

A FORBIDDEN MARRIAGE

BY LAURA JEAN LIBBEY

Author of "When Lovely Maiden Stoops to Folly," "A Cruel Revenge," "The Heiress of Cameron Hall," "Ione," "Parted at the Altar," Etc.

(CONTINUED).

By his direction it was given out that he was a relative of Mrs. Dent, the housekeeper, and was paying her a short visit at Fairlawn Villa. No one would have dreamed that the beardless, boyish young fellow, so bashful in appearance, was in reality one of the keenest and shrewdest detectives on the Washington force.

A week had passed since he had come to Fairlawn, and, for the first time in his life, he was completely baffled. The mystery which shrouded in deepest gloom the mysterious disappearance of beautiful Reine on her wedding night was as impenetrable as ever.

Each ingenious device for getting on the trail had turned out an ignominious failure.

One idea fixed itself firmly in the detective's mind, however. If Miss Hastings had contemplated flight, or suicide—if it came to the worst—she would not have been likely to robe herself in her bridal dress and linger there until within a few short moments of the time for the ceremony to begin.

He had taken her picture from the album and carried it about in his pocket, studying the lovely, laughing face so well that he knew every feature by heart.

There was something peculiar about the saucy, smiling mouth and deep, pansy-blue eyes, and about the whole contour of the lovely, dimpled face, framed in its sheen of golden curls, that told him he would recognize the original instantly on sight if he ever beheld her.

The failure which met his every effort to trace Reine was a bitter blow to the young detective. He knew his reputation was at stake—for it was a great honor to be selected for so great a case; and last, but by no means least, he knew if success crowned his efforts he would receive as handsome an amount as the most experienced man on the force could have commanded. Ability could not be justly measured by age or experience. He spent most of the fine old of doors—daily, hourly hoping, Micawber like, that something would turn up that might give him some kind of a clue.

He had haunted the groves and glens surrounding Waldron Towers, and on one of these rambles he had come face to face with its handsome, fair-haired owner.

Waldemar Waldron eyed the young stranger curiously, a brilliant idea occurring to him the while. Why not sound this youth who was stopping at Fairlawn Villa, and learn from him what the inmates were about, and what they thought and talked about concerning the disappearance of the general's daughter.

Waldemar Waldron possessed the unusual quality of making himself agreeably fascinating to men as well as to women when he chose.

He greeted the young stranger cordially enough, and as the days passed on it was no unusual thing for Donald Gray to find himself in Waldron's company. He smiled at the ingenious way in which his new-found friend plied him with questions, in roundabout ways which were certainly unique. His replies were wary enough. He always managed to rouse Waldemar's curiosity from day to day, and leave him when apparently on the point of making some disclosure.

A laugh, that was not pleasant to hear, fell from Waldron's lips when the sufferings of Bernard Chesleigh were portrayed to him and he seemed to triumph in the other's misery. But he spoke never a word, and his brows darkened as he listened to the manner in which the old general met the terrible blow that had fallen upon him. He had said:

"If ill has befallen my darling, let the perpetrators of it beware, for they shall be hounded down, and a vengeance worthy of the mighty sorrow of an outraged and suffering father dealt out to them, just so surely as yonder sun shines.

"But if my child has deserted me of her own free will—ah, well, I cannot curse her—my dead wife's daughter—but I shall never forgive her. She shall never again cross my threshold. I will never again look upon her fair, false face, so help me God! and not a penny of my money shall be hers. I would sooner leave it to the paupers of the almshouse."

Waldemar Waldron frowned still more darkly.

"The general's daughter is his legal and only heir," he said, slowly. "Let him fume and fret as much as he will, she will get it at last, every dollar of it—that is, if she is alive," he added quickly.

"Long and almost endless litigation, together with the fat fees of lawyers, would dwindle the old millionaire's wealth down to a very small sum, I should fancy," retorted young Gray, carelessly; "and especially if he carries out the plan in regard to Bernard Chesleigh that he in-

tends, would fare badly."

"What plan?" inquired Waldron eagerly. "What is it he proposes to do?"

"I haven't time to tell you about it now," replied the young detective, apologetically. "The fact is, I must leave you in order to reach Fairlawn Villa in time for tea; they don't like to keep things standing over to oblige only the housekeeper's nephew."

Waldemar Waldron stopped and studied a moment. He must know the general's plan.

"Suppose you come and take tea with me at Waldron Towers," he said, waxing hospitable, "and you shall tell me afterward, over our wine and cigars."

This was the very opening the delighted detective had been longing for—a visit within the walls of Waldron Towers.

CHAPTER XI.

Waldemar Waldron led his companion silently through the deep green coppice wood until they reached the high stone wall that closed in the spacious grounds of Waldron Towers.

He swung open the massive gate, and together they entered the house.

The old butler who admitted them stared in amazement at the unusual sight of a visitor accompany his young master.

"Let us have tea at once in my rooms, Mason," he said to the servant. "The accommodations here are such as do not warrant guests," laughed Waldron. "The dining-room here is a luxury of the past. There are scarcely half a dozen inhabitable rooms about the place," he added, turning to his companion.

