

HIS LEGAL WIFE

BY MARY E. BRYAN

(Continued)

"Yes, I pity Miss de Vasco from my heart. Mrs. Child. I am sorry I had any hand in bringing about this distressing complication. I have something to propose to her tomorrow. It may be that things can be arranged more hopefully than she thinks possible."

"Do you think so? Well, it is best you should stay here—and appear as her husband—until the matter is settled, if ever it is settled. I am sure I don't see how it can be without oceans of scandal. Oh, my poor, willful, impulsive girl, what unhappiness she has brought on herself!"

Lee did not look particularly happy himself as he followed the trust-worthy James up the winding stairs to the suite of rooms that had been assigned to him. They were luxuriously furnished. Evidently they had been newly put in order for an expected divorcee. An arm-chair was drawn up before a bright fire in the pretty sitting-room, and fresh roses filled a big crystal bowl on a table of carved olive wood and silver, perfuming the soft warm air of the room.

Lee threw himself into the arm-chair, and lighting a cigar, smoked slowly while he reflected upon the situation.

Nina's trouble appealed to him strongly. He somehow felt guilty of having helped to bring about this unhappy tangle in her life. He must now help to straighten it. His sympathy and his sense of honor alike prompted him to do this. But it involved a hard sacrifice. He must allow his good name to be sacrificed by a divorcee court. He must give up his hope of saving Lucille, and of giving a home and a life of comfort to her and to his old father. For he would give back Miss de Vasco's money. He drew his checks out of his pocket, and smoothing the important slips of paper on his knee, he looked at the figures upon them, and thought of the castles of hope he had built upon the sum they represented.

Lucille's radiant face—as it had beamed upon him when he told her of his newly acquired fortune—seemed to smile upon him through the wreaths of smoke that rose from his chair, and then to change and frown in anger and derision—and grew hard and defiant, with a desperate resolve.

He sighed heavily. The path of duty and honor was beset with thorns—and yet, before he laid his head on the pillow, he had resolved to tread it.

CHAPTER VII

At nine o'clock next morning, breakfast was served to Lee in the pretty dining room that was one of the suite of apartments.

He dined alone, waited upon by James, who had appeared at his bedside that morning, and offered his services as valet and general waiting-man, and had proceeded to open his new master's wardrobe and assist him to make an elegant morning toilet.

Lee was getting up from the table, when a servant came in bringing a message from Nina. She was waiting to see him.

He went down at once. He found her with Mrs. Child in the library. She was standing in the alcove window, at the end of the room, nervously snipping off the leaves from an overgrown geranium. She turned around as he entered. The rich light from the stained glass window streamed over her graceful figure, habited in a princess dress of dark heliotrope shading into soft, pink.

The colored light imparted a delicate tint to her face, pale as some cameo carved of ivory. Her eyes showed traces of tears and sleeplessness, but her manner was wonderfully self-controlled.

She came forward to meet Lee, holding in her hand some papers he had given her the evening before as credentials of his respectability. They were letters of introduction and recommendation, addressed to prominent business firms in the city, and bearing the signatures of the president of the college at which he had graduated, of a well-known minister, and of a somewhat distinguished public man.

"I have looked over these," she said, as she put the papers into his hand. "They assure me that you stand well with your friends. I am sure you deserve a better fate, Mr. Lee, than to be the legal husband of a woman who must all her life bear the burden of remorse for having brought you and herself into such a position."

"You need not bear the burden all your life, Miss de Vasco," he said. She noticed that he gave her the name she had legally exchanged for his own. "The mistake that makes you so unhappy may be retrieved—in part at least. The marriage can be annulled by a decree of court."

"A divorce court! Heaven forbid!" cried Mrs. Child, clasping her hands dramatically.

"Go on, Mr. Lee. How can the decree be obtained?"

