

HIS LEGAL WIFE

BY MARY E. BRYAN

(Continued)

"Yes, I will go," he answered, cheerfully, after a little pause. "Thank you. It will only take five or six days, unless we go on the steamer. Your lady love can spare you for that time. Afterward I will trouble you no more."

The steamer would leave in two days. Harry had time to take his father to Green Valley, and spend the day following with him in looking about the place and talking over his plans.

Lucille had gone to her friend's. Harry did not see her on his return. He could not go to the house, and she did not meet him, as he had requested—that he might walk with her in the park, and have that long, earnest talk and full understanding that he was anxious for. He had hardly spoken a dozen words with her by themselves since his marriage. She had seemed always in a hurry, or absorbed about something—fitting before him like a bird that just eludes the grasp.

The day arrived for the sailing of the "scoutboat" steamer. Tickets had been purchased, and two first-class state-rooms engaged for Mr. and Mrs. Washington Lee. Mrs. Child drove down with them in the carriage to the pier, and there were some friends with flowers and good wishes to see them off. Nina was looking very pretty in her dark-blue and crimson travelling dress, and Lee contrived to throw off his personal anxiety and appear the happy husband about to take a charming trip with his lovely young bride.

All was auspicious until after the edifice had been said, the waving of hands and handkerchiefs was at an end, and the handsome, clean-looking vessel was fast making her way out of the bay into the broad Atlantic.

Then, as Lee and Nina stood on the deck, there came an unlooked-for addition to their party.

"Delightful morning, isn't it?" said a well-known voice, with a musical drawl, just behind them.

Nina gave a start, and the two turned and saw Floyd sauntering up to them with a cigarette in his well-cut lips and a steamer chair in his hand.

Lee's stern, contemptuous glance expressed his disapproval. He turned silently back to the deck railing.

A flush of pleasure, with a slight shade of annoyance had overspread Nina's face.

"Why, how came you on board?" she asked. "How happened you to decide to go with us?"

"Did you think I would let you go alone with him?" he answered, moodily. "Not I."

CHAPTER XIII
Floyd Grafton met with a surprise. He fully believed he should see the town of annoyance on Nina's brow, and give way to a smile. She would surely be delighted to have him with her. She would be gratified in her heart to find that jealousy had prompted him to come with her and guard her against the possible love-making of her legal husband.

He was disappointed to see that the shade of annoyance deepened. "I did not expect to see you on board," she said, coldly.

"And you are not pleased to see me here, that is plain," he answered, offensively.

"No. How should I be? Your coming with me puts me in an unpleasant position. To say the least. What will be said?"

"Nobody knows of my coming, and you have no acquaintances on board, except Lee. I suppose he is the one you mean. See here, Nina. If you cared for me as I do for you, it would not matter to you what other people said, and you would not prefer the companionship of that other man to mine."

"You know very well," she said, coldly, "that I am taking this journey as a step toward freeing myself forever from the companionship of that other man."

"That other man," as you are pleased to call Mr. Lee. If you can not trust me, Floyd, it is plain that you have but small respect for my word, or for me."

"I do respect your word. I know you are the soul of honor; but I love you, dearest, and love is full of fears," he said, with that soft cadence which was wont to melt her coldest mood. Then, with a change of voice: "But if you are angry because I have come, I assure you I will not intrude upon you. I will not go near you after we reach Indian River. Of course I was not expecting to be your guest. I intended to put up at one of the Rockledge hotels. I only wanted to be near you."

The injured tone, the hurt look in his eyes, had their effect. Nina softened under them. She held out her hand in token of forgiveness; but she did not suffer him to hold it. She drew it quietly away, and he felt that there was an atmosphere of reserve about her which he would not dare to break through.

Lee, too, was surprised at the result of this meeting. He had looked at them critically, feeling that his role as "protector" on the journey would be a farce, and half angry with himself for having been persuaded to play it. He did not look to have Nina call him to her

side and ask him to take the seat near her. She began talking in such a way as to draw him into the conversation, and make him feel that he was not an intruder. Floyd looked sulky, but she did not seem to notice it. She drew Lee into telling some incidents of his wanderings in California and Mexico. He was a good story teller, and he not only interested his two listeners, but he attracted others, and there was soon quite a little group standing near, listening and entertained.

This was a sample of what happened throughout the voyage. Nina kept herself wrapped in a mantle of delicate reserve, and Floyd found himself kept at a distance. She ingeniously avoided being alone with him, and her manner, with all its charming sweetness, had in it an intangible aloofness, which Floyd felt but could not quarrel with.

