

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 appeal, she could not withstand its 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."

"At 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, passionately. "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 luring 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."

"Did you see the man?" "No."

"He was out there on the riverbank a moment or two ago. I do not see him now," said Nina, looking from the window.

"I'll go and find him, and thank him on my own account," Grafton said.

He went out, and Nina saw him speaking to the man of the house, who, with his wife, was busy picking up the oranges that the storm had scattered under the trees. At the same instant she saw a steamboat glide into sight around a curve of the river. She was watching the thick wreaths of rosy smoke that floated back from its tall chimneys as it plowed its way upstream when Floyd came back.

"The man has gone," he said. "Gone?"

Every shade of color fled from her face as she turned to him. He did not notice it.

"Yes; he was in a hurry. He wanted to catch the up boat. It's just gone by."

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. And he—strange to say—appeared in no haste to possess himself of the treasure he had sought.

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 consented to go at first, but when the time came she had lost the little inclination she had for the trip. Besides, she was obliged to look after the business of the divorce.

Floyd was disappointed at her decision. A shadow came over his handsome face. Nina saw it, and urged him to go without her. She really felt that his going would be a relief to her. She would be better, calmer, for his absence. She wanted to be alone with her heart, that she might conquer it with the force of that strong will that had come down to her from her high-spirited race.

She had made her fate; now she must school herself to accept it—to bear it. She had herself chosen this man. Blinded by his beauty and his magnetism, 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 wringed and disengaged him once; she would not do it again. Not though the veil of illusion had been torn from her eyes and she had begun to feel a cold chill creep over her when she thought of marrying him.

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 dead-broke."

His fiancée smiled, and reaching out her hand, pulled open a drawer of her writing desk and took out of it a roll of bank bills, which she started to push gently into the side pocket of his coat.

"Nina, what are you doing?" he exclaimed. "I will not permit this—I will not take your money!"

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," she said. "I want you to go on this excursion. I could not do even if I wished to; this business, you know, will keep me. I shall not be lonely; I am never lonely. Mr. Davis will look after me and I shall busy myself setting out my little pineapple 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 she 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 note 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.

"It has done far more than help me to restore my prostrate fortune," he wrote. "It has done more good than I can tell you; and another joins me in heartfelt thanks to you."

Nina's first impulse was to return the certificate immediately; but she felt that it was necessary to write to Lee in order that his feelings might not be hurt, and she did not feel equal to writing just now.

The return of the money saddened her. It seemed the final breaking of the tie that bound her to this man, who had behaved to her in such a noble, considerate way. She felt a deep sense of loneliness and loss, as though a support she had leaned upon had been withdrawn.

He was now wholly divided from her, independent of her. He had returned the money she had bargained to let him have on that fateful night when she asked him to marry her. How her cheeks burned when she recalled it!

It was unreal as a dream that marriage. Her memory held no incident of tenderness connected with it, none, save that sudden embrace on the little porch of the cottage the night he had taken her from the water. And that meant nothing; his heart was with another—the girl he loved and would soon marry.

"Oh I hope it will be very soon! I hope I shall soon hear they are married!" she said, with bitter earnestness.

But when her wish seemed granted, she did not look like one whose desire had been gratified. She walked to Rockledge one delightful day, and

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 promontory 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 Esten.

After the first sharp pang had passed and left her calmer, she picked up the card that had dropped from her fingers, and read again the name—Lucille Esten. 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 Esten.

"How beautiful!" uttered Nina, earnestly. Her lips trembled. This fair, smiling face, framed in yellow curls, this petite figure in the girlish white frock, seemed adorable to the eyes of the pale, stately, dark-eyed girl. She did not wonder that Lee was devoted to his charming betrothed. She put the picture down hastily, and leaned from the window, drinking in a deep breath of the balmy air. She felt as though she were stifling.

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 cursive, 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 it has all come right, 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 both pray 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, wearily, 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."

She began to look forward almost eagerly to Grafton's return. She determined that she would care for him tenderly, devotedly. She would do her best to make him happy.