"There is only one ground for divorce in this State," he went on. "I could not consent that a suit should be brought founded upon

that ground, or upon any other that would disgrace or dishonor me. But I am deeply sorry for you, Miss de Vasco. I am sorry for the part I have taken, unknowingly, in bringing this trouble upon you; and I am willing that you should free yourself from me on any plea that is not absolutely dishonoring. In several of the other states the divorce laws are less stringent than in this. A marriage can be broken on a plea of incompatibility of temper, absence for a year without being heard from and other charges. You will need to go and take up your residence in a state for awhile before you are privileged to apply for a divorce. I would respectfully suggest that you do this. I give you now my solemn promise not to oppose your getting the divorce, and not to intrude upon you after this interview; also, to regard the contract between us as null. Here are the papers relating to it, the copy you gave me of the agreement we signed yesterday, and the two checks for the sum named in the agreement."

He placed the papers on the table before her, and stood awaiting her reply.

She looked at him without saying a word. A tumult of conflicting thoughts and feelings possessed her. She felt a thrill of gratitude and admiration for Henry Lee. She recalled what Grafton had said about him last night:

"He has married you for your money, Nina. Offer him a sum to let you free yourself from him. He will set his price high, because he has you in his power. But no matter, if it takes all your fortune, my darling, you will be left to me."

She had half believed the slur against the man she had paid to marry her; but now she saw this man offering her her freedom without price, and returning her the money she had given him.

There was another under-current in the tide of feeling that swept over her. She would not have been a woman if she had felt no pique at being thus willingly given up by her legal husband. She knew that she was young and beautiful, and that her social position was far above his. She had a right to feel surprised that a man of refined tastes and full of masculine vitality should be so willing to break the bond that united him to her.

She did not know that his faith was sworn to another woman, and his heart was filled with that woman's image.

Mingled with these feelings, and dominant over them, was joy at the prospect held out to her of being free—free to give herself to the beloved one whom—so she felt—she had deeply wronged.

"I thank you," she said at last. "You are generous, Mr. Lee. But," she went on, "I could not at once enter a suit for divorce. I must have to reside in another state for some time, you said."

"A year or two. In some of the territories only a few months. That will not matter. You are young, Miss de Vasco. You can afford to wait before making a true marriage. It is possible you may find a man more worthy of you than—I stopped and hesitated, then continued—"than any you have yet known."

She noted the turn of his last sentence, and understood what he had first meant to say. But she did not resent it. She knew Grafton was far from faultless; but she loved him, and his faults were as notes in the sunshiny day of her love.

She sat down and rested her elbow on the table, leaning her cheek upon her hand.

Lee's matter-of-fact way of stating how she might free herself of her legal husband had not the highest opinion of her handsome, fascinating lover.

"Have you ever known Mr. Grafton?" she asked, coldly.

"I never met him until last night." The answer seemed not quite satisfactory to her, but she said nothing.

Presently, Lee rose to his feet. "I will not intrude upon you any longer," he said. "I think I understand your wishes, and I will try to carry them out. What will you have me do today? Are you going out?"

"No, but today, Thursday, is my 'at-home day,' as we say. From four to six in the afternoon, and again from eight to ten in the evening, I have been accustomed to receive visitors. Of course, a good many more than the usual number will call today, more from curiosity than friendship, perhaps. But that doesn't matter. In society one takes what glitters for gold, or seems to take it. What I was going to say is, that you will need to be here as early as five o'clock. The ordeal must be gone through. You must help me to receive the visitors, and must be presented to them, and receive their congratulations on your marriage, and try to appear like a happy bridegroom. And mind, you must remember not to call me Miss de Vasco. It must be Mrs. Lee, or—with a smile and a blush—"Nina."

"I will remember," he answered, smiling back. Then he bowed and went away.

them that confronted her. Freedom and Floyd Grafton on one side, divorce and scandal on the other. Womanlike, she inclined to a compromise. There was the intermediate ground of delay. She could postpone the divorce, and remain betrothed to Floyd, with the understanding that they should marry as soon as she was free. The delicious engagement period would be prolonged; she would have her lover's company, while she would enjoy the protection of a legal husband and the social importance of a married woman.

It was a unique situation. There was a thrilling charm in it for Nina's imagination. Her eyes brightened, a subtle smile played about her beautiful mouth. She snapped off the cluster of purple bells she had been toying with, and walked back to where Lee and Mrs. Child were sitting. He admired her free, proud motion, her noble figure, her picturesque hair, and her better breeding, if he hasn't their languid graces and subtle way of flattering."

