

HIS LEGAL WIFE

BY MARY E. BRYAN

(Continued)

"I will not take up your time; I see you are languid this morning. The ball was fatiguing, but it was sweet—inexpressibly sweet to me. You know why, I am sure. You have already guessed what I wish to say to you. I love you, Nina de Vasco. I lay my hand and my heart my life, at your feet!"

"Nina was troubled. 'I thank you,' she said, tremulously. 'Believe me, I am very sorry that I—'

"Stop!" he interrupted, eagerly. "Do not yet answer me finally. I did not expect it. You have not known me long enough. I have offered no credentials. When I return in two months, I will bring them. You shall see that I am not unworthy, by birth or fortune, to claim the hand of the Vasco's daughter. What I ask now is that you will think of me while I am away, and you will give me now a hope that I may win you."

"I shall think of you kindly, Captain Alvera, that I can assure you; but—but I can not—"

"Stay!" he broke in impetuously, his brow darkening. "I know your heart is sore because of a recent disappointment; but if you still love that villain, I can never care for you—only for your money. I can tell you why he—"

"Silence, sir! How dare you!" interrupted Miss de Vasco, pale with indignation. "You have no right to pry into my affairs; you have no right to speak to me of them!"

"I have the right of a man who honestly loves you, and not your fortune. I have also the right of—But let that pass until my return; then you shall know. Miss de Vasco—Nina, you can not mean to leave me without hope! You can not deny that you encouraged me. Last night you permitted me to tell you—"

"Oh!" she interposed, trying to laugh off the embarrassment and regret she felt, "don't hold me to what happened last night, any more than I would hold you—"

"When the viols played their best. Lamps above and laughs below; 'Love me' sounded like a jest. Fit for 'yes' or fit for 'no.' You have had many a ball-room flirtation before this, Captain Alvera."

"No, by heaven!" he exclaimed, angrily. "I am not a man for trifling. So you were playing with me last night! But you will do so no more, Nina? You will be in earnest with me?"

"Yes, Captain Alvera. I am sorry there was any jesting last night. Forgive it. I shall answer you with plain truth today. I thank you for the honor you have done me; but I can give you no hope that I will ever love you well enough to accept your hand."

His dark face grew a shade darker. "Is this final?" he asked. "It is final. I beg that you will put me out of your mind."

"I will not put you out of my mind, Nina de Vasco, and you will bitterly repent rejecting my love. Let me warn you, my proud signora, it is in my power to injure you terribly; and I belong to a vengeful race."

"You threaten me!" cried Nina, quick with scorn flashing into her face. "I had made the great mistake of supposing that Captain Alvera was a brave man, a man of honor."

He winced, pulling his black mustache fiercely. "One forgets honor when one loves, and feels that he has been wronged," he said. "Threaten! Nina de Vasco, believe me, you will find to your cost that what I have said is no idle threat. You will find it when I return, two months from now, if you still refuse my hand. I will say no more today; time presses. I leave you with this saying; keep it in mind while I am away: Accept my offer, and I will devote my life to your service; reject it, and I will bring down ruin on your head!"

He was standing in the doorway when he spoke. He raised his hand as if registering an oath. A look of mingled love and malignance glowed in his eyes as they rested on Nina's beautiful, scornful face. Before she could speak he was gone.

She stood where he had left her. The cold, contemptuous look faded from her face, and one of troubled apprehension took its place. "What had Alvera meant? He spoke so confidently. Was it possible he could injure her—ruin her—as he had said? But how?"

Perhaps he had meant to frighten her into accepting him, to play a blackmailing scheme upon her—she being an unprotected heiress. No one knew his antecedents. He was probably a free lance—an adventurer, who had made his way into society by means of his fascinating person, his romantic story, and a little money, shrewdly spent.