There was some rough water when they reached Hatteras—the Stormy Cape—and nearly all the women passengers were seasick. Nina's splendid physical poise saved her from this dreaded malady. Floyd succumbed to it. He lay pale and languid on a sofa in the cabin, with Nina's smiling bottle held to his classic nose.

"What can I do for you?" she asked. "I will make you a lemonade."

"No, I would rather you sat by me and read to me."

"What shall I read?"

"I believe I have a new novel with me. I bought it to while away the time on a voyage. It is there in my overcoat pocket. Mr. Lee will get it for you," he added, looking at Harry, who was cutting the leaves of a new magazine.

Harry got the book out of the pocket of the overcoat that hung on the back of the sofa on which he was sitting. He glanced at it and turned a few of the leaves; then he looked gravely across at Grafton and deliberately dropped it back into the coat pocket and brought Nina the magazine he had been reading.

The novel, translated from the French, was the work of an author noted for the subtly disguised immorality of his stories.

"I don't think you will like the book," the magazine will please you better," he said to Nina; and he turned off and went out on deck. Flushing with surprise, she looked inquiringly at Grafton.

"Curse his impudence!" exclaimed Floyd, as he jumped up and went across to where the overcoat lay.

He got the book and brought it to Nina. She took it, glanced at the title and name of the author, turned a few pages, then laid it down without a word and took up the magazine.

She read a short story; but her sweet voice, with its piquant foreign twang, failed to drive away the gloomy shadows from her lover's face.

That afternoon they found themselves in Southern waters. For the first time they saw the frolicsome porpoise tumbling in the distance. Then they were witness to an exhilarating incident. No sooner did a group of porpoise catch sight of the steamer than, after the strange habit of this big fish, they came rushing for the vessel and made straight for the prow. Then followed an exciting race between the fish and the steamer.

The porpoise swam close on either side of the prow, now springing out of the water, now diving swiftly now turning over on their backs in the most frolicsome, kitten like manner.

All the passengers on the deck had rushed to the forward part of the vessel to watch the gambols of the great fish. Among the rest, Nina leaned over the railing. One of the sailors unwittingly seized and pulled the end of a large rope, on a coil of which she was standing. The sudden jerk made her lose her balance.

She felt herself about to fall overboard, and a cry of terror escaped her lips. In the next breath she was caught by strong arms and her feet set firmly upon the deck. She hid her face in her hands, stifling a sob of excitement and relief. She looked up and met Floyd's eyes. He was bending over her full of solicitude.

"You saved me!" she murmured, with a radiantly tender smile.

She felt the skirt of her dress pulled from behind. She turned round and saw the big blue eyes and sorrowful face of a small boy, whose diminutive legs below his large stomach made him look like a frog.

"Twice 't him as ketches you," he said, solemnly. "Twice 't other man—him a-standin' yonder."

Nina looked in the direction the boy's forefinger had pointed.

"Him" was her legal husband. He had his back to her, and he was walking away. She saw him no more until he came to take her to the table, when the bell rang for the six o'clock tea.

He seemed so grave and abstracted that she doubted if he heard her when she gratefully acknowledged what he had done for her.

That evening was the last they could spend on the "City of Kansas." Next morning she would arrive in port.

The air was as balmy as on a night in June; the moon, nearly full, turned the smooth sea to silver. The pas-

sengers sat out on deck, talking, telling stories, singing. Grafton brought a guitar, and begged Nina to sing.

She took the instrument, and holding it gracefully, sang a little Spanish serenade, plaintively sweet as rain and sunshine together on an autumn day.

Harry Lee was sitting at a little distance, talking to the captain of the vessel. When the song had ceased, the air still seemed full of its haunting sweetness.

Turning suddenly to Harry, the captain said: "Your wife is a very lovely woman, Mr. Lee."

Harry started at the word "wife," and, involuntarily, he glanced across at Nina.

She sat on a low steamer-chair, half in shadow, half in the light of the moon. A light net shield was wrapped around her and down a little way over her dark hair.

"Yes, she is very lovely," he assented; and directly after he sighed. He could not have told why, nor was he conscious that he had sighed, but the old captain heard him and decided that there was something wrong between the young husband and his charming wife.

"And I'll wager that blue-eyed, soft spoken fellow is at the bottom of it," he said to himself.

CHAPTER XIV
Next morning the "City of Kansas" steamed into the harbor of Savannah and the passengers for Florida were driven through the shaded streets of the quaint old city to the station of the railway.