Miss de Vasco smiled dreamily. "There is no man like Floyd," she said, dwelling tenderly on the name. She fell into a little fit of musing, her eyes cast down upon her hands, lying loosely clasped on her knees. Suddenly rousing, she rose to her feet.

"Floyd will be here presently," she said. "I must tell him how I came to make this marriage. Oh, how I hate to tell him! How weak, how mad he will think I have been."

"Let him blame himself," returned Mrs. Child. "I can't see yet that he was not to blame. Why did he get angry with you for a trifle, and refuse to answer your letter when you wrote and begged him to forgive you? He is the one that ought to have asked for forgiveness. And he must have paid attention to that other young woman the rich grandmother's heiress, or it would never have been published that he was to be married to her."

"Mrs. Child," cried Nina, who had turned quite pale, "you must not insinuate that Floyd has been false to me. He has explained everything. He was out of town, and did not get my letters. He hardly knew the young woman. Her grandmother was a friend of his dead mother, and he called on them for her sake. He was not responsible for the thing the papers said. I know he is true to me. I only have been to blame."

"Maybe so. I don't pretend to understand the true inwardness of your affairs, my dear Nina. I confess your present complication horrifies me. Here you are, bound to one man, and legally his wife, and expecting to marry another as soon as you can be freed by a divorce. Really, I think it was noble in Mr. Lee to consent to your getting the divorce. It will injure him, of course."

"Injure him! You forget that it is not to be obtained on any plea that will injure him."

"That can't be, my dear. There is no plea you could found a suit upon that would not injure him. Do you think to have it proved that he had neglected or deserted or misused his wife would be very helpful to a man's reputation?"

"Oh, it is not certain that the man has any reputation to be troubled about," Nina said, scornfully, but in her heart she felt that the insinuation was not just. Henry Lee's grave, clear eyes came up before her accusingly.

"Yes, I have brought trouble on him, as I have brought it on Elyod—on everybody connected with me," she said to herself. "I have spoiled his life."

A few minutes later her elastic spirits rebounded. Floyd Grafton was with her. He held her hands in his, and his beautiful, troubled eyes were bent upon her.

"My lost love! My lost love!" he murmured, passionately.

"Not lost, it may be," she whispered.

Then she made him sit by her, while she nerved herself to tell him the story of her marriage, and that it was no true marriage, and she had hopes of freeing herself in a little while.

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That's Why You're Tired—Out of Spirits—Have no Appetite
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door closed upon him, then turning to Mrs. Child:

"He does very well," she said. The chaperon sniffed significantly. "He is better looking to my mind than some others I know, and better bred, if he hasn't their languid graces and subtle way of flattering."

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"I know it. It hurts me to the heart to think about it, but I will make it up to you some day," she answered, forgetting, in the humility of her devotion, that he was primarily to blame for all, and that the trial was harder on her than on himself.

While this interview between the lovers was going on, the legal husband was striding along the streets that were bright with sunshine and alive with busy pedestrians. But he heeded them not. He was as alone in spirit as if he once more trod the wilds of his California ranch.

He still felt as if he were in a dream. The events of the past twenty-four hours were more like the fantastic whirlwind happenings of a dream than like the incidents of real life.

And now there was another turn of the whirlwind. He was soon to be severed from this beautiful, strange woman to whom he had just legally been bound. Marriage at a moment's warning, then, presto, divorce.

He frowned as the thought of divorce came into his mind. It was not pleasant to contemplate figuring in a divorce court. Few emerge unscathed from that temple of scandal. But then a divorce would give him back Lucille.

He had not breathed a word to Lucille or to his father about his marriage. In the first place, he was not at all sure that the marriage would really take place. He would fulfil his part of that night's strange bargain, he thought; but he did not believe Miss de Vasco would fulfil hers. She had been dominated by strong excitement, and her undisciplined nature had yielded to a sudden wild impulse.

"She will regret her mad contract when she thinks it over coolly, and she will recall it in time," he thought.

