

HIS LEGAL WIFE

BY MARY E. BRYAN

(Continued)

Nina bent her eyes to the cup which she was pouring full of rich, brown coffee—tea is a beverage in small esteem in the far South.

Lee took the seat at the foot of the table. He was half amazed, yet he felt a little queer. It was the first time he had ever sat at table with his legal wife in family fashion. It would be the last he said to himself feeling a little disposed to sigh. He suppressed it sharply.

"I will leave here on the early boat tomorrow. I will not stay here an hour longer than I can help," he said to himself; and he was quite prompt in announcing this in the presence of Mrs. Davis and her husband, who came in presently. "Business calls me back at once," he said; and he turned a deaf ear to the suggestion of Mr. Davis that he ought to stay for the stean-launch excursion tomorrow, a party of the guests at the Tropical House were going to Ocean Beach in a new steam launch, and the proprietor of the hotel, hearing that Nina, the daughter of his old friend, was expected to arrive, had sent to invite her and her friends.

"We will go—won't we?" Floyd said to Nina.

She nodded. Then she said: "I have never been to Ocean Beach. I have heard that it is a grand sight. It is six or seven miles down Indian River—just below Merritt's Island. There is another island—a desolate one—between you and the Atlantic Ocean. You land on this, and walk across it. All at once, as you look down from a hill of pines and palmettoes, you see a long stretch of white breakers tumbling and thundering upon the shore. Stay and go with us tomorrow. Can't you?" she broke off, turning suddenly to Lee, persuasion in her voice and her eyes.

He shook his head.

"I am not to be tempted," he said; and he was quite firm in his determination to get off on the early boat next day.

He bade her good-bye on the veranda an hour after, in the presence of Floyd and Mr. Davis, and he said to the latter that as he did not wish to disturb the others by rising early, he would sleep in the hammock he had seen in a little shed room at one end of the back piazza.

"And he never even kissed his wife, Drucilla, and he just married her to leave her!" commented Mr. Davis to his spouse in the privacy of their sleeping room.

"Fashionable folks is mighty queer," returned Drucilla. "She'd told me already that she was going to let Mr. Lee have the front upstairs room I'd taken so much pains to fix, all to himself, and she would sleep in the little room."

When she was here before, she seems like the big room is going to be a wedding, after all my work to make it fine with the silk curtains and all the flowers I could get."

In spite of his declaration that he never slept so well as when swinging in a hammock, Harry found it impossible to fall asleep.

Perhaps it was the strong coffee, or the bright moonlight, or the puzzling recollection of the look Nina had given him as he said good-bye.

She had given him her hand in a hesitating way, and he had felt it tremble a little, as if with some kind of emotion. She had said in a low tone:

"There was something I meant to have said to you, but—no matter. I—I believe I have forgotten what it was," she broke off, with a forced laugh.

A mocking bird, waked from his first nap in a lemon tree near the window, began to trill so piercingly sweet that Lee gave up all idea of sleep, and getting up, dressed and went out of doors.

The night was soft and warm, too warm for the time of year. There was scarcely a breeze enough to stir the feathery palm fronds, but in the stillness the roar of the great Atlantic could be heard across the intervening breadth of water and island. Deep and hoarse came its roar and it was strange, while hearing it, to look out and see that Indian River, an arm of that very sea, was smooth as glass.

Harry wandered about in the grounds, back of the house, where wild palmetto fans, Japan plants, and golden rod grew among the unpruned rosebushes and dahlias.

Further on he saw a little elevation where, through a vista of orange trees, he could see another great, moss-hung live-oak like that in the front of the house. He walked toward it. The long gray moss hung from its limbs to the ground. Parting the funeral-like drapery, he was about to enter within the space it shut out, when he stopped on seeing that it enclosed a tomb. There was a slab and a carved headstone of white marble. A woman's figure leaned against the headstone. He thought it was also of marble, for it was all white, until he saw a slight movement of the arm and heard a human sigh.

He was hurriedly drawing back, when the woman, startled by the rustle of the moss, turned around. It was Nina, wrapped in a fleecy

white shawl which she had drawn over her head.

"Ah! it is you," she said, recognizing him.