"I wonder you can content yourself stopping here," commented Donald Gray. "I should imagine you were a young gentleman who enjoyed gaiety and plenty of life."

"So I do," asserted Waldron. "This place was left to me by the death of a relative two years ago, yet I did not trouble myself to look after it until last summer. I took a run down here from Washington then, and have paid visits off and on since."

By this time they had reached the western wing, in which were situated Waldron's suite of rooms, as he called it, and were soon doing justice to a hearty supper.

"Now then," said Waldron, as they sat over their wine, "what was the plan you were speaking of in reference to Chesleigh? You said the old general was about to put a new scheme into execution."

"I do not know that I ought to disclose affairs which were never destined for my ears to hear," objected the detective, modestly.

Waldron was about to retort, but at that instant a strange sound echoed distinctly through the high vaulted rooms—a sound which brought the swift color into Waldemar Waldron's face, and a glance of uneasiness into his eyes.

"These old shutters creaking to and fro on their hinges make unearthly noises," he said, rising instantly and closing the door.

"I did not hear them," observed young Gray, innocently.

The master of the Towers looked, as he felt, wonderfully relieved at those words.

The detective had heard the unusual sound, however, and, quick as thought, had decided upon a plan of procedure. He must investigate it, if he had to explore the old Towers from top to bottom. Nothing must stand in his way.

An experienced detective is always prepared for such an emergency, and, quick as thought, when the master of the Towers turned toward the door to close it, he succeeded in dropping a few grains of a sleeping potion in his host's untasted wine.

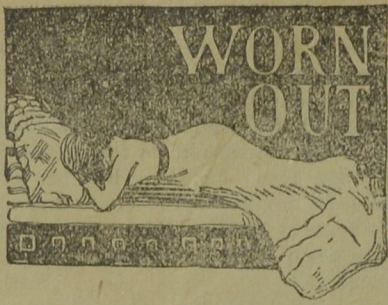
The effect was—as he knew it would be—while he was explaining to Waldemar Waldron that it was the intention of General Hastings to make a will, leaving every dollar he possessed to Bernard Chesleigh, his host's eyes closed wearily; the fair Saxon head sank back among the velvet cushions of his arm-chair, and his deep breathing told Donald Gray the way was safe now from all intrusion to make the long-wished-for investigation of the Towers.

He must make the most of every moment, too, for the effects of the potion would not hold the young heir's senses in thrall for long.

Snatching up a lighted taper, he hurriedly crossed the room and stepped out into the corridor.

If by chance he met one of the servants, he well knew his ready wit would stand him in good need. For half an hour or more the detective patiently investigated every nook and corner of the uncanny old ruins, finding, as a reward, little more than dust and emptiness.

What happened then, Waldemar Waldron



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sound he had heard?" he asked himself, impatiently, as he traversed, one after the other, the subterranean passages.

Surely his senses had not been playing him false?

He was almost tempted to return to Waldron's apartments, and set this experiment down as another ignominious failure—when once again the same strange sound was repeated—this time with a startling clearness there was no mistaking, directly over his head.

He stood quite still for a moment to locate the exact place on the floor above, and as he raised his taper he saw—what had quite escaped his observation before, shrewd as he was—a narrow door, so like in color to the panels of the wall as to be hardly noticeable to those unaware of its existence there.

In an instant the young detective flung it open, and advanced carefully and cautiously up the narrow carpeted stairway which it revealed.

It was certainly evident, as he paused and looked about him, when he reached the topmost stair, that he had not been upon this floor and through this particular corridor before.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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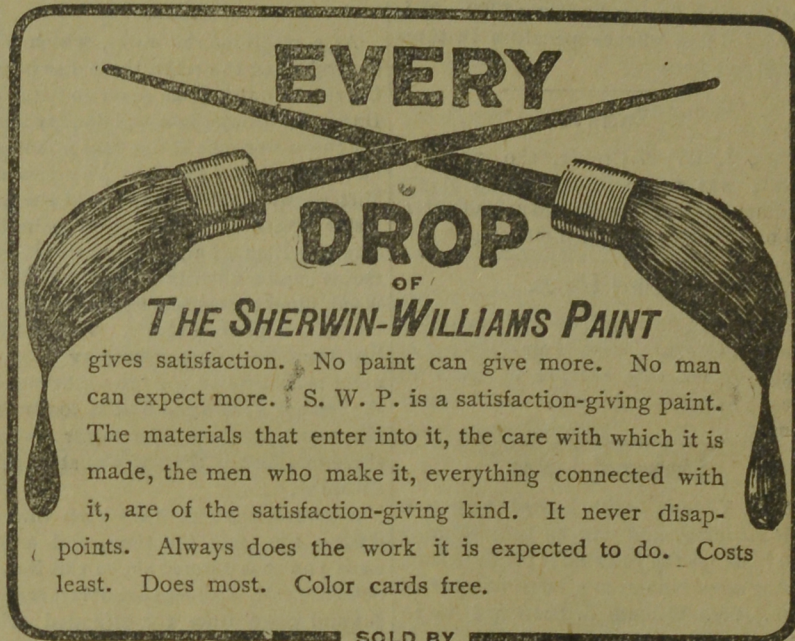
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