

HIS LEGAL WIFE

BY MARY E. BRYAN

(Continued)

What had become of Grafton and the sailor? Had they been drowned? The boat had capsized, turning nearly bottom upward, her mast, no doubt, sticking into the ground, a part of the broken planking being crushed upward against the side of the little vessel, thus affording the stay to which Nina had clung. How was it possible that the two strong men and good swimmers had perished and she had escaped? But if they were not drowned, what had become of them? Surely, Grafton would not have swum to shore and left Nina to her fate?

While these conjectures passed through Harry's mind, his arms and hands were at work, straining every sinew to send the boat through the tossing waves and driving rain to the shore.

The storm had spent its fury, but the rain, driven by the wind, still came in slant, sharp gusts that stung and blinded him. He could have shouted with joy when he saw by a flash of lightning a rough log dock only a few feet before him.

In half a minute his boat was alongside it. He jumped out, threw the boat chain over a post and secured it, then stepped back and lifted the unconscious form that lay so still in the bottom of the boat.

Dimly he could see her white face between the masses of dark, drenched hair, for the clouds had thinned, and some light from the full moon behind them filtered through.

She was colorless as marble, and as cold. Her slender hands seemed to him to be almost stiff. Could she be dead? The fear came to him with a sharp pang.

"I must find a shelter. I must take her out of this chilling rain," he muttered.

He raised her from the wet dock and bore her to the land. There he saw a path running up through the mangroves. He walked rapidly up the path, soon seeing a dark mass among the orange trees which he knew was a house.

There was no light in it, and no response came when he stumped loudly upon the floor of the little porch as he stood upon it.

The doors and windows were shut, he did not take time to see if they were fastened. He sat down upon a long wooden bench on the porch, purposefully now that there was shelter from that blood chilling rain, to try to revive Nina.

He took out his handkerchief and dried her dripping face and hands; then he rubbed her hands briskly with his own, on which he had poured a little brandy from a flask he had in his pocket. He poured a little of the stimulant between her lips, when, to his joy, he felt a shudder run through her, then a short, gasping sigh struggled up from her breast; another fluttering breath and consciousness came back.

She half raised herself as she lay in his arms, and turned her face to his, which she could not distinguish in the dim light. She clung to him, sobbing out:

"Oh, Floyd! Is it you? You did come back! I thought you had left me to die. I might have known you wouldn't. But, oh, it was so dreadful there, alone with that awful water washing over me! And my hands were so cold and stiff, I thought I could never hold on till you came back. I thought you were cruel not to take me with you; but you knew best, only—Oh, I am so cold."

She fell to shivering, her teeth chattering convulsively. Lee put the flask to her lips.

"Drink some of this," he said in a whisper; he dared not trust himself to speak aloud.

He shrank from letting her know, while she was so weak and hysterical, that it was not Floyd who held her; that it was not her lover who had come back and rescued her just as the last remnant of strength was giving way.

A hot current of indignation had rushed through Lee as he heard her broken utterances. So Grafton had left her and saved himself by swimming ashore. He had told her he would come back with a boat to rescue her. He must have expected her to perish, but he would not risk being burdened with her in swimming to the shore.

"Cowardly puppy!" Harry muttered to himself through his clenched teeth, as he bent over Nina, rubbing her hands and trying to bring warmth to her body. The stimulant had helped her, but he knew the terrible chill would be fatal unless she could be gotten to a fire and the wet clothing removed.

He laid her down on the seat, and taking off his coat, which the waterproof cloak had kept dry, he wrapped it about her. Whispering some reassuring words, he left her, and knocked upon the door. There was no answer; another louder knock brought no response. He felt sure at last that there was no one inside. There was a window near by opening upon the porch. The blinds were closed, but one of them was broken, and both were easily unfastened.

"It is necessary to be guilty of house-breaking in this case," Harry said to himself as he lifted the sash of the window and stepped inside.

He took a match from his pocket, lighted it, and looked around. He found himself in a neat, plainly furnished apartment, sitting room and bedroom in one. It seemed, as there was a bed in one corner behind a home made screen. There was a fire place, but no fire in it, and no wood. Harry went on through a covered way into a small back room which proved to be a kitchen. Here he found a pile of dry stove wood, half of it resinous pine. He gathered up an armful, and hurrying back into the front room, soon had a fine ruddy blaze on the hearth. He pulled a large, cushioned chair to the fire, and then went out on the porch, lifted the shivering, half-insensible girl, and bore her into the room.

He placed her in the big easy chair, where she sat with closed eyes and drooping head, while he knelt down and unbuttoned her little boots and took them off. Then, without an instant's hesitation he pulled off the drenched silk stockings and laid bare the small, daintily shaped feet. He took them in his broad palms; they were white and cold as stone. He held them to the fire, rubbed them briskly, and wrapped them in a woolen table-cover he had previously warmed.