"Forgive me for intruding on you. I had no idea you were here. I could not sleep, and was just walking of my restlessness," she said, quickly.

"It is not an intrusion. I am glad the 'spirit in your feet' led you here," she said. "I have been wishing to say something to you before our paths separate forever. Come in here and sit with me on this tomb; it is my father's grave. I somehow wanted to see it tonight, and, like you, I could not sleep."

He lifted the moss drapery behind him and went and sat down by her on the slab, on which he saw she had put a quantity of flowers—the had been gathering—roses, dahlias, and Japan lilies, whose deep hues against the white marble seemed like flame upon snow.

The moonbeams filtered through the stirred leaves of the old live-oak, mixing with the shadows, and making a soft twilight about them. For a moment neither spoke. Then he said:

"There was something you wanted to say to me?"

"It is this," she answered, a little tremor of feeling in her voice. "We will probably never see each other again; is it not so?"

"Yes," he replied. "I suppose you will go abroad as soon as you are married; or perhaps you intend to be married abroad, and I will not be in New York. We will live at a distance, in the country, I and my father—"

"And your wife that will be, the lovely girl you are to marry?" she asked when he stopped, hesitating.

"Yes," he said, answering the half question. "Therefore I may not see you again, for I can repay your loan to your agent."

"I earnestly wish you would not think of repaying it," she interposed. "It was not a loan, it was not a gift, just due, I beg you will look on it as such."

"I can not," he answered firmly. "It would lower me in my own esteem. I accepted it as a loan, a loan that saved me from untold wretchedness. But I could not have taken it if I had not foreseen that I could repay it. I can and will repay it very soon with interest."

"Oh!" she sighed; "you will take nothing from me. That humiliates me, you know, and makes me all the more ashamed and remorseful for what I have done. I have felt for night, more deeply than I ever felt before, how wickedly thoughtless and selfish I have been. What a wicked, sacrilegious thing it was to make such a marriage as I made with you!"

"I was a party to it," said Harry. "Ah! but your motive was noble than mine. And then this divorce; what a wrong to you! Any plea would be false and a wrong to you. And yet, a divorce is the only way out of this thralldom, the only way to insure your happiness, not to speak of mine. It is a greater wrong to you to keep you in this shameful, false position, and to prevent your being happy with the woman you love. Yes, it is the only way out of the entanglement. I hope, I pray that the divorce may not become public, that it may do you no harm. About your betrothed knowledge of it?"

"No, not yet," Harry answered. "But I shall tell her—all."

"Is there any danger that it may make trouble between you?"

"I—I think not," Harry returned, hesitatingly.

"I trust, I pray that it may not," she said, with tremendous earnestness. "If it does, will you let me know? I will go to see her and tell her how entirely it was my fault, and that what you did was for her sake, and that you never cared for me in the least. I will make her believe all this if you will let me know."

"I will let you know. Dear Miss Vasco, don't trouble yourself about what has happened. It has been for good, not for evil, I do believe; good for me, at least."

"God grant that you may be right. I can say good bye to you now with a somewhat lighter heart. You have promised to let me know if this madness of mine should bring trouble between you and your affianced. I pray that your marriage, your true marriage, may be happy. Will you give your bride this little token from me after you have told her all?"

She had risen to her feet, and she was standing before him, fair and white as a spirit, in the dusky light. She took a ring from her finger, a diamond as its flash in a stray moon-beam showed.

"Give this ring to her from me," she said, "and tell her that I know she can not but be happy as the wife of a true and honorable man."

She dropped the ring in his hand. He had risen and stood beside her, looking at her, longing to say something of her future, her happiness, yet kept back by some counter-feeling which he hardly understood.

"I thank you; I will do as you wish," was all he found voice to say. "And you will not think of me as

one who has been willfully wicked?"

"I will think of you as my good angel. You look like an angel as you stand here now," Harry said, impulsively.

She gave him a half-starved look of surprise; then she laughed, feeling glad he could not see the blush that burned on her cheek.

"Flattery from you," she said. "That is dangerous. I must take flight, angel-like."

She lifted the swinging garlands of moss and disappeared.