He came at length. He was in excellent spirits, and becomingly browned by exposure to the warm sea winds. He declared, however, that he had not had a good time. He had been kept from it by thinking of his absent love, and fearing that she was lonely.

She shook her head and smiled incredulously; but she was far from suspecting how very seldom he had thought about her, and how devoted he had been to another.

In the excursion party there was a wealthy widow from St. Louis, and her pretty daughter, Grafton was very attentive to Miss Benson. He believed in the old proverb about having two strings to one's bow.

If, by any chance, Miss de Vasco should fall him, here was another ready to smile upon him. If the blue-eyed Clara was not so intellectual and stately as the high-bred Cuban girl, she was livelier and more inclined to look up to him. He had sometimes had an uncomfortable feeling that Nina did not look up to him.

"If Clara hadn't a mother, I don't know but I'd prefer her," mused the handsome lady killer, as he lounged on the deck of the steamer in his becoming smoking jacket and tasseled cap. "But a mother-in-law—ugh! no mother-in-law in mine, if you please."

And this was the man in whose tender affection a noble-hearted, unhappy girl hoped to find rest. She reproached herself bitterly for not being able to give the intense love she had once lavished upon him. But the charm had been broken, the veil had fallen from her eyes. She knew that her idol was clay, but she loyally resolved that he should never feel that she knew it.

The very night he returned she told him of her willingness that the marriage should take place without

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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 mosquitoes were beginning to buzz, and the hotels 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?"

"Wednesday—its only four days off!" murmured Nina, with a sinking 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 parlor 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 immediately to secure berths."

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

The May day was warm, the sun was fervid, and Floyd had walked fast—for him. He declared he was melted, the heat was "brastly," and he threw himself in a silken hammock on the cool piazza, shaded 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 gaudy palmetto into a hat for Mrs. Davis' little daughter.

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

He tossed the two letters he had taken from his pocket into Nina's lap. She read Mrs. Child's long, rambling letter dutifully, and with interest besides, for she cherished a warm affection for her ex-chaperon.

The other letter was from her lawyer. She laid it on her knee, careless about opening it. It was no doubt only a report of rents collected and money deposited—of money paid for repairs, etc. She had perfect confidence in Mr. Winthrop. She felt sure her property was well managed in his hands, and took small note of business details. With the unopened letter in her hand, she sat looking at Floyd, as he lay eying her as he smoked. How handsome he was! What a light of fascination lurked under the long, golden brown lashes of his violet eyes!

Why—oh, why did that other face come up persistently in contract—that darker, graver face, with its suggestion of strength and protective tenderness—the face of the man she had promised to love and cherish till death, only a few months ago? The law had released her from the promise that from the first had been only a sham. Yet now—oh, strange irony of Fate!—she felt that the promise bound her still—that it would bind her forever.

"What are you dreaming about, Nina? Why don't you open old Winthrop's letter, you little business-like woman?" her lover asked, smiling at her in his indolent fashion.

She shook her head as if to dispel the "dreams," and smiling faintly in turn, she broke the red seal of the brown envelope. Ah! little she imagined that what was written in it would change the whole current of her life!

Grafton looked his shapely hands under his curly head, and turned his eyes to the ceiling of the veranda above him, amused with watching a tiny green lizard that was creeping stealthily along a rampant vine, making ready to spring upon its insect prey. He did not see his prospective bride change color as she read the lawyer's letter. She read it twice. She sat with eyes riveted upon it for a minute, then the hand that

held it fell upon her knee, 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 over 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 underclothing, and a Paris tailor, and—"

"Stop, Nina! No more of that doleful category, 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 grandmother's 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 what 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 sold as Gibraltar, make up the fortune of the last of the De 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.

"But what do you mean, Nina? Tell me," he said, with a change of voice.

"I mean this," she said: "I am not the last of the De Vascos. I am not the heir of my uncle. His son, supposed to have been killed in South America, has turned out to be alive. My uncle's money was left to me unconditionally in his will; but there is a codicil to the will, dictated when my uncle was on his death-bed. In this it is stated that should his son, Alvera de Vasco, prove to be alive, he shall inherit his father's fortune. I am to have only a small legacy of five thousand dollars."