And what had he meant by offering to prove that Grafton had sought her only for her money? She felt that this was true; but proof would help her to feel it more deeply. She wished she had let Alvera speak—anything to make her feel more bit-

ter toward her false lover—to drive him utterly out of her heart. "Ah, well! this marriage will dig a gulf there will be no passing," she said to herself, as she went slowly back upstairs.

Mrs. Childs, burning with anxious curiosity, came to meet her. "Well?" she asked. "Captain Alvera did me the honor of offering me his hand."

"Oh, my dear child, if only you had waited a few hours, you need not have asked a man to marry you."

"Mrs. Childs," returned Nina, sternly, "you surely have not understood me, though I have labored to make plain to you that I do not want a husband in the domestic sense. I do not want either a master or a lover. Alvera would be both. I will not give up my freedom, nor will I ever again open my heart to love. Therefore, I want a legal husband only, and I have secured one. If he does not fail me," she added to herself.

CHAPTER V

"If he does not fail me." This was the doubt that crept into Nina's mind as the day waned, and the evening—her marriage evening approached. What if he should not come? In that event, what public mortification would be hers!

For she had burned her ships behind her. The fact of her prospective marriage tonight had been announced; it had even been published. She had sent this note to Miss Van Dyke, whose bridesmaid she would be tonight.

"Dear Helen,—I shall have to tell you my secret. I have kept it till the last moment, for a reason I won't stop to give you now; but it may as well be made known now, and you shall be first to hear it. I, too, am to be married tonight. The fortunate—or the unfortunate—man is Mr. Warrington Lee. I have never, I believe, mentioned his name to you. Now say that a woman can't keep a secret! Well, I should like to have my marriage follow yours, at Grace, tonight. The good doctor won't object to tying two knots in succession; and you, my dear Helen, I am sure, be glad to have me follow your example so promptly."

The note was sent at noon, and James soon returned with a gushing reply on scented paper. "You sly puss!" wrote the fair Helen—"No, indeed; never did you breathe a word to me about your engagement to Mr. Warrington Lee, nor did you ever mention his grand English name in my hearing. I suppose he is English, the second son of some Lord Lee, and you knew him in belle Cuba, and were betrothed to him while you were in short frocks. But how could you treat us like this? Never a hint, and making believe all the while you were engaged to that other! Well, I'll forgive you, since you are to be married the same hour that I am. It's charming to have our weddings come together; though I know, of course, nobody will look at me; they will have eyes only for bride number two. Your marriage is so romantic, and will make such a sensation, that I couldn't resist sending a notice of the double wedding to Cousin Bert. He's on the 'Evening Age,' you know, and always so delighted to get a society item. So your mouse will be out of the bag this afternoon, and tonight you'll be the 'cynosure of all eyes,' as the stock novelists say. Look your loveliest, cara Thine, Helen."

Nina let the note drop in her lap, and looked down at it in silence for an instant. Then lifting a white face, she said, with a nervous laugh: "So the die is cast; the marriage notice is being published. No going back now. I've burned my ships behind me, Trixy, dear."

"Oh, Nina!" Mrs. Childs' fat hands were clasped in horror, her round face looked pale and scared. "But if that man—Mr. Lee, I mean—shouldn't come?"

"Then I should have the honor of getting into 'Town Talk' once more, as the girl who had been jilted twice," said Miss de Vasco, with a little forced laugh.

The thought of public humiliation was gall to her sensitive nature; but it was not so bitter as the thought that she might fall in her effort to retaliate upon her faithless lover.

"Anything to revenge myself on him; anything to make him believe I never cared for him, that I was deceiving him, instead of his blinding me."

This was the feeling that possessed her, and nerve to carry out her scheme of a legal marriage with a man she had seen but once.

As the short afternoon drew to a close, Nina's suspense became painful. To add to her trial, Mrs. Child was as nervous as herself; and having less self-control, she flattered about ceaselessly, breaking the china bric-a-bac, worrying the canary-bird into fits, and upsetting the pot-plants. She kept constantly exclaiming: "Oh, Nina, how could you do such a terrible thing?"

