

ONE LOVE TOO MANY

Or THE FUGITIVE BRIDE

By F. W. CHAPPELL

Suddenly upon the terrible hush broke the discordant voice of Leonard Harris. "This is murder! Secure the murderers!" The spell was broken, men began to move toward the group with murmuring hearts. And then it was that Marshall showed himself to be a man. He sprang to his wife's side, threw his arm around her, and snatching the knife from her rigid fingers, he cried: "Touch her who dares! This is my sin, not hers!" But the murmuring crowd approached, and with a bound he broke through it with Bel, brandishing the bloody knife to clear a way. He ran with her through Jim Pointer's room, pushing him aside as he crossed deathly pale to meet them, dashed through the door and ran to the front gate. This he opened wide with the hope of misleading their pursuers, and then, turned suddenly inside the fence, and kept by it until he reached the back entrance. Through this he passed quickly, and still dragging almost carrying Bel, sped on through the fields until he reached old Phibby's cabin. He shook the closed door violently. "Let me in, mummy!" he cried. "Quick, for God's sake!" They heard her rising slowly, and in the instant of their waiting he whispored, clasping her closely: "Oh, Bel! did you love me so? I will save you if it costs my life to do it."

CHAPTER XII "What does this mean, Bel Pinte?" asked the old woman, looking darkly upon the trembling girl. "I have killed Dore Valine!" she answered, shudderingly. "Oh, my Land! oh, my blessed Land and Savioh!" shrieked Phibby. "You've killed Miss Dore Valine? Mar'ess, sit out from undeh dis house' roof! I knowed it! I knowed it! My po' chile! I knowed he'd s'p sorrow along o' dis 'oman. An' it's come a'ready! Oh, you turrible sinner, does you know what you's brought dat po' boy to? Does you know dat you's flung down de 'spectable name o' Marshall into de very mire? Oh, my Land, why did you let me live to see dis day? Look heah!" she cried, suddenly ceasing her lamentations, as if struck with a new thought. "Listen to me, Bel Pinte! She came near and said eagerly, but in low tones: "Does you love Mars Charley?" "Do love him?" cried the poor girl wildly. "Oh, my God! what a question!" "Well," whispered the old woman, "if you truly loves him you can save him yit. Is you willin' to sac'fice yourself fo' his sake?" "Oh," cried Bel, "I would die for him!" "Well, den, you mus' git away from heah fo' dat po' chile comes back."

"Oh," said the girl, gasping and pressing her hand against her heart. "Well, does I know, Mars Charley's without de old woman, tremb'ing, she came near and said eagerly, but in low tones: "Does you love Mars Charley?" "Do love him?" cried the poor girl wildly. "Oh, my God! what a question!" "Well," whispered the old woman, "if you truly loves him you can save him yit. Is you willin' to sac'fice yourself fo' his sake?" "Oh," cried Bel, "I would die for him!" "Well, den, you mus' git away from heah fo' dat po' chile comes back."

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CHAPTER XIII Meanwhile, what had been the end of Bel Marshall's sudden and unexpected flight? Half distraught with the horror of her deed and the bitter pang of parting with Charley, she yet retained sufficient self command to know that in haste alone lay the chance of her escape. And with the thought that she was saving him from the shame and grief of her presence, she ran from Phibby's door straight out into the gloomy night, not caring, not considering whether her footsteps led so that they only bore her away from him she loved. She was familiar with every log and tree in the field, and dark as it was, instinctively avoided them, until she reached the fence along the river. Over this she climbed with the ease born of her boyhood's childhood among the little negroes of Marshall House. Standing at a moment upon the bank, she stilled her feet, and she shuddered as she thought of how suddenly and easily she might end all her sorrows therein. But she turned away quickly, and shot at her own thought, for hers was not a suicidal temperament, nor, in fact, a nature to commit any great sin except upon what to her intense feelings seemed an overpowering provocation. She was about to start out down the river when suddenly upon her ear fell the muffled beat of paddle wheels, and far out in the waters she saw the lights of a large steamer. She then looked on towards the bank, but with a stifled and intermittent sound unlike that of a boat in motion. "It is a steamer," she thought, and then in an instant she had formed her plan of escape. She remembered an old skiff which had long lain tied to a rack heap in front of her father's place, and which the negroes used occasionally to carry their small produce to the town across the river, and running hastily along the bank she soon perceived the dim outlines of the heap of wave-washed logs. She stepped on, and found the heap, feeling each footstep before trusting her weight upon the decaying logs. At last, partly by feeling, partly by the faint glimmer from the far-off lights of the steamer, her way through memory and instinct, she found the boat. She untied the clumsy rope which held it to a tough snag, sprang lightly in, seized the broken oars, pushed with one of them against the logs and was launched alone upon the dark bosom of the river. She had lived all her life by the water, and was not at a loss how to manage the craft, so, though she found it difficult, it was by no means an impossible task to guide it toward the great steamer still puffing upon the bar.

As she approached she could hear the loud and profane voices of the deck hands complaining of the hard luck which had put them aground at that time of night, when they might be steaming on their way a dozen or so more miles nearer St. Louis, and saw at the same time that the boat lay head downward with her bow under the snags. The girl pulled slowly and cautiously nearer, carefully avoiding the long rays of light which fell from the open furnace and bright, twinkling lamps. By their light she saw the boat's name, Hesperides, painted in large letters upon the wheelhouse. Pausing a moment to reconnoiter, she perceived that the stern lay in comparative darkness, and roved carefully around till she found a spot which appeared suitably dark and deserted for her purpose. She made her way still more cautiously to the low guards which she caught with her left hand. With the right she threw away first one oar and then the other, stepped on the projecting edge of the deck, pushed the skiff away with her feet, and climbing over the guard, stood alone in the dark shadow of the wheelhouse. She walked noiselessly forward in search of a hiding place, which she found behind some water barrels. There she crouched for a long time, ages, it seemed to her. Not until this period of inactivity did she begin to realize the utter loneliness and misery of her state. The night air was chill and penetrating, the rain had begun to fall heavily. "It will wash away my footprints," she thought; "this morning will not leave him one trace of me." A deep sob broke from her breast, but no tears came with it. She began to tremble with the cold. Her feet, protected only by thin slippers of satin, seemed heavy and cold as lead. She grew strangely drowsy and faint, but rousing herself with an effort, got up and walked softly up and down the narrow space in the shadow. Ere long the boat was eased from the bar, got under weigh, and went sailing swiftly down the river. A few miles down she saw her forsaken skiff rocking and trembling in the great billows of the steamer's mighty wheels. She strained her eyes after it until it fell again into the outer darkness, unilluminated by the passing boat. She waited and watched through the dreary hours of the night, not knowing what to do when the morning should come and discover her to the people on board.

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