"Five thousand dollars! Nina, you surely don't mean to let yourself be swindled out of your rights by the first adventurer that claims to be your uncle's son, who is dead as Hector, I'll wager my life! Why, that's an old dodge! It's tried by crooks every day."

"I am convinced, Floyd, that this is no swindle. You know the man. He was in New York last winter, under an assumed name—er, rather, his own first name—Alvera."

"Alvera! That sinister Spanish fellow who was so attentive to you that I wanted to shoot him? Why didn't you recognize him? Why didn't he put forward his claims then?"

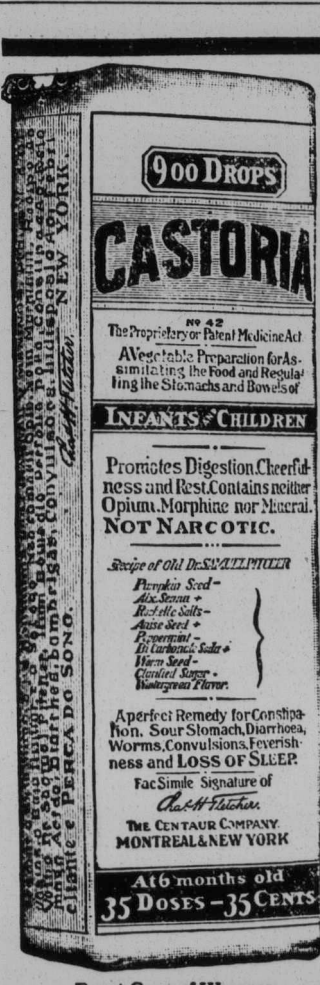
"Mr. Winthrop says it was because he hoped to marry me, and in this way settle the matter."

"Did you reject him?" "Yes. When I told him I was already married—it was the day of the ceremony between Mr. Lee and me—he was very angry. He uttered some dark threats about begging me."

"Yes; and this is simply his revenge—a trumped up story." "No, it is not. He had a striking resemblance to my uncle; it was this that drew me to him, and caused him to accuse me of encouraging him. He knew he was the rightful heir of the wealth I was enjoying. He hated to depose me. He thought my marrying him would solve the problem. He was greatly excited when I told him I was married. He said he was going away to make sure of something that would ruin me. He sailed for South America that day. He has brought back proof of his right to the estate that can not be controverted. That is what Mr. Winthrop says, and he would not make such a statement unless he was sure of its truth. You can read the letter."

He caught it from her hand without ceremony, and ran his eye over it, his face growing darker and his teeth pressing nervously upon his underlip.

He dropped the letter, and looked at her without saying a word.



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

"A good deal, Floyd—enough to support us in comfort—not luxury. I have this little place, and my growing orange trees and pineapples. I have the five thousand dollars my uncle left me in the codicil, and a good many valuable family jewels. And besides—"

"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."

"How much did the check call for?"

"Three hundred dollars."

"Three hundred dollars! It wouldn't keep you in stockings, Nina. A scribbling woman with tousled hair and an ugly ink-stain on her fingers! My poor girl, has it come to this?"

She flushed indignantly, but she controlled herself.

"Keep your pity for those who may need it," she said. "To work with the hands and the brains that God has given us is more honorable than idleness and dependence."

He winced.

"Now you are hitting me, dear. That is unkind," he said. "Well, we won't discuss this any more just now. I will take a walk and think it over, and talk to you when I come this evening. I feel sure you ought not to give up your rights so tamely. You ought to contest that fellow's claim, or you ought to dispute the legal soundness of that codicil. It was written, or dictated, when your uncle was in a dying condition. He could not be called a sane man."

"I am sure he knew what he was doing. He had lately heard something that made him hope his son might be alive."

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 on 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 good-ly 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 that 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 unselfishness 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 falls 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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