He stood absently staring at the swaying moss she had just let drop, then he sat down on the tombstone and sighed profoundly. He felt dissatisfied with what he had said—or rather, what he had left unsaid, in this midnight interview with the woman to whom he had given his name. She had been deeply concerned about his happiness; she had made him promise to let her know if any misunderstanding or trouble arose between him and his betrothed, that she might try to help him. Why did he not extract a similar promise from her? She had no father, no brother, or other near relative to give her counsel or protection; and the man she was going to marry, was a man who would insure a woman's happiness? With all her money and her deep love for Grafton, she would be apt to encounter trouble in the coming years. If he had only asked her to let him know, if the time should ever come, when she needed a friend!

But it was too late. The last good-bye had been spoken between the two whom the law had pronounced husband and wife.

CHAPTER XV

Chance—or was it fate?—decreed that Lee should not get away from Indian River the next day. He had lain awake until nearly daybreak, trying to expel intruding thoughts and feelings. When at last he slept it was the profound, dreamless sleep of a child.

The shrill bugle cry of a peacock in the tree at his window aroused him. He dressed quickly, and found that the sun was more than an hour high. He gressed quickly, and stole out by a side door, wishing to get away without meeting any one. He walked rapidly along the palm-shaded path to the village. He reached it the proverbial "minute too late."

As he arrived at the pier, he saw the boat calmly steaming around a bend of the river. He must wait until next morning, unless, as some one told him reassuringly, there should be a boat up from Lake Worth about ten or eleven o'clock.

He decided not to let Nina, or any one at the cottage, know that he had not gone as he intended. He would stay at Rockledge and look out for the first up-river boat.

He seated himself on a bench under the shade of the palms that bordered the ledge in front of the Hotel Indian River. The water about the broad, well-built pier was alive with craft—fish and oyster boats, from which issued the smoke and odor of breakfast cooking, pretty, painted skiffs for the use of the guests of the hotels, and steam launches, one of which was rapidly being filled with a merry party from the hotel.

The fluttering flags and the band on board announced still more plainly that the launch was bound on a pleasure trip.

"It must be the excursion to Ocean Beach that Nina spoke of going on," thought Lee; and he looked quickly down the road to see if she was not in sight.

For an instant the temptation assailed him to go aboard the launch and wait for her. But he put it aside at once. He had said a final good-bye to his legal wife the night before. He was conscious that it had cost him more pain and regret than he had any right to feel. He would not see her again; there should be no second leave taking. He would not intrude upon her enjoyment of the day with her lover.

The launch was being rapidly filled with the laughing, hurrying crowd of pleasure seekers, and still the two Lee was watching for did not appear. At last the signal whistle blew shrilly, and the gaudy craft, with fluttering of flags and waving of hats and handkerchiefs, steamed away from the pier. She was roundly a bend of the river when the pair from the cottage drove up in the wagonette, driven by Davis.

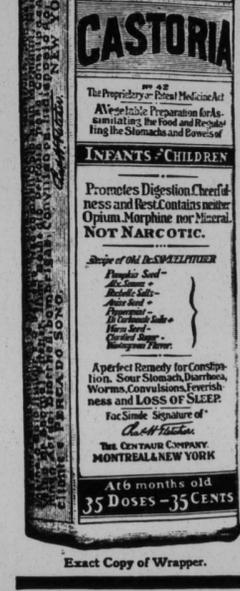
"Too late! Yonder she goes!" cried Davis, pointing with his whip to the receding launch.

"Curse the luck!" exclaimed Floyd. "He jumped out of the wagonette."

"I won't be balked! I'll hire a boat, and we'll have an excursion of our own," he said.

He walked down to the pier. A sunburned young fellow in a blue overshirt and a round sailor hat was sitting smoking a pipe on the forward part of a little sail-boat, on whose side was painted in rude letters "The Crow."

Grafton called to him, and asked him if he would take a small party down the river to Ocean Beach. The man took the pipe from his mouth and held it reflectively a moment, then nodded agreeingly. Grafton went back to Nina, who, leaning



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of land thirty miles in length, its banks lined now with pineapple farms and cottages set in the midst of tall, plummy coconut trees, now with stretches of forest, the many stemmed mangrove trees growing wild and thick to the water's edge, their limbs shaded at every fork with parasite air plants.

