

HIS LEGAL WIFE

BY MARY E. BRYAN

(Continued)

His voice trembled and broke. His pale, perfect face, his beautiful eyes—filled with tears—were bent reproachfully upon the unhappy, bewildered girl.

Generous and sensitive, she could not doubt the sincerity of his earnestness. She held out her hand. "Floyd, I believe what you have told me, and I ask you to forgive my doubt. No, I have not turned from you. You have my promise. I hold it sacred. I will make amends for what I have made you suffer."

He caught her extended hands in his and drew her to him. "I thank you and bless you for this sweet assurance," he cried, rapturously. "I knew you could not really doubt me. I know you loved me—my Nina! my sweet—my wife!"

The impassioned words brought no responsive thrill to Nina. They fell like an iron stroke upon the ears of another—Lee—who had come up to the house.

He was drawn there against his will. He could not resist the longing to see her once more. He said to himself that it was his duty to know from her own lips that she had recovered from last night's terrible shock.

He had just stepped upon the porch when Grafton began to speak and the fervent words came to him through the open window.

He turned abruptly and strode rapidly away, taking the path that led beside the river to the steamboat landing—a mile away.

He had been out of sight but a few minutes, when Nina said: "You have not asked me how I was rescued. Do you know?"

"Yes, they told me outside—the family who live here—I mean. They said a man was at hand in a boat, and saved you—probably just before we came up."

co. She was still the maiden heiress who had loved Floyd Grafton, and been driven wild by his seeming desertion. She was free now to bestow her hand and her fortune on the man she had then so madly loved. But she seemed in no hurry to do this.

Floyd had been enjoying life in this fair region of sun and summer. He had gone with a gay excursion party to Tampa, and thence to Key West and Cuba. Nina was not of the party.

She had made her face; now she must school herself to accept it—to hear it. She had herself chosen the man. He had it by his beauty and his languid smile. She had poured out at his feet what she believed to be the best love of her life. She had pledged herself to marry him. She had vowed and disappointed him once; she would not do it again.

He protested that he would not go upon the excursion without her; all her acquaintances were going; she would die of loneliness.

"Anyway," he added, with a little bitter laugh, "the excursion is an impossibility to me—financially. I am a dead broke."

He took hold of her hand, trying—but not very hard—to prevent her putting the bills in his pocket.

"Yes, Floyd, you must let me have my way," she said, firmly. Then, smiling in his face: "What is mine is mine. I want you to go on this excursion; I could not go even if I wished to; this business, you know, will keep me. I shall not be lonely; I am never lonely. Mr. Lewis will look after me and I shall busy myself setting out my little banana plantation. I shall be well satisfied here, and it will please me to have you go on this excursion. You will enjoy it."

He did go. Nina hardly knew whether the sigh breathed as she saw him depart was one of regret or relief. She would miss him certainly. He was a charming companion when he was in the mood to be. And she believed that he loved her; and to believe that she is loved is very consoling to a woman, even when she does not love in return.

Soon after Grafton went away the decree of divorce was granted, and in a few days a letter came to Nina from Lee, inclosing a bank certificate of deposit to her account of forty thousand dollars. Lee's accompanying this was short. It was merely a manly and very earnest expression of thanks for the great favor she had done him in lending this money.

got her letters from the post office. Among them was an ample, square envelope addressed in Lee's firm, clear writing. She turned pale, as there came to her a pronouncement of what the envelope contained. She would not open it until she reached home. There, alone in her room, she opened the envelope. Her impression was right; it contained the wedding cards of Harry Lee and Lucille Estlin.

After the first sharp pang had passed and left her calmer, she looked up the card that had dropped from her fingers, and read again the name—Lucille Estlin. It was not the name she thought to see. It was not the name of the rich heiress whom Grafton had assured her was beloved by her legal husband.

"Floyd was mistaken," she murmured. Then she saw that the envelope had other inclosures. There was a letter and a picture. She eagerly caught up the photograph. She went to the window that the fading light of a splendid sunset might fall upon the face. It was the face of Lucille Estlin.

"How beautiful!" uttered Nina, earnestly. Her lips trembled. This fair, smiling face, framed in yellow curls that fell about her neck, and the eyes that looked so sweetly at her, were the face of the girl who had been the best love of her life. She had pledged herself to marry him. She had vowed and disappointed him once; she would not do it again.

At last she remembered the letter. She had been holding it, crushed in her hand. She opened it; it was not from Lee. The faintly scented sheet was written over in a dainty, graceful hand, that though graceful hinted at weakness and impulsiveness. It was signed Lucille.

"Harry has told me all," she wrote, "and I understand so well how it was done, and how you felt. I am so glad that you are free, and that you will now be happy. I love you for your kindness to Harry, and I thank you very much for the beautiful present you sent me. We will not part always that you may continue to be blessed and happy."

Nina replied to this letter. She said that there was an opportunity to send back the money in the form of a check. She could ask Lee's bride to accept it as a wedding gift from her.

She quickly wrote the check, and inclosed it in a note of congratulations and good wishes. To prevent a reply, she added a postscript: "I am very soon to go upon a voyage, and it may be that I shall be abroad for some time. When I return, I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing you in your happy home."

But never, never shall I come back to this country," Nina said, eagerly, as she folded the note and placed it in an envelope. "Grafton will be very willing to live abroad. It is best that we should be married at once, and let it be over. It may be that then my aching heart may have some rest."

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Further delay. He professed himself delighted. He was really well pleased. He was beginning to be bored. The Bensons would leave their Indian River place in a few days. The woodmen were beginning to buzz, and the lovers were nearly deserted. The prospect of going abroad with a charming young wife and plenty of money to spend, sent his drooping spirits up to a happy pitch.

