

IONE: A BROKEN LOVE DREAM

BY LAURA JEAN LIBBEY

Author of "A Broken Betrothal," "Parted by Fate," "Parted at the Altar," "Heiress of Cameron Hall," "Miss Middleton's Lover," Etc., Etc.

a year, for a woman's heritage of bitter sorrow was to fall over her, shutting her out from love and happiness forevermore.

CHAPTER XV.

A sharp convulsive shudder passed over Colonel Whitney's strong, stalwart frame.

"A week ago to-day, Ione," he repeated, faintly, "I was a different man; life seemed worth the living, and now it is torture to me to see the light of such a morning day."

"But to break into the subject while I have the courage," he cried, desperately. "As you recollect, I stayed all day, and all the evening, too, in town. I met a party of friends when I dropped into a cafe to dine, and upon their urgent request, joined them. The hours flew by, as hours of social pleasure will, and on leaving the cafe—I can never tell how it happened—I fell into a spirited dispute with one of the gentlemen; bitter words followed. I uttered words that, in the rash folly of the moment, sprung to my lips, and which I would have given worlds to recall. We parted in anger, and he went his way."

"A little later I started for home. It was snowing heavily, and as I stepped off the car at its destination, I buttoned my overcoat tightly around my chin; for the long tramp ahead of me to the villa, even though I cut across lots, was not very pleasant to contemplate in that storm."

"I had not traversed half the distance, when, directly across my path I stumbled upon the form of a man, almost buried in the deep drifts."

"As it was a bitterly cold night, my first impression was that the man had lost his way, sunk exhausted by the road side, and had frozen to death."

"In an instant I was kneeling beside him, intent upon rendering him every assistance in my power. I turned him over, and the light of the lantern, which I had secured at the car stable, fell upon his face. I started back with a low cry. It was the gentleman whom I had had the altercation with on the steps of the cafe; and in that same moment I saw a sight which turned the blood round my heart to ice. It was a long, thin knife buried to its hilt in his breast."

"With a horrible cry I drew it forth, the warm life-blood spurting up in my face as I did so; and as I held it in my hand in that awful moment I heard hurried steps approach—some one stopped short in the path. There was an exclamation of horror, a voice cried hoarsely in my ear: 'For Heaven's sake, Colonel Whitney, what is this that you have done?' I raised my eyes and saw Frank Lyons."

"In a few breathless words I explained the situation. He shook his head."

"I was on the steps of the cafe, as were many others, when you two gentlemen parted company," he said. "We all heard that bitter quarrel, and now I have witnessed the result of it."

"I sprang to my feet white as death. In Heaven's name, you do not mean to insinuate that I—that I—I could not utter the words for very horror."

"This is your work," he said, coolly. "What my eyes beheld as I came suddenly upon you, my heart must believe. No denial can avail you. Any law in the land will pronounce you guilty; and you can realize for yourself the end."

"In vain I expostulated, vowing my innocence; yet, as in a glass darkly, I saw for myself just how matters stood."



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"I would be your friend if I could," he went on. "I am sorry for you. Flight is your only hope. Go to your home now. To-morrow I will call upon you, and we will advise together. No one knows—no one save myself could condemn you. You are safe if my lips are closed."

"Protesting my innocence vehemently, I turned away. For long hours after I reached home, I paced the floor like a man driven mad. I could see myself arraigned—the trial on circumstantial evidence, and what the verdict must be. I was a proud man, Ione. I had lived an honored, respected life, and in one brief hour all that had changed. Oh, the torture of those hours!"

"In the morning Frank Lyons came to the villa. He called for me, and was shown into this room. What conversation we had during the hour that followed I will not repeat. It was this in brief: No one knew, no one saw, no one would accuse me save myself; and that his lips would be sealed on one condition only, and that was—oh, Ione, how shall I tell you?"

"Go on, uncle," said the girl, who knelt, white as death, before him.

