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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.

"He insists, my commands, that I shall be so; desiring me to add, that this hitherto unaccountable absence has created no end of scandal, so much so, that he would feel it a strict duty to close his doors against you unless, as I repeat, you return—my wife."

Ione, weak as she was, sprang to her feet, white with rage. "I cannot believe my uncle made such a request as that of his own free will," she cried. "I believe that you have forced him into making it, and I resent it most bitterly. He knows I hated you deeply enough before, but now—"

"Stop!" he cried, "you goad me too far. There is a limit to even my patience and endurance. Repeat those words, and I swear to you I shall declare this marriage off. My next step will be to unmask the colonel by placing him in custody of the officers of the law. Either submit quietly to the decree, or state that you refuse. It is becoming a matter of indifference to me, I assure you."

A piteous, wailing cry fell from the girl's lips. "Remember, there is no coercion in this matter. You are at perfect liberty to do as you choose."

"You know I cannot but choose to submit," she sobbed, "for my uncle's sake."

"Well, when can the ceremony take place?" he asked, frowning impatiently.

"It matters little to me," she retorted, bitterly, "as soon one time as another, since the cruel sacrifice must be made."

"Will to-morrow at this time, suit you?" he asked, briefly.

She nodded, wearily. "I shall insist that my uncle and Miss Carriscount, my companion, be present."

He turned pale to the lips under his dark, curling mustache. This was an unlooked-for dilemma which he had not foreseen. He was equal to the situation, however, for he answered, instantly:

"It is quite impossible to comply with your request for the colonel is confined to his room by his old enemy—the gout."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Ione turned abruptly away, too proud to let her see the tears that gathered in her dark eyes.

"If that is the case, I have nothing more to say," said Ione, briefly. "No further objections to make. Make what arrangements you will. If my life must be spent with you, a day's or a week's respite will not matter much."

His eyes gleamed darkly as he looked at her. How he longed with all his soul to tear away that barrier of cold pride behind which she had entrenched herself and trample it beneath his feet, to drag this queenly girl down to his level. What a revenge he would take upon her for scorning him and his love so bitterly. He would make life one long torture for her—for—

Next to love, revenge is sweet, he told himself.

He had settled that the wedding should take place the following afternoon.

"If you wish to witness the ceremony, imagining I shall ever dispute it," he added, with a wicked laugh, "you can take these good, honest people, the Malcolms, to the church with you. I will have carriages at the door precisely at three in the afternoon," he said, rising. "Will that suit you?"

Ione bowed coldly.

"Good afternoon, my fair Ione," he said, throwing her a kiss most gracefully from his finger tips, which she did not so much as deign to notice. "Rest assured I shall be punctual."

It was not until the door closed behind him that Ione's courage, which she had made such an effort to preserve, gave way utterly.

"Oh, God!" she cried, raising up her white hands, and sobbing to Heaven in the very fullness of her overwrought heart, "would that there was no to-morrow for me. Why didst thou rescue me from the dark waters to doom me to a fate like this?"

There was a smothered moan and a heavy fall, which brought Mrs. Malcolm hurrying to the room with all possible speed.

"The Lord have mercy!" she cried, with a gasp. "Miss Lawrence lying prone on her face on the floor, and in a dead faint."

Raising the slight figure in her strong arms, Ione was taken back to her own room at once, placed in bed, and restoratives applied. Then the dark eyes slowly opened.

"You fainted, my dear," said Mrs. Malcolm. "I was afraid you were hardly strong enough to see any one."

"She wondered why the girl turned her face to the wall with as bitter a cry as ever fell from human lips. All night long Ione paced the floor of her room, crying out to herself that she wished the light of morning would never break.

At last day dawned pink and golden over the eastern hills, the birds sang joyously in the branches of the trees, the sun shone with a golden radiance of the winter earth—all nature seemed as joyous as though a human heart was not destined to be broken ere yonder sun should set.

"It is morning," murmured Ione,

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intelligence that Ione was to marry him, and it occurred to her, too, that the prospective bride certainly did not look much elated over it.

"He is a very handsome young gentleman, my dear," she said, wistfully. "I hope he is as good as he looks."

Was it only her fancy, or did the girl shiver as with sudden cold? But Ione made no answer.

