

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 friends. 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—flitting before him like a bird that just eludes the grasp.

The day arrived for the sailing of the southbound steamer. The first-class staterooms engaged for Mr. and Mrs. Martin Lee, Mrs. Clara Lee and two children, were ready. The children were packed 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 traveling 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 adieu had been said, the waving of hands and handkerchiefs was at an end, and the handsome, black-hulled vessel was just 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 Grafton walking toward them with a cigarette between 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 flash 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."

Floyd Grafton met with a surprise. He fully believed he should see the frown of annoyance on Nina's brow 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 care 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,' 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 cynically, 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 smelling 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 shipboard. 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, leaving her to look at the magazine 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 with out 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 moody 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 witnesses 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.

"Twins!" he exclaimed, as he said, solemnly. "Twins '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 would 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 shawl was wrapped around her and drew a little way over her dark hair.

"Yes, she is very lovely," he assented; and directly after he sighed. He could not help 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 Indian 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 absently. 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 Indian 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 carried 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.

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."

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"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 trembled 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 knew 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 dock upon a broad, white-paved street; but on either side of it rose its thick ranks of tall palms whose plumed 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 risen 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 glaciers 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."

"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