"That this little hand should be given him in marriage as the price of his silence; that you should be sacrificed to save me," replied the colonel, huskily.

"He saw the lovely face blanch, and the dark eyes grow wide with terror. The words seemed to strike and smite her as lightning strikes a fair flower."

"I refused to be saved at such a price," groaned the colonel. "I could not even speak to you of it. It seemed more cruel than death. I refused."

"I will give you a week to consider the matter," he said, "and at the end of that time, if Ione is not my promised wife, the law shall take its course. The week is up to-day, Ione; this evening or to-morrow morning he will come for his answer."

A pitiful cry broke from Ione's white lips.

"Oh, uncle, uncle!" she moaned. "I could not marry that man!—and my Arthur—my lover—"

"You shall not be sacrificed, my darling," cried the old soldier; "not even to save me. You shall marry the man of your choice—you shall be Arthur's bride."

The girl crept nearer to him, looking up fearfully into his face.

"Tell me what would happen to you in that case, uncle," she said.

"The worst!" he replied, desperately. "But let that pass; my life is nearly spent, yours is in its morning. Put your arms around my neck, dear; look into my face and tell me you believe in me, though the whole world denounce me, and I can bear my fate. I will meet it unflinchingly, as a soldier should."

How she clasped her white arms about him, declaring her belief in him, her unwavering confidence in his innocence amidst heart-breaking sobs.

"God bless you, Ione!" he said, huskily, putting those clinging arms from him. "You have made the worst that can happen easier to bear."

"The worst!" she repeated. "Oh, no, no, no, uncle! that must not be. I would give my life to save you," she went on, vehemently, "and I—I—can sacrifice my happiness. The temptation to save myself at your expense is past, uncle. I will purchase the man's silence by giving him my hand. I will marry Mr. Lyons, if he persists, to—to save you. That will be your answer to him when he comes. Say no more, uncle; you cannot dissuade me. The path of duty is marked out plainly before me. I—"

The sentence never was finished. With a low cry she threw up her arms and sank at the distracted colonel's feet in a dead faint.

In looking through the lace-draped window she had seen Frank Lyons swiftly approaching the house.

Half an hour later he took his departure. There was a smile of exultation on his dark face, and the eyes had a strange gleam in them.

"Mine at last!" he muttered—"at last!"

That afternoon a messenger brought a note from him to Ione. It ran briefly as follows:

"Dear Miss Lawrence: I am glad to note that you have seen fit to look with favor upon my suit. I will do myself the honor of calling to-morrow afternoon at the villa, and if agreeable to you, we will discuss the marriage in all its details. I am obliged to add: It must take place at the earliest possible moment."

"Trusting I may have the great pleasure of seeing you, I remain, yours faithfully," "Frank Lyons."

Ione read the note through, shivering from head to foot, as with a bitter cold.

"Heaven give me strength to keep my word with this man!" she moaned.

Then her eyes fell upon a pictured face, smiling at her from its pushed case on the marble mantel. She held out her hand toward it with a bitter, yearning cry.

"Arthur, my love," she sobbed, "we are parted forever. The hand of Fate has torn our hearts asunder. We are to be strangers to each other, you and I who have loved each other so fondly, and I, who looked forward so eagerly to becoming your bride, am to marry another for duty's sake. How shall I ever be able to say he was?"

and break the news to you, Arthur? I—I dare not tell you why I have broken my betrothal with you, to marry him. You must think of me what you will, and I must suffer under the ban of silence. I must see you turn from me in indignation and anger, perhaps, too deep for words. You will go from my presence, and leave me with my heart breaking—breaking. How can I part from you, Arthur, knowing it is to be forever? and yet, how dare I even hesitate when a human life is at stake—a noble, innocent, heroic life!"

No words can describe what Ione suffered in the hours that followed: how at times she almost wished Heaven would let her die and end it all, the world looked so dark, and the future, which was to be spent with the man she hated so desperately—alas!—so dreary.