A few hours of travel landed them in Jacksonville; then a change of cars, and a further flight across a region of long leaf pines and turpentine farms, with an occasional sugar cane farm, and a grove of orange trees, to Titusville—a town on the banks of a wide expanse of blue water called Indian River, although it is in reality an arm of the sea.

A unique stream is this Indian River, like no other river in the world. Three hundred miles long, and often two miles in width, a currentless, tideless body of salt water, shut out from the Atlantic ocean by a succession of long, narrow islands, with an occasional strait-like break through to the stormy sea, Indian River remains one of the geographical curiosities of our country.

At the foot of the long pier of the Titusville landing lay a little steamer, waiting to take the passengers who had come on the train down to those points on the river that were their destination. They had but thirty minutes before the boat left.

Nina had been here before. She said to her companions as they stood on the platform of the little railroad station:

"I wish there had been time for me to show you a curiosity there is here—a big India-rubber-tree growing out of a palm tree. It is a way that the rubber-tree has. It fastens itself midway upon the trunk of a vigorous palm, and sends down its long roots alongside the stem of the palm to the earth. Sometimes the two grow lovingly together, and sometimes they dwarf and hurt each other, and have to be separated."

"Like some married people," Lee said, half absent. Then he came a step nearer to Nina, and said in a lower tone: "Do you know that this is the seat of Brevard County, in which your Florida home is located?"

"Is it?" she said, in a tone that implied, "Of what consequence is it?"

"Would it not be better to stop here long enough to attend to the business in hand?"

"What business?" she asked, opening her eyes in genuine surprise.

"The divorce."

"Oh! The color sprang to her face. "But I can come up any time," she said presently. "It is only twenty miles, and there is a boat every day. When I am going to any particular place I hate to stop on the way. I am getting quite anxious to see my Florida home. My dear father loved it so. He planted most of the trees with his own hands. The cottage is in a grove of tall palms, and India-rubber trees. I am sure you will think it is picturesque."

"I am sure I should, if I could see it; but I shall not have the pleasure. I will leave you here. There is no need of my going further. You will take the boat, and in an hour or two you will get off at your home."

Before she could reply, Grafton came up.

"Better come at once and get on board," he said. "They are all going to the boat."

He took possession of her hand satchel, and hurried her off down the planker that led to the steamer-boat. She looked back at Lee; but he did not see her. He had turned back to make sure that her baggage had been sent to the boat. The trunks of the passengers that were piled on the station platform were being pitched upon barrows by a number of darkies, working in their lazy, deliberate way, as they exchanged jokes, and laughed and whistled and sang a snatch of song now and then in chorus.

Lee saw that the three trunks marked "N. de V." were put upon the trucks, then he stood irresolute

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On the platform. His glance went down the long wooden pier, and singled out from among the little crowd on their way to the boat one figure, shapely and elegant, with a movement at once light and stately.

"Is it worth while to go after her to say goodbye?" he asked himself. "There is not the slightest need of my going. I have done everything that is necessary. She will be safely at home in an hour. Our paths separate here. In a few weeks she will have a divorce. After that she passes out of my life. I need never see her again. The money I owe her will be paid to an agent, and she and Grafton will go abroad as soon as they are married. I will go to the hotel and get something to eat and be ready to leave on the afternoon train."

But he did not start directly for the hotel. On the contrary, he still stood on the platform and watched the graceful figure in fern-leaf, brown and green now nearing the boat. All at once she turned around and seemed to recognize him. Did she beckon to him, or was the movement only accidental? No; she certainly beckoned to him. He replied by a wave of his hand, and jumping from the platform, walked quickly toward the boat.

The little steamer was nearly ready to start when he reached it. The deck hands were taking up the last relay of freights and baggage. The passengers were most of them on board. Nina still stood on the end of the pier, having turned around to watch his approach. Grafton stood near her, looking vexed and impatient.

"I was afraid you had deserted us," she said, smiling as he came up. "No; I felt I must say good-bye," he answered. "Possibly I may not see you any more, and—"

"Oh, that sounds too gloomy! It quite damps my spirits. Why not come with me to my journey's end? It is such a little way now, and there is no need to hurry back—unless there is some one anxiously waiting to see you?" she added.

There was a question in the bright, half-laughing, half-serious look she gave him.

"There is some one anxious for my return—I hope," he answered. Her eyes clouded a little.

"Oh, well, she will be all the happier to see you for the little delay. Come with us, and see Rockledge, the little City of Palms. There is nothing so unique. You can come back tomorrow on the return boat."

"Pray let Mr. Lee do as he likes," Nina. He knows his own business best," interposed Grafton, testily.

His remark helped to decide Harry.