As the delicious sense of warmth thrilled through her, Nina roused herself from the stupor produced by cold and the shock she had received. She languidly stretched out her hand and touched the shirt-sleeved arm of the man who was kneeling by her.

"Dear Floyd," she murmured, "you've taken off your coat to cover me. Put it on. You will freeze. Oh, the fire feels so nice! How good you are!"

Her hand went from his arm to his head. As she touched his hair, she started and sat upright.

"Floyd!" she called. "It is not Floyd; it is—"

Lee raised his head and turned his eyes, moist with pity, upon her.

"It is only I," he said. She gazed at him without speaking. A tumult of emotions swept over her face. Amazement, disappointment, pain, shame, all pictured themselves in the tablet of that expressive face. Her lips quivered, her head dropped upon her hands. She was shaken with violent sobs.

He stood up, leaning on the rude mantelpiece, he looked down at her with a world of sympathy in his eyes, which he dared not put into words.

Suddenly she raised her head, a startled, anxious look on her face.

"Where is Floyd? Was he—was he drowned?" she asked, falteringly.

"No, no; he could not drown so near the land; a good swimmer as he is, by his own account. He was not hurt by the capsizing of the boat."

"No."

"He told you he would swim to the shore and bring a boat; did he not?"

"Yes," she said. A faint flush came into her cheek. Lee was sorry he had asked the question, but he wanted to get at the facts. "He said if he tried to swim ashore with me we would both be drowned," she added, excitedly. "The sailor left us to our fate. Floyd said he would get a boat and come for me. He thought it better I should keep my hold on the rigging. But, oh, it was awful!"

She shuddered, and her eyes closed, as if to shut out the vision of those moments she had passed alone with the wild, lashing waves, the darkness and the storm.

Once more her eyes opened all at once, and she looked up at him. Her face was brighter; a faint smile hovered about her lips.

"Is this a dream?" she said. "How did you come here? It must be magic. You went away—"

"No; I did not go away. An accident—a providence—prevented. I will tell you about it presently, when I have made you comfortable. I must have you dry and warm before I can go into explanations. Sit here and be quiet, like a good girl. I am going into the next room to explore a little."

He wrapped the coat carefully around her, and folded the woolen covering closely about her feet. Then he lighted a small lamp, which he took from the mantel-piece and went into the next room.

It was the family sleeping room, littered with all the various articles that fell of every day occupation. He glanced first at the drawers of an old-fashioned dressing case, and he had partially opened one of these, when his eyes fell upon a large, round basket, made of the long wire grass of the pine hills. It stood in a corner of the room, and was filled with clean, folded clothes, evidently the batch that had come from the last wash.

Smiling at himself because of his novel purpose, Harry turned the clothes over until he found, as he imagined, the things he was looking for, some women's underclothes,

rather coarse, but clean and white. Keeping possession of these, he next opened a closet and looked carefully at the garments that hung on the walls. He fixed upon one which he took down and held out before him, examining it critically as he had done the others. It was a rather gaudy looking blue and red flannel wrapper. He decided that this would do, and carefully replacing the other garments, he took this one, with the white things, into the room where Nina sat.

"You are still cold," he said, touching one of her hands. "It is those dripping clothes you have on. Are you strong enough to change them for these dry ones?"

"Where did you get them, and how did you know?" she exclaimed, opening her big eyes in amazement.

"This is one of the things I will tell you when you are as comfortable as I can make you," he answered. "I am sorry I have not a maid for you. You will have to perform your unique toilet by yourself. Let me know when it is finished. I am going on another exploring trip."

He went out the back way, shutting the door behind him.

She examined the little pile of clothes, and found everything she needed, even to towels and a pair of stockings.

"What a man he is!" she said to herself. "Oh, he—"

She broke off with a sigh. She sat in silence, gazing into the glowing fire, the tears gathering in her eyes. She roused herself and began to dress with surprising energy.

In a short time she had divested herself of her drenched garments and put on the clean, dry ones, whose coarseness fretted her soft skin a little; but the sense of warmth and dryness compensated for this. She picked up and wrung out her own garments and hung them on a towel rack behind the screen. Then she sat down once more in the big armchair, but not before she had, womanlike, looked at herself in the old-fashioned, gilt framed mirror that hung over the mantel-piece. She sat gazing into the fire, thinking, regretting, dreading to face the future.

The little clock above her head struck eight. She started up, remembering that she was to let Harry know when she had finished dressing.

She knocked on the door he had passed through, and he answered from some room beyond, "Coming!" in his clear, strong voice. She liked the ring of that voice. It sent her miserable thoughts to flight.