She had not recalled it, the marriage was now an accomplished fact, and he had last night determined to tell his father and Lucille. He feared the shock to her would be terrible, and she might not be able to believe that it was for her sake he had married the handsome heiress.

Within the last few hours, however, a thought, a temptation, perhaps it was, had come to him. Why should he tell Lucille what had happened? What need to wound her and shake her trust in him? The probability was that she would never find it out. The marriage was only temporary; the bond would soon be broken; Miss de Vasco would soon be going away to reside in another State, that she might enter suit for the divorce.

He felt sure that not one of his acquaintances, who might have chanced to read the notice of Miss de Vasco's marriage had recognized him—plain Harry Leigh—or Lee, as his name was most frequently spelled, in the high-falootin' description of the distinguished-looking bridegroom, Mr. Warrington Leigh, a scion of a noble English family. Not counting two or three business acquaintances, and his father and Lucille, he had only two friends in the city. One of these was Ada Glynn, that same "heiress of the rich grandmother," to whom, according to the report of "Town Talk," Floyd Grafton had transferred his allegiance from Miss de Vasco. Ada Glynn was Harry Lee's cousin three degrees removed. She had lived at Green Valley with her step-father, and she and Harry had been school fellows and sweethearts. Then his father married Lucille's beautiful mother, and Harry, vexed at seeing another take the place of the dearly remembered dead, had gone off to California, to seek his fortune. This was before he was eighteen, and Lucille was a pretty, curly-headed child of twelve.

When he returned at his father's summons, five years later, he found many changes. Ada's step-father was dead; her rich, eccentric old grandmother had paid an unexpected visit to Green Valley, had adopted her before neglected granddaughter, and taken her to her gloomy, stately old home in the city. Harry went to see his boyhood sweetheart, but unluckily he offended the high tempered old lady by warning her against a spiritualistic adventuress who he believed had designs on her purse. She forbade him to come into her house again, or to think of Ada as a wife. She need not have any fears on the last score, for Harry was already deeply in love with Lucille. The first night of his return home he had been captivated by the beauty and winsome grace of the fair, dainty girl whom he found blooming like a rose in the shadow of his childhood's home.

Harry Lee's only other friend in the city was the family lawyer, Mr. Purcell, who had honestly tried to straighten out the financial tangle in which Doctor Lee, ignorant of business and anxious to please his wife, had managed to involve his affairs. He had added a modern wig and a handsome conservatory to the old mansion, and he had put his name as security to a note given by his wife's brother. The note fell upon him to pay, and in order to meet this debt and others, he had mortgaged his estate. His wife died, he lost all hope, and finding himself on the verge of ruin, he telegraphed to his son. Harry sold his California ranch at a sacrifice, and hurrying home, threw his young energy and his small means into the breach. In vain, however; all was lost but honor. The debts were paid, but Green Valley was given up, and the young man brought his broken-hearted old father and the petted Lucille to the city, hoping to find employment there.

The week after their arrival in the strange city, Doctor Lee broke down utterly, and lay for two months ill with a low fever, and constantly nursed by his son, who could do nothing but try to keep alive the spark of vitality in his father's breast.

The money they had brought melted away, and when at last, Harry, worn and pale from the long ordeal, went out to seek something to do, all doors seemed closed against him. It was days before he found even an inferior position that would at least bring enough to pay for food and cheap lodgings.

He had a grave heart, and he worked cheerfully, hoping for better things, though it grieved him to know that he could not keep the burden of household tasks from Lucille's fair shoulders. It saddened him to see that his gentle, uncomplaining father was pining in these dim, cramped lodgings, for the country home, with its big rooms and broad piazzas, and the groves and orchards he had planted. He had kept up heart, however, until Lucille's bitter discontent with her lot culminated in her declaring her intention to fly from it and join a traveling variety company, the "Sunset Lake."

"Thank Heaven! I have saved her from that—no matter what befalls me," thought Harry, as he strode in the direction of the bank. "How glad she and my poor father will be to get back to our own old home! How good the trees will look, and the lovely lake, and the green hedges!"