"I yield to the temptation," he said stepping on the gang-plank beside her.

In another moment the boat gave its short, final whistle, the plank was pulled in, and the little vessel puffed away into the stream.

Grafton stood a little way off from Lee and Nina, smoking a cigar, and looking sulky and cynical.

After awhile, seeing that no notice was taken of his mood, he flung the cigar into the water, and lounged carelessly up to where they stood. Lee presently moved away, and then Floyd said, abruptly:

"Nina, will you tell me why you did that?"

"What?" she asked, innocently, flushing a little under his look.

"Oh, you know! Why did you invite that man to come on board with you?"

"Through the merest courtesy," she answered. "I thought he would enjoy seeing the Indian River region. He has been generous to me in the matter of the divorce, and he has twice saved me from injury—perhaps worse."

"He is quite a knight-errant," sneered Grafton; "but unlike the knights of old, he is paid for his devotion."

She colored angrily, but her displeasure passed in a breath. What will not a woman overlook in the man she loves, when she believes that jealousy and passion are the influences that move him?

Nina only said:

"I have told you that he regarded the money as a loan." Then she added, "I should think you would be grateful to him."

"Grateful—well, yes, I am. He has behaved very well, as I have admitted before. He has stood by his contract so far, though my little unbusinesslike love paid the bargain money beforehand. But then, remember, he is not tempted to break it. He is not at all in love with you, my sweet, and he is in love with another—a very handsome girl, and rich besides."

He smiled to himself maliciously as he said this, with seeming carelessness, while he covertly watched Nina's face. His keen eye detected the shade that passed over it, but she said, quietly:

"Of course, I take all that in consideration. I only wish to be courteous to a man who has received but little kindness at my hands. After tomorrow I shall never see him again."

"For which I heartily return thanks," muttered Floyd. "I know you think me exacting," he added, feeling that she shrank from him slightly. "But put yourself in my place, dearest. Can I help having a prejudice against this man who has a legal right to be near you always? But I will forgive him since this privilege is to end with today. And I'll even be so generous as to help you make these few hours pleasant to him. Where is he?"

"There, on the front, talking to the captain. He is enjoying the scenery. I know he would."

"He is leaving us alone, for which I am much obliged to him," Floyd said, lightly, as he drew her to a seat near the railing, where they could look over the river, which was calm as a lake and mirrored the tinted clouds overhead.

This tideless and currentless river of salt water was indeed a novel spectacle. As the boat glided slowly along, its banks on either side could be distinctly seen. They were clothed with what seemed an unbroken forest of tall palms and live oaks.

But the captain assured Lee that behind this wall of foliage, left to protect the orange groves from the strong salt winds, were houses, villas, beautiful flower gardens, and groves of oranges, lemons and bananas.

Occasionally the boat would stop to put out a quantity of freight and a passenger or two at the extremity of a long, narrow wooden pier built far out over the shallow water, in which innumerable fish were playing, while clouds of wild ducks flew up from sheltered inlets of the island as the boat approached.

There was no vulgar hurry about the little steamer—the "St. Lucie." She moved leisurely through the broad, placid waters. Her officers and passengers lounged and chatted on the deck, and exchanged pecks with the young men and girls that, in some instances, stood on the platform at the end of the piers.

It was dusk when the boat arrived at Rockledge. Lee was filled with surprise. They stepped from the deck upon a broad, white-paved street; but on either side of it rose in thick ranks the straight, column-like trunks of tall palms whose puny branches met, and rustled overhead. On one side could be seen a great hotel, crowning a terraced height ablaze with electric lights. On the other was the dim, wide river, with the waves lapping the shore at the base of the flat ledge of coquina rocks that jutted out over the water all along the bank. The soft yellow light of the new moon mingled with the white illumination of the electric lamps. A mocking bird was singing somewhere in the orange trees, and a band of music was playing on the piazza of the Hotel Indian River. There were clusters of yellow oranges and lemons hanging on the trees, and their white blossoms on the same bough, perfuming the dewy air.

It was bewildering, particularly to those who had seen snow and slush piled up in the streets of the city they had left but a few days ago.

Nina enjoyed the surprise of her companions.

"I know you would think Rockledge a bit of fairy-land," she said. "It is so all the way nearly, to my home, half a mile further on. We will walk there along the river path, though I suppose some one is here with a conveyance to meet me. Yes—here is—How do you do, Mr. Davis? You got my telegram, I see."