All the morning she had declared her hope that "that man" would not make his appearance; but after the arrival of Miss Van Dyke's note, she was in terror lest he should fail to come.

"He's pocketed the money you were foolish enough to give him, Nina, and you'll never lay eyes on him again. He's some fellow that knows the police have an eye on him. He might have been hanging around the house, looking for a chance to burgle; or else he's got a wife already, and has a wholesome fear of the law against bigamy."

"Be quiet, for pity's sake, or you will simply craze me, Trixy!" Nina would say, clasping her hands over her throbbing temples.

Six o'clock came, but she had little heart to dress. She was sitting in enforced quiet, pretending to read, when James brought her a box wrapped in paper, which had been sent by a messenger boy. She opened it quickly. An exclamation of surprise fell from her lips. The box was filled with sprays of orange-buds and blossoms, almost as fresh as if just gathered. They lay in a bed of moist gray moss, and on the top was a card with a few words penciled on it:

"I was fortunate enough to find these. Thinking you might like them to take the liberty of sending them to you. Lee."

A quick flush came to her pale cheeks. She buried her face among the fragrant blooms to hide its expression of intense relief. Then she lifted her head and took pity on Mrs. Child's anxious curiosity.

"Mr. Lee sent them," she said. "Have no more doubt about his coming."

At once she went to her room and began to dress. A little after seven she entered the drawing-room—beautiful as the Frost Queen, and as cold. Mrs. Child declared. The only tender touch was the orange-flowers. She wore them in her hair, and they composed in part the bouquet she carried.

Mrs. Child, in a rustling brown silk and handsome old lace, beamed upon her with affectionate admiration. All at once her face changed.

"Ah! if it was only a real wedding! If you were to marry a man that loved you, somebody we all knew, even Captain Alvera!" she sighed. "Nina, my beautiful one, it is such a sacrifice! You are so lovely, and your dress is superb. You are like the lamb of old times, garlanded with flowers, and led to the altar to be sacrificed!"

"But I'm not led. It's I that am leading the lamb to the altar. You must give your pity to the bridegroom," Nina said, with a laugh of self-mockery.

"Pity! He's the luckiest man that ever lived. He has fallen upon a piece of miraculous good fortune."

"I wonder if he thinks so," mused Nina, recalling that the "tramp" had not seemed elated by her proposal—that indeed he had hesitated to accept it. "Perhaps he is making the sacrifice," she thought.

It was nearly half past seven. Miss de Vasco's carriage was at the door. Mrs. Child, in a terrible state of nervous flutter, had stationed herself at the window, whence she kept a constant lookout on the street, occasionally glancing at the clock, and crying on a running fire of exclamations.

"Dear me! what makes him so late? Nina, do you feel very sure he will be here? I wonder how he will look? What if his dress is in bad taste? What if he should wear a red tie and cheap white gloves? Oh, my poor child, I am afraid you are going to be put to shame! How can you take things so coolly? You look as if you were merely waiting for your escort to a ball instead of—"

She broke off suddenly. A carriage had stopped before the door. A man alighted from it and paused to say something to the driver. In one lightning glance Mrs. Child took in the whole figure, nobly proportioned, faultlessly dressed. She looked quickly up at Nina, who had come to the window, and was looking out, hidden by the lace curtain.

"Thank Heaven! he is a gentleman—in looks, at least!" fervently ejaculated Mrs. Child.

Nina said nothing, but the quick color that overspread her face gave evidence how keen had been her suspense and how welcome was the relief.

"Mr. Lee," announced the puzzled James, who had faintly recognized in the new arrival the tramp of the night before.

"He's a born gentleman. I know it by the way he wears his clothes. He seems a little embarrassed; but how can he help it? Even Nina is agitated with all her nerve."