At length the morrow dawned bright and clear. Oh, how the sunshine mocked her! How discordant the chirping of the snow birds seemed as they twittered outside the window.

"Is it a horrible dream?" Ione muttered, as she looked out into the bright sunshine of the winter morning. Then the sound of death seemed to clutch at her heart. "Heaven help me, it is no dream," she moaned. "I have promised to give up my lover, and wed another!"

CHAPTER XVI.

It was late when Ione opened her eyes the next morning.

"Heaven forgive me!" she sobbed. "Has it come to this, that I dread to see the light of day?" and she turned her face to the wall with a piteous moan. "He is coming to-day," she mused, "and my fate will be settled."

She never remembered how the long hours of the day passed. At last one of the servants brought her Frank Lyons' card.

She went down to the drawing-room, outwardly calm but it seemed to her that he would be sure to hear the wild beating of her heart.

He sprang forward to meet her, his dark, handsome, triumphant face all aglow.

Ione held up her hand, drawing back from him with such a gesture of scorn that he could not mistake it. Then, for half a minute, she was silent; not from want of words, but because she had so much to say that she hardly knew where to begin. He took advantage of her silence.

"Ione," he began, "you have seen Colonel Whitney; may I hope that you have a favorable answer for me?"

She drew her graceful figure to its full height, and looked at him proudly, steadily.

"I have heard all the colonel's story," she said, "and it is needless to ask that I believe him, go, and now, let me ask, is there no way of saving him without sacrificing me?"

"No," he replied; "for in doing so I would lose my only chance of winning you. I would not send my uncle's sake up in smoke, and I would not let it not my great love for you, should plead for me. Will you give me one word of encouragement, Ione?"

"I cannot," she said, turning away. "I was mad to imagine that I ever loved you, Mr. Lyons. I look back to that time in wonder. I know now that it was only a girlish fancy."

"Then you decidedly refuse me?" he said, with lowering brow.

Suddenly there came to her the memory of the colonel's agony as she knelt in terror before him listening to his story. Could she send this only chance of help far from him, and look the terrible consequence in the face?

"Stay, Mr. Lyons," she said, hurriedly, bowing her dark, curly head on her hands. She was silent so long again that he drew near to her, saying:

"If you send me from you, it will be a death blow to your uncle. All his hopes are based on this marriage."

He never forgot the stormy beauty of the girlish face raised to his. For years afterwards that picture was before him. The lovely, slender figure in the pearl-gray silk robe, that fell about her in graceful folds, the spray of scarlet blossoms at the white throat and twined in the meshes of the nut-brown curls, and the background of plush amber portieres.

"Do you think it manly to force me into a marriage because I love my uncle so dearly—because it is the only way which I can save him?" she asked, with sudden passion.

"It is my only chance of winning you, as I have said, Ione," he replied, "and I seize the opportunity."

As he spoke he had attempted to take the little hand that was lying on the back of the chair, to which she had been clinging for support, for she would not take the seat he placed for her.

Ione withdrew her hand as though he had suddenly touched it with fire; and then, with a strangely frank smile, she looked at him.

"How can you ask me to marry you when I shrink from the very touch of your hand?" she asked him with a shudder.

To be Continued.

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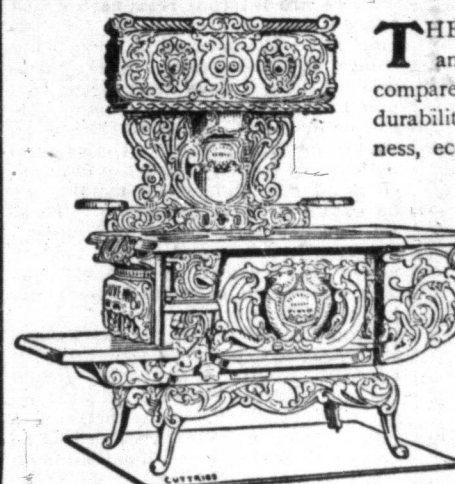
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