A moment after he came in, laughing and rosy. He had a pot of hot coffee in one hand, and a tray with a plate of biscuits and sliced ham in the other.

"I have been making useful discoveries," he said. "I have found the pantry and a little gasoline stove. Here is the result. The hot coffee will do you good. Why, the old blue and red wrapper has made you look like a queen of gypsies, with all that long, black hair on your shoulders! But do you know your hair is still dripping? Let me wring it for you while you sit down and drink your coffee."

But she would not touch the little repast he set before her until he, too, had taken his seat at the small table and let her pour out a cup of coffee for him.

As they ate, the fire burned briskly, the wind howled furiously without, but within all was warmth and comfort and seclusion, the sweet sense of which came over them as they sat opposite each other at the tiny table.

Afterward she let him wring out her hair. As he gathered up the rich, wet mass, his hand touched her lovely neck, and a thrill went through him. His fingers trembled. He bit his lip and frowned, then hurried through his task.

"Come and sit down," she said in a low, strangely muffled voice. When he had seated himself near her, and looked into her face, he saw, to his surprise that it was wet with tears. Large drops hung on her lashes, as she lifted them and looked at him with wistful earnestness.

"You are too good to me!" she said. "I do not deserve it; I do not deserve anything you have done for me. How can I ever thank you?"

"You need not thank me for what I have made me happy to do," he said, laying his hand gently on hers, that were held out, clasped together, on her knees. "It has made me very happy to have been the instrument of rescuing you," he went on, speaking low. "I shall always remember this night with thankfulness."

"I, too, shall always remember this night," she said. Then a look of pain came into her eyes. She drew her hands away and wrung them. "Oh!" she cried, "we sit here so quietly and talk about this night when it may have been a terrible thing. Are you sure he was not drowned?"

"Floyd Grafton was not drowned. I feel sure of it."

"Then, where is he?"

"He found no boat at this landing and he went on to the next house. There he doubtless got a boat and hastened back to get you."

"When he found I was not there, he must have believed I was drowned," she said.

"Then a joyful surprise awaits him tomorrow," he added, cheerfully. "A happy meeting it will be," he went on, smiling, though his heart was far from light.

She looked at him in a strange way, a kind of wild wistfulness in her eyes.

"You forget that he believed it was the only way to save you." "Would you have left me?"

He felt that she put the question as a test. She was looking straight at him with suppressed eagerness in her dark eyes; her hands, which lay folded on her knees, clasped themselves tightly together.

"No," he answered. "I would have swum with you to the shore."

"But if you believed you could not do that?"

"I would have tried; if I failed I would have perished with you."

She had drawn the words from him with those compelling eyes, but they came with a warmth that seemed to call her to herself. Her look relaxed, her hands dropped apart; a sigh fluttered from her lips, and her lids fell, hiding the pain he knew was in her eyes. He felt as if he had given her a blow. He experienced a fierce longing to take her in his arms and comfort her.

He rose to his feet; the warm air of the room seemed suddenly to stiffen him; he walked to the window, and stepped out on the porch.

"What a change!" he cried. "Not a sign of the storm. The night is supremely beautiful."

She came to the window, stood inside a moment, then stepped softly out and stood beside him. He turned and saw her.

"Oh, you should not be out here, in this damp night," he said, quickly.

"You should not have tempted me," she answered, smiling archly up to his face. "I came out to see the beauty you praised. It is surely magic; the change in the sky and the river. Oh, the river!"

She shuddered as her look went over the now moonlit, foam-flecked waters that had no nearly been her grave.

The only souvenirs of the storm were the torn and flying clouds, now turned to silver by the moon, and the glistening raindrops that lay thickly on the dark green leaves of the orange trees. The rich scent of the orange blossoms filled the damp cool air. The voices of the storm were hushed; the only sounds were the far-off roar of the ocean, the low lapping of the water near them, and the rustle of the dying wind in the tall palm trees that fringed the river.

They stood on the little porch, looking in silence at the scene. All at once a strange, wailing note broke from the orange tree close to them. It was the cry of the screech owl. Its suddenness and its near proximity frightened Nina, her nerves still quivering from her recent shock. She gave a start, nearly lost her balance and tottering on the edge of the porch, she caught hold of Lee and clung to him. He put his arm around her; then, as he felt her heart beating and her yielding young waist palpitating under his arms through the folds of the loose gown, he lost control of himself. Thrilled with a tender, exquisite passion, he clasped her to his breast. He held her there for an instant in an almost fierce embrace, then as suddenly released her and staggered back against a post.

"Forgive me," he uttered, faintly. She did not speak. Her face in the moonlight was quite pale, but she did not look angry, only startled, stunned.