Henry Lee was embarrassed. It is not the easiest position in the world to stand before a strange young woman whom you are soon to marry, and know that you and your clothes—both bought with her money—are being anxiously examined and critically weighed in the balance. The consciousness of having sacrificed honorable pride to mastering necessity in the bargain is not calculated to make the position pleasant. A deep flush burned on Henry Lee's thin cheek, and he bowed, without a word, before this white, stately girl who had asked him to marry her. Her own head fluttered like a netted

dove under her white bodice, and the faint color fled from her cheeks. But the embarrassment was short-lived. The strangely bright together pair were controlled by preoccupying motives too strong to allow of their being influenced by shallow feelings. Miss de Vasco, recovering herself, introduced Mrs. Child, and Henry Lee shook the lady's cordially extended hand. Her quick eye noted the shapely hand and the well-fitting glove, pale gray in color.

"I hope you have not been waiting for me," he said. "I believe I am punctual."

"To the minute," replied Miss de Vasco; and she added, as she took a paper from the table: "Here is the written agreement—the same you heard of and acceded to last night. Will you glance over it and sign it? Mrs. Child will witness your signature."

He took the sheet of paper from her hand and ran his eye carefully over the page upon which Nina had written the unique marriage contract, which alone was to bind them, the religious ceremony being, in their case, a mere form.

Mrs. Child watched him closely as he read it. She was vexed in her heart that he did not fling it on the table and declare he would have none of it—that this lovely young woman must be his bride in truth or not at all. He looked so handsome, as he stood under the chandelier reading, with the slight flush spreading over his finely cut, melancholy face, and the girl beside him was so fair and sweet in her bride attire, that Mrs. Child, who had been trained in the old, romantic school, thought, in the depths of her sentimental heart: "They will think better of it; they will join hearts and hands in the old-fashioned way."

It gave her sensibilities a jar to hear Nina ask, in a cold, matter-of-fact voice:

"Is the agreement written correctly?—I had a legal form—and do the conditions please you on reading them?"

And the young man answered, with as little emotion.

"They suit me perfectly. You made it all clear last night."

Then he drew off his glove and sat down beside the table, calmly dipped the pen in the ink, and wrote his name, Miss de Vasco wrote hers beneath it, with equal deliberation.

The one most fluttered was the little chapman, whose pretty, cushiony hand trembled so she could scarcely add her name as witness to this agreement, which she inwardly pronounced wicked, though she dared not protest against it, standing in awe as she did of the proud will and strong persistence of her charge.

A duplicate paper was signed in the same way, and then Miss de Vasco took her check-book from a drawer of the escritoire, and tearing out two checks, already signed, handed them to Lee.

"I prefer to give you both at once; they are each for twenty thousand dollars."

He did not take them at once. "Will it not be better to wait—until—afterward?" he said, hesitatingly.

"No, if you please," she answered with gentle decision, "I wish to have the business over with."

He took the checks, coloring to the temples, and dropping his eyes as he folded the bits of paper that represented so much, and thrust them into an inner pocket of his coat.

He looked up directly with grave earnestness in his eyes.

"Miss de Vasco," he said, "you will let me feel that this money is a loan, which I hope to pay back to you. Otherwise I could not in honor receive it."

She looked him full in the eyes for a little while before answering, gently:

"Think of it as a loan if that will make you feel easier about taking it. To me it seems only pay, and not overgenerous pay, for the hard obligations you have let me put upon you. That is the business view, the true view of the transaction. I wish you to use the money in any way you like. It is only a small part of my fortune. I can well spare it. You will have your allowance besides, as you see in the agreement."

He raised his head quickly as if about to protest, then dropped his eyes again; his compressed lips seemed to say that he was making some earnest promise to himself. "We must go, shall be late!" exclaimed Mrs. Child. "Flora, bring your mistress's cloak."

In a few moments they were on their way in the two carriages to the thronged and richly lighted church, where the music of the wedding march had already begun to roll through the many-piped organ.

repenting!" she thought. But it was too late to withdraw. Already the minister was pronouncing those words that are the clasp of the chain of marriage—"until death do you part!"