She spoke to a tall, broad-shouldered, swarthy-looking man in a blue flannel overshirt, who had stepped up to her and pulled off his broad palm-leaf hat.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, "I got your message and my wife's made ready for you. I've brought the road-wagon; it's back here a piece. You know they don't 'low no wheeled concern on the front 'cep'tin' trucks and wheelbarrows."

"Yes, I know. Well, Mr. Davis, you can take the trucks; we will walk to the house, it is such a little way, and the moon is kind enough to light it. It is the loveliest walk you can imagine," she added, turning to the others.

It was a lovely walk indeed. The path ran along the riverside through the grounds belonging to a succession of little villas, separated by light iron fences with turning gates. Overhead all the way were the rustling palms, their tall trunks giving the semblance of a continuous colonnade. On one side were the cottages, each embowered in its grove of lemon or orange trees; on the other hand was the river with its putting ledge of coquina rocks fringed by sea-mosses, ferns and palmettoes.

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Nina walked on with buoyant steps. She had taken off her hat, and the soft wind played with the dark little curls that clustered about her forehead and her neck, as she moved on, now in the moonlight, now in the shadow of the palm-trees.

They came at length to a strip of wild woods where the moonlight failed to penetrate the branches of the great live oaks, hung with long, gray moss. Everything looked weird and wild, and with the instinct of protection, Lee put out his hand in the dusk to take Nina's hand and put it on his arm.

He withdrew it quickly, for he found that she had laid her hand on Grafton's arm, and he had placed his over it.

In another moment they had emerged from the woods. They came into open grounds, and caught sight of a light gleaming through trees and shrubbery a little distance from the road.

"This is my habitation," Nina cried, as she stopped before a gate set in an untrimmed hedge of wild olive trees and Spanish bayonets. "Looks weird, doesn't it?" she went on, as they passed inside; "but this is the place. Here is the great live oak tree, and the seat in it my father made for me. And that is old Hector's bark. My father brought him from Cuba with us. Hector!" she called out.

A great black dog appeared in the shadowed walk, and walked toward them, uttering a warning growl.

"Don't you know me, Hector?" With a quick bound, he sprang at her and crouched at her feet, wagging his tail for joy.

"Isn't he splendid?" she asked of Floyd, looking up from the shaggy black head she was caressing.

"He's a handsome fellow," Grafton replied.

He stretched out his hand to pat the dog, but Hector regarded him with disfavor, and showed his white teeth in a snarl. The snarl changed to a growl as the shapely hand touched his head. He shook it off, and his eyes glared menacingly.

"Why, Hector! what has come over you? You were always good to my friends," exclaimed his mistress. "Make friends now with Mr. Grafton. Shake hands with him, and say 'How do you do.'"

The dog stretched out his paw reluctantly, and just touched the white hand held out to him; then drew it back.

"You won't say 'How do you do?' You are a naughty dog. You have forgotten all your manners," said Nina.

The dog dropped his tail, and looked unhappy under the reproach.

"Hector, won't you shake hands with me?" asked Lee, stooping down and holding out his hand. The big dog looked at him suspiciously; then his fierce eyes softened, and out went his great paw and was laid in Harry's hand, while he uttered short barks that meant "How do you do," in dog language.

Grafton looked vexed and disdainful.

"It is queer," Nina said, exclaiming. "Hector has his whims; he is as spoiled as they say I am."

"No," explained Harry. "Hector has instincts. He is jealous of those you care for. He is not a bit jealous of me."

She looked up at him quickly, then her eyes dropped. She said nothing, only nodded with a little constrained smile.

They went on down the walk, bordered by orange trees, some bare and close, others with gnarled branches that had caught the malady of the long moss from the gray-bearded old live oak. The sweet damp smell of foliage and flowers was in the dewy night air. The

green leaves glistened, hundreds of tiny insects piped from the tall grass.

Standing on the steps to give them greeting was a sorrow-faced, languid-looking young woman in a blue calico Mother Hubbard, with a baby in her arms, and a youngster holding to her skirts.

"How do do, Miss Nina?" she said in a soft, drawing voice. "You've grown powerful, and you're prettier than ever. I reckon you hardly know me, I've got so thin and yellow. Peter says it's the snuff, but I know better. I took the malady when I went to see ma on the lake, and I've had the dumb chills ever since."

"Oh, yes; I know you, Mrs. Davis. I could never forget your nice brown eyes. But I don't know this young person," taking the baby's chubby red fingers in her slim, white ones. "He is a stranger."

"Taint a he, Miss Nina; it's a she. All Peter's children turn out to be girls. It runs in the family. I hope you'll have better luck. Peter told me you wrote that you was married. I'm sure I wish you well—you and your good man."