"It seems very sudden, my dear," she pursued, stopping short with embarrassment.

Mrs. Malcolm was most eager to tell the news to her son; but, as was generally the case, whenever he was wanted he was not about. He had left the house early that morning, and it was nearly noon now; still he had not come.

"If he does not get in before we go, I will leave a note on the table for him, telling him where we have gone," she concluded.

Slowly the hours dragged their slow lengths by. It seemed to Ione's fancy that the hands of the clock on the mantel fairly flew around to mark the hours.

At length it struck three in measured strokes, and the sound fell upon Ione's ears like a death-knell, and almost simultaneously she heard the sound of carriage wheels.

"God give me strength to go through it," was the fervent cry that rose to Heaven from her pallid lips.

The next moment she heard footsteps on the stairs, and Mrs. Malcolm looked in at the door.

"Don't be a tardy bride, my dear," she said. "It's a bad sign—it is, indeed. The young gentleman is waiting, and not very patiently, if one may judge from the way he is pacing up and down. He has got two elegant coaches at the door, one for Mr. Malcolm, my son William, and me; but, just as like as not, William won't be here in time to go with us. Are you ready, Miss Lawrence?"

"Yes," said Ione; and in utter silence—though her heart was breaking—she followed her down to the room where Frank Lyons awaited her.

"Do not speak to me," she whispered, as he sprang forward to meet her. "Do not touch me. If you do, I shall fall dead at your feet."

So, in utter silence, he placed her in the coach in waiting, and took his place by her side.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

It was the strangest bridal party ever seen. So thought the good old minister, as he watched them advancing slowly up the aisle—the bridegroom so dark and stern, the bride-elect pale as death, and the shabbily-dressed man and woman following in the rear.

As a usual thing, the faces of brides were smiling and joyous. There was love-light in their eyes, and happiness in their hearts, and in the manner in which they clung to the arms, as they timidly approached the altar, was a caress in itself.

This one held coldly aloof, and the beautiful, dark, dark eyes seemed heavy with unshed tears.

"Yes, verily, a strange bridal party," muttered the minister, thoughtfully.

"Nothing can save me now," he thought Ione, drearily. "I shall have this place the wife of the man I abhor. This is but the beginning of the horrible future."

In the centre of the dim old church Ione came to a sudden halt.

"Before we step to the altar, I have a request to make of you, Frank Lyons," she said, slowly.

He started uneasily. "I say, if what you ask be within my power, I promise beforehand to grant it."

"Explaining the thrilling event that transpired, we must go back a little to the cause that occasioned it."

The sound of the carriage wheels had scarcely died away in the distance ere William Malcolm, the bridegroom's son, came slowly up the aisle.

"I knew he was a rascal," he muttered to himself, "and of the deepest dye. I told mother so, but she could not believe it. 'Papa's faithful son,' they say."

Entering the house, he threw himself down in his favorite arm-chair to smoke and think.

"He is the greatest villain that ever went unhung," he muttered; "but for her sake, because he is a relative of hers, I will not expose him. I knew I could not be mistaken. He is the same man!"

An hour or more had elapsed ere, by the merest chance, his eye fell upon the letter his mother had left for him on the table.

"A letter for me, and in mother's handwriting!" he muttered. "How strange! No doubt it is a reminder of some gift she is wanting me to buy; for, now that I remember it, to-morrow is her birthday."

With a good-humored smile on his honest face, the young man broke the seal. As he glanced over the contents of the letter, the smile died from his face, and an exclamation of horror broke from his lips. Glancing over his shoulder, we will read it with him, dear reader. It ran as follows:

"My Dear Son: I am out of patience waiting for you to return. As it is unusual for you to find your father and me both gone from home, I write to let you know where we are going. I fancy it will be a surprise to you. It appears that I was mistaken in believing the gentleman (Mr. Lyons, she calls him) to be a relative of Miss Lawrence. He is neither kith nor kin. Imagine my great amazement when Miss Ione called me to her room, and said, very abruptly: 'I am going to marry the gentleman who called here this morning, Mrs. Malcolm. The ceremony is to take place in the old church at the cross-roads at four this afternoon. I should like to have you and your husband—your son, too, if he will—accompany me to witness the marriage.'"

To be Continued.

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