—it shall not be. I must put a stop to that, too, at all hazards."

He walked slowly back to the Towers, meditating upon a strange problem that was in his mind.

"By George, I must put it into execution to-morrow," he mused. "I am standing upon thin ice, with the plank of safety slipping beneath my feet."

"Yes," he decided, "to-morrow this part of the country will witness one of the greatest sensations that it has known for long years. Excitement will wax hot, and I shall stand quietly by and witness it all."

Meanwhile, a new and startling thought had occurred to the young detective. He had retraced his steps hurriedly back to Waldron Towers, touching the huge brass knocker with a firm, determined hand that sent a weird, resounding peal through the house.

We will leave Waldemar Waldron to mature his plans, which were to bear strange fruit on the morrow, and the young detective to carry out the startling design which had caused him to retrace his steps toward the Towers; and you shall learn, dear reader—in the following chapter—the

rate that had befallen beautiful Reine the general's lovely young daughter.

CHAPTER XII.

We must now return to the general's daughter, as she stepped out into the moonlit grounds on her bridal eve, sinking down upon the rustic bench in the shadow of the fir trees.

Fifteen minutes more, and she would be Bernard Chesleigh's wedded wife—she whose every thought was with the lover who had been banished from her side.

After to-night it would be a sin to give one thought to another.

"Waldemar, oh, my love!" sighed the girl, holding out her beautiful white arms. "I am bidding you a silent, eternal farewell forever."

The shadow among the trees advanced quickly forward, stopping suddenly before her, and, raising her startled glance, Reine beheld—Waldemar Waldron.

She did not cry out or faint. The shock of sudden joy was too much for that. A sharp gasp parted the crimson lips. The light that shone in the blue, up-lifted eyes was pitiful to see. She held out her tender hands, and he, rushing forward, clasped her to his heart.

"Reine," he cried, hoarsely, thrusting the beautiful bridal veil back from her face, "have I come too late? Have they wedded you to my rival?"

She shook her head. "Not yet, Waldemar," she whispered, shudderingly. "Not until eight to-night. It wants a quarter to that time now. Do not remind me of it. Let me have a few brief, fleeting moments of happiness. Life will be so cold and dark for me after we part."

"You do not love him, Reine, my darling," he said. "Why should you sacrifice yourself? You must not—you shall not! Why did you consent to anything like this?" he asked. "I thought you would be true to me, Reine," he added, reproachfully.

"I thought you had forgotten me, and I longed to die, Waldemar," she said, faintly; and in broken sobs she related to him the story Gertrude Traverser had told her of the beautiful lady whom he was seen in company with, and the fear that had come over her that he had found some one else to love.

"After I heard about that, I grew desperate, Waldemar," she said. "Then I let them have their own way."

"The lady in whose company they saw me in New York was my cousin," he explained, glibly, "a true and noble young lady who has heard me speak of you a hundred times, and who takes the warmest interest in our love affair, Reine."

A triumphant smile wreathed the lips the fair moustache covered, as he saw how implicitly she trusted and believed him. He had had no intention whatever of resigning the richest prize Dame Fortune had ever placed within his reach when he went away.

He had laid his plans adroitly. To throw the old general off his guard he had gone away. His absence would have another advantage. Beautiful Reine, whose heart he had so completely won, would be brought to a realization of what his absence cost her, and what life without him would be like; and the plan he had in view could be more easily accomplished.

Ah! he had guessed rightly. The sorrow of his absence had told upon her greatly. She had hungered and thirsted so for his love! Now that he was with her again, no wonder that she forgot all the world—everything save him.

The moments flew on unheeded.

He clasped the lovely form clad in her bridal robes still closer to his heart, kissing the quivering lips, and kissing the tears from her lovely blue eyes, telling her in eloquent, passionate words that it would be death to them to part from each other—that he could not do it. He could never give her up to another and live.

She clung to him with piteous sobs. His caresses were like strong wine to her and dazed her senses; her heart beat with happiness; the whole world seemed changed to her.

Let the gayety go on within the walls of Fairlawn—he had quite another plan for the bride-elect.

Married she should be that night, but not to Bernard Chesleigh. He himself should be the bridegroom, and, once married—the mischief really done—there would be no help for it but for the old general to forgive his lovely daughter and make the most of his new son-in-law.

He never for one moment believed that the fond old father would disinherit his child and refuse her pardon.

He broke his plans to her gradually; he did not startle her; he was too wary for that. Gently he painted to her in glowing, eloquent words, such as young girls love to hear, of the

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she would but consent to wed him instead of the lover who had been selected for her by others.

She must decide quickly—the moments were fleeing swift-winged by them. Was it Yes or No?

"Oh, Waldemar, think," she cried, piteously, "they are waiting for me in there! I have given my word that I would marry Mr. Chesleigh, and how dare I break it? My heart pleads for love and you, but duty points another way."

He gave a little sigh, thinking to himself that he had all the weary way of persuasion to go over again.

He pretending to look broken-hearted; then spoke of bidding her farewell forever—telling her that he would go abroad, and do his best to die there, and that he was mad to ever dream that she could care for one as poor as he was, now that a wealthier suitor was at hand; that he would go quietly away where she should never see him more. He could not blame her for choosing wealth to a poor man's love.

He knew how the words would touch her tender heart. She broke down utterly, crying out that he was her love, and she would sacrifice the whole world for him.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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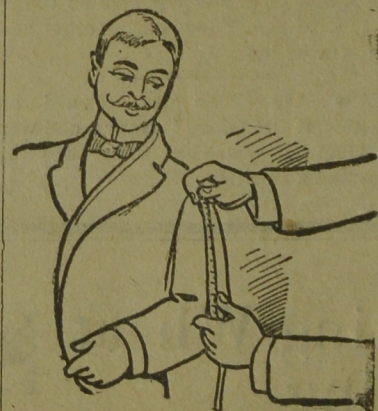
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