He stopped before the entrance to the bank. It was the same high-class establishment in which he had yesterday cashed the small check given him by Miss de Vasco. Mr. Purcell had gone with him, and introduced him to the bank officials, though the lawyer knew nothing of the romance attached to the check.

It was with a slight feeling of embarrassment that Harry stepped inside the massive stone portal of the bank, and going to the depositors' window, presented the two large checks, with the request that twenty thousand dollars should be deposited in the bank in his name, and the remaining twenty thousand be paid to him in five hundred dollar bills.

The clerk gave him a quick, keen look, and then, bowing politely, said:

"Excuse me a moment, Mr. Lee," and stepped into a back room with the checks in his hand.

Harry could see his approach one of the two gray-haired, dignified personages who sat in the room in high-backed chairs before massive desks, and leaning over, show him the checks and speak to him in an undertone. Then the important personage came forward himself, and approaching Harry, bowed with the polished courtesy of the old school business man, and said, with a scrutinizing look:

"You were introduced to us yesterday, I believe, Mr. Lee?"

"Yes," answered Harry. "I was introduced to you by Mr. Purcell."

"We then cashed a check for you—from Miss de Vasco, whom we know very well. I see these checks are signed by her with the name 'Nina de Vasco Lee.' I suppose that is her married name. I saw a notice of her marriage. May I ask you are her husband, Mr. Lee?"

"I am," replied Harry, blushing in spite of his efforts to appear unembarrassed, and feeling a queer sensation upon acknowledging himself to be the husband of a woman whose hand he had never touched—except once—at the altar.

The bank superintendent gave another glance—quiet, but keen—at the handsome, flushed face before him, and then, seemingly satisfied, he said, cordially:

"We are glad to have you among our patrons, Mr. Lee. The clerk will make out a certificate of deposit for twenty thousand dollars, and the teller will pay you the balance."

In a few moments Lee received from the polite clerk a leather-covered book, recording the amount of his deposit, and then another clerk counted out to him forty crisp bills, calling for five hundred dollars each.

He had an immediate use for sixteen of those handsome banknotes. He determined to redeem his old home before the day was an hour older, that he might carry the good news at once to his father and Lucille.

The man who held the mortgage resided in the city. Though he felt obliged to close it, he had kindly acceded to Harry's request that the place might be redeemed by him, any time within six months, by paying the amount of the mortgage debt with interest. This agreement had been put in writing, and signed by Mr. Mangrum in the presence of witnesses.

The time specified had nearly expired, and no doubt, Mr. Mangrum believed, and was glad to believe that the money to redeem the property would not be forthcoming. For these six months had seen an important change in the value and the destiny of Green Valley, and the pretty village on the outskirts of which it was located.

A railroad, connecting it with the city, had penetrated this quiet region, and an enterprising syndicate, seeing in its picturesque scenery, its twin lakes and mineral springs, the possibilities of a grand summer resort, had bought up all the lands they could purchase.

They were wild to get possession of the Lee estate, the most beautiful and finely situated of all the Green Valley lands. They wanted to build a grand hotel on the bluff overlooking the twin lakes. They had offered Mr. Mangrum thirty-five thousand dollars for the tract of seventy acres and that gentleman was feverishly counting the hours until the time when his agreement with Lee should expire.

In five days the time of grace given in the contract would be at an end. But now Harry was on his way to redeem his home. The money—eight thousand dollars—was in his pocket, and nothing less than a return of the title deeds would satisfy him.

It was his knowledge of the enhanced value of the property which had made him willing to accept the money from his legal wife. He knew that by selling only a portion of the land he could pay back the loan.

He would reserve the house, the orchards and vineyards, and the rambling gardens that surrounded it. The rest of the land he would sell, or divide into lots, and build cottages and a summer hotel on the wooded heights that sloped down to Sunset Lake.

He could soon treble the little fortune that fate had so strangely dropped into his hands, and by the time he was free to take Lucille to his heart, he could make his pretty darling rich enough for all purposes of comfort and happiness.

(To be continued)

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Get a 25 cent bottle of Knowlton's Danderine from any drug store. You surely can have beautiful hair and lots of it if you will just try a little Danderine. Save your hair! Try it!

CHAPTER VIII

Nina looked after him until the