Nina was so overcome that she was fain to lean heavily for the first few steps on the arm of her newly won escort. The fierce strain was over; she was coming to herself. Reason was beginning to control blind, impulsive passion. She was beginning to regret her mad marriage. But it was too late.

The drive home together was accomplished almost in silence. Only Mrs. Child attempted to relieve the oppression of the moral atmosphere by a little playful prattle. The bride answered only by monosyllables, the bridegroom by polite phrases.

At last the house was reached. They all left the carriage and entered the house. The servant who opened the door said to Nina:

"There's a gentleman waiting to see you in the parlor, miss. He's been waiting ever so long."

"A gentleman to see me!" A quick presentiment came to Nina. She had not dared to look around at the sea of faces that filled the church, fearing to see the one face that was stamped indelibly on her heart.

She had prayed never to look on him again; and yet she moved quickly to the drawing-room, pushed open the door, that was slightly ajar, and stood face to face with Floyd Grafton!

She was too much stunned to move or to utter a word. He came toward her quickly, exclaiming:

"My darling, I've been waiting an hour. I forgot you were Miss Van Dyke's bridesmaid. How beautiful you are! I've just read your letter. Never got it until an hour ago. I've been out of town—summoned to my sick sister. You asked me in your letter to forgive you. Ah, dearest, forgive me! I was the sinner. It was my miserable jealousy. But it's all over. Nina, what is the matter? Why do you look at me so?"

For she stood staring at him, white and still, as if turned to marble. Her eyes held one expression, utter despair.

All at once she dropped on the divan in which her face was buried. "Oh, God! what have I done?—what have I done?" was the wail that broke from her lips.

CHAPTER VI

As that cry of anguish fell upon the ears of Mrs. Child and the newly made husband, who stood outside, they instinctively rushed into the room.

Mrs. Child uttered an exclamation of dismay as she saw the face of the man who was bending over Nina.

"Floyd Grafton! You here? Why have you come now—how that it is too late!"

"Too late!" He raised himself and looked around. "Why too late, Mrs. Child?" he demanded.

"Because Nina is married. She was married an hour ago."

"Married!" His richly tinted face grew white. "It is false! I will not believe it! Nina"—he bent over her again—"tell me that this is not true! It can't be true!"

She made no answer; not even a sob or a moan escaped her lips. He grasped her shoulder almost roughly. He put back the folds of the veil, that had fallen about her face.

"Tell me that it is not true!" he repeated. "She does not hear you. She must be unconscious. Let me come to her, Mr. Grafton," urged Mrs. Child. She made her way to the lounge, beside which Nina had thrown herself, and bent over the unconscious bride.

She lifted the limp white arm, which had been flung out over the velvet cushions. It was cold as marble.

"Yes, she has fainted. Oh, Floyd, see how death-like she looks!" she went on, trying to lift the white face from its resting-place.

Floyd Grafton did not look at the unconscious face. He laid his hand impatiently on Mrs. Child's shoulder. "Who is the man she has married as you say? Who is he?"

His slim, sinewy fingers grasped the chapman's plump shoulder so hard that she was forced to notice his question, in spite of her concern for Nina.

"He is Mr. Lee," she said, turning her head with a gesture toward the door. "There he is!"

Grafton wheeled around, and found himself face to face with the man who had married his betrothed.

He gazed at the distinguished-looking figure for half a minute in silence. The hot flame of disappointment and jealousy rose that had burned in his breast received a sudden check as he encountered the cool gray eyes of the man he faced.

The look in those eyes was grave even to sternness. A moment before, when Mrs. Child had called the name "Floyd Grafton," a flash of surprise had come into the face of Henry Lee.

It had died out and left the cold, half-conscious expression which rebuked Grafton, when he encountered it in the eyes that so calmly met his own look of resentful passion.

He recovered himself with an effort. "Lee!" he said, haughtily. "I have never heard Nina speak of knowing any man by that name. Sir, did I understand rightly? Is it true that my affianced wife—Miss de Vasco—has married you?"