"Forgive me," he repeated; "I did not mean to. It shall never happen again."

A faint smile went over her face. "I know you did not mean it," she said. "You were thinking of some one else. Let us go in; it is too damp out here."

They went back out of the dreary, perfumed moonlight into the fire-lighted, commonplace room, and Harry's brain began to cool. But he stood silent before the fire, not

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daring to lift his eyes to her face. At length he looked up and saw that the sweet face between the dark, loose hair was pale as ivory, and the drooping lids looked as if they hid tears.

"You are worn out," he said. "You must have sleep. There is a bed behind the screen there; or will you have me draw that lounge to the fire and lie here, with a blanket over you?"

"I will sleep here in the big chair," she said.

"No, you must lie down. How will this do?"

He drew the wide, calico-covered couch before the fire, and brought a pillow and a bright patchwork quilt from the bed.

"Rest there yourself," she said, smiling. "I will keep watch."

"Indeed you shall not. There is no need for any one to keep watch. I will make myself comfortable in the other room. If you should feel ill, call to me; I am a light sleeper. But I hope you will not feel ill. I trust you will rest as peacefully as if you were in your own house."

He was turning to go into the next room, when she asked:

"When are you going to start back to New York?"

"Tomorrow—as early as possible, as soon as I see you safe with your friend."

"And you will let me hear from you? You will let me know when you are—married?"

"Yes, I will let you know."

"It will be soon, I suppose—as soon—"

"As soon after the divorce as possible," he answered, quickly, with a forced hardness in his tone.

She flushed a little.

"I will hasten it as much as I can, for your sake," she said. "You will forgive me for delaying your happiness?"

"Last night I told you that there was no ground for forgiveness, only for kind and grateful remembrance," he answered, faintly. "And now you must rest. Good night."

He bent his head over the hand she held out to him; then he raised it quickly to his lips, and letting it fall, he passed out of sight through the door.

She did not dream then how long a time would elapse before she saw him again, and under what changed circumstances that meeting would take place.

CHAPTER XVI

Lee could not sleep. The recollection of what had happened on the porch filled him with self-reproach. A feeling that he had been disloyal to Lucille burned within him. Oh, why had he yielded to that mad impulse? What must Nina think of him?

But why had she not resented that impetuous career? Was it possible that she—Oh, no, no! Her whole heart was given to Floyd Grafton. It was only that she was so generous, as well as so pure and broad in her nature, that she had forgiven his offense. She had pardoned it on the score that it was unpremeditated. It was the outcome of a sudden emotional impulse.

"I know you were thinking of another," she had said, excitedly.

But he knew he had not been thinking of another. He remembered guiltily that he had not thought of Lucille today.

He took her picture from his bosom and looked at it by the moonlight that streamed in at his window. Such a little rosebud face! He kissed the smiling mouth, murmuring, "My sweet, my own Lucille!"

He strove to let her image efface the one that kept rising before his eyes—the proud, sweet face, the rich dark eyes luminous with soul—his legal wife—soon to be his no longer, even in law. Did he regret it? Was it only that it troubled him to think that this sweet woman, with all her wealth of heart and mind, was soon to be given to the arms of another who was not worthy? Yes, he knew that she would marry Floyd Grafton even if a revelation of his littleness had dawned upon her to-night through the glamour her love had thrown around him. She would marry him to make amends for the wrong she believed she had done him.

Harry turned from the window and threw himself upon the bed, hoping to sleep. But sleep came only in brief, fleeting visits throughout the night. At early dawn he rose and went down to the riverside. The grand expanse of water was almost calm—only streaked here and there with foam in token of last night's storm. At a distance of hardly seventy yards from the shore he could see a portion of the keel of "The Crow," with the water rippling about over it and the piece of rigging to which Nina had clung when she was left to her fate by Grafton.

"The coward!" Lee once more uttered between his clenched teeth. A glance up the river showed him a man coming along the path that ran along between the mangrove-bordered bank and the field of pineapples. He came on down to the dock where Lee was standing. He was a wiry, sunburned young fellow, a farmer—as was plain to be seen by his sturdy look and independent carriage. He glanced at Harry, then at the boat which was fastened to the dock.

"Good-mornin'," he said. "You've been looking for the body, I s'pose? Have you found it?"

"What body?"

"Why haven't you heard? Joe Kent's boat capsized in the squall

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last night out there where you see the water rifflin' over her keel. He had two Northern folks in it—swells from New York—a man and a woman. What must he and t'other fellow do but swim to shore and leave the woman holdin' on to some of the riggin'. They swam to my landin'—right here. They said they thought to find a boat here; but I had taken my wife in the boat to her father's