Fleets of ducks sailed out from the little tree embowered inlets, and dived or flew as the boats came near. Sea gulls in small squads came from the direction of the ocean, flying low and uttering occasional shrill screams. The air was so still and hazy that the roar of the Atlantic could be plainly heard across the two narrow, intervening strips of land and water.

These signs betokened to Harry a change in the weather. He was somewhat learned in the lore of the sea coast, and quite skilled in managing a small boat, having had some experience on the coast of California.

As he noticed the awkward way in which the master of "The Crow" handled his boat, he felt that the uneasiness which had prompted him to follow in the wake of the excursionists was at least justified.

They had gone but a few miles when they came in sight of the steam launch, stationary at a landing on the island, from which extended a broad, white road paved with coquina rocks and bordered with palms.

An archway stood at the entrance to this inviting vista, and on it was lettered: "This way to Fairy Land."

The party on the launch, it seemed, had decided not to go as far as Ocean Beach. They had stopped at Fairy Land, the favorite picnic spot on the island. Perhaps the sailors that managed her had read the signs in the air and sky of an unfavorable turn in the weather.

"The Crow" will stop at Fairy Land, too," thought Harry. But he was mistaken. She stopped for a moment and then held on her course down the river. He followed, managing to keep the little yacht in sight.

Hours passed. The island had grown less and less in width, narrowing to a long keen point. One could see quite across the green level patches of beans or pineapples to the bank on the other side, fringed with the dark green of mangrove or live-oak trees, whose long moss dropped down to the water, called Fannara River, that here intervened between a second long narrow island that shut out the ocean.

At last the ultimate point of Merritt's Island was reached, a rugged pile of coquina rock, crowned by a single palm tree standing like the solitary sentinel of an outpost. Around this point "The Crow" passed slowly, for the wind had nearly died out. She crossed the mouth of Fannara River and landed on the nameless low lying island across which one must walk to reach Ocean Beach.

Lee rested his oars and watched Grafton and Nina quit the boat, leaving the skipper in charge, and walk up the bank to the small, dilapidated house that stood there among neglected orange trees and Spanish bayonets.

Evidently the house was deserted, and the cistern from which they had expected to drink was dry. They left it, and turned into the path that led across to the beach.

Lee debated with himself whether or not he should get out and follow them; but to do this, he thought, would seem like spying on their movements. Besides, he did not want to make his presence known. He pushed his boat up to the half-rusted pier, and spoke to the man in charge of "The Crow."

"How far is it across to the beach?" he asked.

"Half a mile they call it; more like a mile and a half," he answered sullenly. Then he added: "If you're going there I wish you'd tell them folks that's jest gone they'd better hurry up and come along. It's gettin' late in the day, and it's goin' to be a nasty evenin'. See them clouds 'bilin' up in the southeast?"

Lee glanced at the sky. The sun was still shining through the lurid haze, but there were great masses of clouds slowly boiling up from the horizon. The wind had begun to freshen, and the water of the river to stir and murmur as if in prophecy of what would come.

Harry determined to get out and walk to the beach and warn the forgotten pair that there was danger in dallying. He hoped to do this without letting them see him. He hurried along the narrow sandy path that wound among dwarf palmettoes, coarse sea grass, and the tall, straight, limbless trunks of the long-leaved pine. As he went he could hear the roar of the sea sounding even a nearer and hoarser.

At length, as he ascended a little elevation, the magnificent view burst upon him. Miles of white, crested breakers, tier upon tier, as it seemed, burst into foam and spray on the lonely beach. On the top of the ridge of long-leaved pines he stood for a moment, carried away by the desolate grandeur of the scene before him. Then he bethought him of the two he had come to seek. He saw them a little way below him standing on the beach. Nina, the wind blowing her long gray veil, stood looking out dreamily over the white, tumultuous expanse; Grafton was walking about, idly picking up shells and throwing them into the

sea. Lee hesitated whether to approach them and deliver his message, or to speak to them without letting himself be seen. He decided not to make himself known. Stepping behind a large pine tree, he said in a hoarse voice, purposely changed:

"Your boatmen begs you to return at once. There is going to be bad weather."

They both turned and looked around to see who had warned them but Lee was well concealed by the great tree and the ferns of the dwarf palms. Standing there, still hidden, he saw them pass a little while after, walking fast toward the boat.