"It is quite true that that lady, formerly Miss de Vasco, is my wife," was the cold reply. Then, in a lower tone, touched with scorn: "If you have been disappointed in your marriage expectations, Mr. Grafton, it is perhaps not the first time it has happened."

Grafton flushed, and looked keenly at his rival. Before he could reply, Mrs. Child sobbed out: "Oh! one of you ring for her maid and pray, come and life her up and put her on the lounge. She must be brought to."

Henry Lee stepped back, and Grafton, with a half smile of triumph, bent over her. It was his handsome face, pale with concern, that met her eyes when the lids suddenly flashed open.

"Oh, Floyd!—my Floyd!—how glad I am that you have come!" she said, and stretched her arms to him.

All at once she recollected what had happened. Her arms dropped, and in a tone of wild anguish she cried out:

"Oh, Floyd, why did you not come before—one hour before? Now it is too late. Do you know what I have done? Have they told you that—"

"You have made me the most miserable man in the world, Nina!"

"Oh!" The cry was like that of a creature wounded to death. "I have made you miserable—I, who loved you so!"

It was plain to see that the thought of his suffering was more bitter to her than her own anguish. He, meanwhile, had thought of his own unhappiness first.

She added presently in a tone of dreary hopelessness:

"I have wrecked my own life as well!"

"Oh," he said, bitterly, "you have your new husband's love to console you!"

"Husband!" She started up to a sitting posture as she echoed the word in sad derision. She tossed the loosened hair back from her face, and looked around. Her eyes fell upon the face of the husband she had spoken of so mockingly.

The sight of his face—pale, troubled, sympathetic—checked her further utterance. She turned one despairing, piteous look upon Floyd Grafton, and buried her face in her hands.

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see her alone—one moment," he pleaded, turning not to the husband but the chapman.

Mrs. Child shrugged her shoulders. "Nina has a husband," she said. "It he—"

"Certainly, I will see you alone," interrupted Nina. "Leave us, please," with an imperious motion of her hand toward Mrs. Child. Henry Lee had already withdrawn from the room, and was standing just outside the door, which Mrs. Child closed lightly as she quitted the room.

"Oh, my! you are not going to leave the house, Mr. Lee?" she exclaimed, as she saw him take up his hat.

"Yes, I will see Miss de Vasco tomorrow. There is something I must say to her."

"But you must not go away the evening of your marriage. What would be thought of such a thing? Do help me to keep down gossip as much as possible! Mr. Lee, Nina has suffered enough from it already, and now this unfortunate contretemps! Was there ever anything so dreadful? It was bad enough to have her act as rashly as she has done. She was half crazed because of the way he had treated her, as she thought, and the cruel things in that scandalous paper, 'Town Talk.' And now for her to find out that there was no truth in it, and that he was not to blame; though I shall always think he was to blame, but his sweet tongue would make you believe black was white. Well, but you see she is married now, and the world is no wiser to the queer way the marriage came about—and, really, you look to be a gentleman, Mr. Lee, and I am sure you are, and that your credentials, which she wouldn't take time to look at this evening, are all right. And since the thing is done, and can't be undone, I think we should carry it off cleverly, and keep society from doing more than suspecting there is anything unusual in the marriage. So, for Heaven's sake, my dear sir, don't think of saying away from the house the first evening of your marriage, and leaving her, too, in the company of the man she was to have married. What a scandal if it got out! The separate apartments are bad enough but James is an old confidential servant. He was brought up in my house, when I had a home, a beautiful one, Mr. Lee, on Madison Square before my dear husband's reverses and his death. He died broken-hearted. He could not bear to see me come down from my high position in society. Yes as I said, James is an old family servant, and he knows how to hold his tongue. No domestic skeleton will ever be unveiled by James. He will attend you. He will show you now to your rooms, and see that your luggage is brought to you. You were saying you wanted to talk the matter over with Nina tomorrow?"

(To be continued)