"We will be married next week, then, my darling," he said, rapturously. "Next Wednesday—that is the orthodox day, isn't it?"

"We're—lay—its only four days off!" murmured Nina, with a staking of the heart that she tried in vain to control.

"Yes; but you have no preparations to make. We will be married here in your little cottage, just as privately as possible, as we will start at once for New York to be in time to catch the 'Servia.' She will sail a week from next Tuesday. I will telegraph home, later to secure tickets."

"He went on down the orange walk, whistling gaily. When he came back an hour later, he announced that all was plain.

The May day was warm, the sun was bright, and Floyd had walked back to his room. He declared he was melted, he was 'melted,' and he threw himself in a slumber, hunched on the cool piazza, smoking with young, rustling palm trees, and began to fan his flushed face with his broad Panama hat. Presently he lighted a cigar, and lay smoking the fragrant weed and lazily admiring Nina, who sat near him in a low bamboo chair, looking cool and sweet in her pale tinted muslin frock. Her white fingers busy sewing an endless chain of painted palm-leaf to a hat for Mrs. Davis' little daughter.

"Halloo!" Floyd suddenly exclaimed. "I'd forgotten to give you your letters. Not much matter, though. I know that still old-fashioned hand. I fancy the old lady doesn't send me her love. I was her pet aversion."

held it fell upon her knees, and her eyes went over to Grafton in a long, wistful, perplexed look.

She rose at last and went to his side. She laid her hand on his arm. "Floyd," she said, "how would you feel if I were to lose my fortune?"

He did not notice the tremor of earnestness in her voice. He did not turn his head as he put his hand ever hers with a languid pressure. "Why, darling," he drawled, "you are fortune enough yourself. The money is simply an adjunct—a kind of painting of the lily, as Shakespeare says."

"But it is a very useful adjunct, Floyd," she went on, earnestly. "How would you feel to be poor, not penniless, but obliged to restrict your expenses, to live all the year round in a little cottage, to give up Havana cigars, and—silk and underclothing, and a Paris tailor, and—"

"Stop, Nina! No more of that dolorous galeology, if you love me. What are you driving at, anyway?"

He had turned his head now and was looking at her keenly. "Was it possible she was about to throw him over?" She knew he had come to the end of his small fortune—the poor old New England grandfathers' legacy—and that he would have to do without all these luxuries unless he married a rich woman. Still, he was not apprehensive; he felt sure of her love. She was only asking these questions to test him.

"You are not serious, of course?" he said.

"But I am serious, dear Floyd." "I know very well you could not lose your fortune. Nina, I know that it consists of—new, solid city buildings, well insured, and renting at high prices. This and United States bonds, and some stock in a bank as solid as Gibraltar, make up the fortune of the last of the Vascos—the fortune that my lady talks of losing. As well talk of losing the beauty of her smile—both are imperishable!"

She was smiling; but it was in a grave, wistful way that made him suddenly uneasy.

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you are! Will you please inform me now what stands between you and me?"

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"Yes, besides—"

He put the query in an impatient tone, which implied that what she had named was mere dress.

She had stopped, and looked at him with a pathetic smile. She went on timidly, her cheek flushing a little.

"Besides, I have my secret. I can earn money by my brains. Would you have dreamed it? I found it out while you were gone. I was here alone, and I had nothing to do. I had often written stories for amusement. I wrote one that I liked. I sent it to a magazine. It was accepted—paid for. Then I took out of my trunk a long, romantic tale—the scene laid in Cuba—which I had begun two years ago. I corrected it, finished it, and sent it to a New York paper. It also found a welcome, as the check I received yesterday told me."

she must lose her money! It's infernal hard luck! I was really fond of her; but, of course, I can't marry her now. It's fortunate this turned up before the marriage came off. I'd have been in a bad box then, to be sure. Well, there's the little Clara. I'll strike in there right away. No time to be lost, either. I'm at the end of my row."

Mr. Floyd Grafton did not show up at the De Vasco cottage that evening. Instead, there came a letter from him, a goodly letter, full of sentimentally worded despair. It must all be at an end, he said. He wished Nina a better fate than to marry a poor devil who could not support himself, much less a wife. He knew no way to earn a living. He had no profession, no ability for anything practical. His luxurious habits were fastened upon him, he could not shake them off; therefore he must marry a woman with money, though he could never love another—never. And he wound up with a couplet from an old song they had sung together:

"My fortune is too hard for thee,
'Twould chill thy dearest joy;
I'd rather weep to see thee free
Than win thee to destroy."

Nina smiled with scornful sadness as she flung the letter from her. But she was hurt to the core. She had believed to the last that she loved her. It was not in her noble nature to cherish doubt. She could not believe that it was her money he cared most for. She, herself, set little value on wealth. She would have better enjoyed the making of it. With her fine courage, her energy and enthusiasm she would have inspired and aided even a common man to achieve success. She would have cheerfully worked for Floyd Grafton and made his home happy, although she could never have given him the deepest love she was capable of. But she was a woman, and she was loyal and brave. She could and would have hidden from him the secret of her innermost soul, that the deepest fountain of her love had been stirred by another. She would have cared for him faithfully, and in the time of love of children would have satisfied the hunger of her heart, as with so many women.

But he was far less worthy than she had believed him. He had deserted her when she lost her fortune. There is untold bitterness in being taught to despise a being one has once loved and believed in. Nina drank now a deep draught of scorn. But she was too saddened and humiliated to feel bitter for any length of time. A gush of hot, scalding tears, an overwhelming sense of desertion and friendlessness—a brave struggle for the victory over despair, then a prayer for strength and help from that unseen Father who fails not to give strength to those who earnestly ask it, and then Nina rose from her knees a victor, with a heart for any fate.

(To be continued)

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