They had already got aboard, and "The Crow" had left the landing when he reached it. Without a moment's delay he sprang into his own little boat. He found a difficulty now in keeping the yacht in sight. The wind had risen; the sun, low in the sky, was hidden behind clouds that gathered and grew darker every moment. The wind, coming from the south east, filled the sail of the little craft and sent it flying through the water.

Soon it became necessary to reef the sail. The storm was upon them in earnest. The wind came in strong gusts, mixed with a sharp driving rain. The gloom increased to darkness, that gave way momentarily to the glare of lightning.

Lee, on setting out that morning had thrown his traveling bag of alligator skin into the boat. He managed to open it and take out and put on his water-proof cloak, and to draw the hood partly over his face. He had also lighted the lantern that was fixed into a strong standard in the prow of the boat. He did not for an instant lose sight of his purpose to keep as close as possible to the boat that contained his wife. He was using every exertion to get near it, but the tricky, quickly changing wind, the rough water, the thick, blinding mist and rain hindered his progress terribly.

"The Crow" had hoisted her headlight; it was by this that Harry steered; but often the rain and the spray hid it from his sight. When there came a flash of lightning he had a brief view of the boat. He could see that she was being badly served by the wind. When a gust struck her, she careened over in a dangerous degree. A capsize seemed to him to be imminent, and he redoubled his exertions to reach her. He was comforted by the knowledge that she was only short distance from land. The lightning showed the mainland a mile away, but the shores of the island were near at hand. In the event of a capsize, Grafton could swim to the shore with Nina, if the little boat could not reach them in time.

The situation grew every moment more gloomy and threatening. The rush and swish of the waves, the roar of the ocean, heard across the island, the scream of the winds, the darkness and the cold blinding rain were bewildering and numbing to the senses.

It was hard to realize that land was so near at hand. No friendly lights gleamed from the shore; far in the distance miles away, could be described the clustered lights of a town, gleaming mockingly through the rain and darkness. Besides these, Lee could see only the light of the little yacht he was following; a light that rose and sank and flashed here and there in a way that told how the boat was tossing about.

At last the storm reached its height. The culminating gust came with a wild rush and a twisting movement that nearly turned Harry's little boat upside down. Quick handling on his part saved her.

When she had righted, he looked ahead with eager anxiety for "The Crow." Her light was not to be seen. Filled with apprehension, he waited for the next flash of lightning. It came; its broad illumination swept like the white wing of a spirit over the waste of wildly agitated water and the stretch of wooded shore. But nothing did it reveal of the yacht.

"It has been overturned! It has sunk!" cried Harry, in an agony of dread.

Headless of danger, he let out the reef in his little sail, and the boat scudded away through the foaming waves, driven by the demon of the wind. He steered it for the point where he had last seen "The Crow." The wind came now with less fury, but the rain half blinded him. He dimly descried a mass of black and white; it might only be foam and water; then he lost sight of it; he was driving past it, when suddenly a flash of lightning showed him, close to his boat, a woman's head, a woman's white hands clinging to the crushed rigging of the overturned boat.

With all the strength of his sinewy arms he turned the boat sharply about. Its prow grated upon the keel of the capsized yacht, and in that instant he reached out and caught hold of the woman, whose long, floating black hair had assured him she was Nina.

As he grasped her, she gave a scream, half of fright, half of relieved reaction from the terrible strain; and when he drew her to him and lifted her out, a dead weight, he saw that she was unconscious. The light of the boat lantern flashed over her white face; her form lay limp in his arms. He bent his cheek to hers; it was cold as the dead. But she had screamed; she was alive an instant ago.

"She is alive still. She must be brought to; she shall be brought to!" he exclaimed.

But he could do nothing to help her here in the darkness, the wind and rain. She must have shelter, she must have warmth; he must get to land at once; he must find some house; they were plentiful on the shore of the island, as he had noticed this morning.

He quickly laid her down in the lotton of the boat, with her head resting on his traveling bag, and stripping off his water-proof cloak, he covered her with it, then caught up an oar and pushed the boat away from the sunken yacht, on the keel of which it had rested, and turned in toward the shore.

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