

HIS LEGAL WIFE

BY MARY E. BRYAN

(Continued)

"It is the unexpected that happens," he said. "You know that old saying, Miss Flake. The marriage has happened—fortunately for me. As for the rest, it is under the rose"—he took a rose from a crystal dish near him and put it to his lips—"until my lady herself shall choose to tell the story."

Nina heard him, as she stood near by, the center of a little group. She telegraphed to him a single bright, approving glance. She admired the grace with which he had parried the ill-bred curiosity of Miss Flake. His coolness put her at ease. She was able to throw off the nervousness she had struggled to hide.

But Lee saw that the color fluttered under her face whenever the door-bell rang, and she watched the door expectantly.

Presently, as he looked at her, her face grew suddenly radiant. He guessed the cause of the transfiguration, even before he saw that Floyd Grafton had entered the room.

The young man dressed with unusual care; he looked exceedingly handsome. A silence fell on the company. All eyes were upon the new arrival as he made his way to the side of the hostess.

Every one knew that he had been the suitor of the bride—every one had heard the report that he had jilted her a short time before their marriage.

"Confound the fellow!" Lee muttered to himself. "Why did he wait till the room was full, and put her to this trial?"

He watched her anxiously. She stood the fire of all those curious eyes gallantly. She met Floyd at first without betraying any consciousness, with the usual smile of welcome, and the hand put out for a friendly touch.

He was to blame for the tell-tale flush and droop of the lids that came the next instant. It seemed to Lee that he purposely held her hand longer than necessary, and bent an adoring look upon her. For a second she forgot prudence and all but him. She kindled responsively under that electric look and touch.

People glanced at each other. "She still loves her old flame!" was the whispered comment or the unspoken thought.

"Probably, now she is married, she will take him as her cavalier servant—true to her Spanish blood, you know," said one.

Nina did not realize what was being said or thought about her. She was excited and happy. Her spirits were at high tide tonight—a reaction from the long depression. Her eyes shone like splendid stars; her face was vivid with emotion and quickened fancy.

She moved here and there, all kindness, grace, and sparkle. She was thoughtlessly happy. Were not all doubts swept away? Was not her lover true to her? Was he not here at her side?

He kept by her nearly all the time, standing over her while she played, showing himself familiar with all her favorite pieces, and singing with her a tender little lyric which he had selected.

It seemed to Lee that he was doing all this purposely to show his power over the woman who had married another man, through pique or jealousy, as he seemed to wish to make every one believe.

"He is a thoroughly selfish cad," Harry said to himself. "He doesn't care a fig about preserving the reputation of the woman he expects to marry. It's only her money he is after. I'd like to flatten that Grecian nose of his!" added the legal husband, his hand clinching as he watched the maneuvers of Floyd Grafton.

Catching Mrs. Child's eye, he knew by its expression that she was feeling the same way toward this gay and easy young gentleman who was making himself the center of attraction in the parlors of his former fiancée.

To do him justice, it was difficult for him not to be conspicuous. Many women, and not a few men felt, if they did not acknowledge, the charm of his peculiar face, with languid, sea blue eyes and full mouth, petulant and passionate. There was a fascination for women in his manner—half-careless, half-indifferent, and with a touch of disdain.

It was this manner directed to Nina that exasperated Lee. It conveyed subtly, intangibly, the idea of familiarity and possession rather than respect.

"Why does not Miss de Vasco—who is pride itself to others—notice and resent that man's manner to her?" thought Lee. He ought to have realized that Nina saw nothing to take exception at in her lover's manner. Love-blind, she was intensely happy in his presence and in the thought that they were reconciled, that he had forgiven her for misjudging him, and for putting that dreadful gulf between them, which, however, the law could bridge.

She was making an injured hero of the lover whom she had bitterly wronged, as she believed, and who had magnanimously forgiven her.

Absorbed in her devotion, and unable to realize that she was some-

body's else wife, she lost sight of prudence, and gave no thought to curious, suspicious eyes that followed her flashing movements, and noted how her face softened and her eyes grew tender when they rested on Floyd Grafton.

Harry did his best to shield her from the moment her thoughtlessness provoked. Whenever he could, he interposed himself between her and Floyd. He kept beside her, calmly disregarding the little frown of haughty impatience she gave him sometimes, and the covert insolence of Floyd's manner.

At length, Floyd managed to get her to himself in a curtained recess of the room. Harry watched him, bending over her in his adoring fashion, talking low as he played carelessly with the roses at her belt.

Others were glancing toward the corner, and exchanging looks of well-bred significance. A sweet-faced old lady with lovely gray hair approached Harry, and said:

"Mr. Lee, I wish you would get your wife to sing that sweet old song—'The Old Oaken Bucket,' for me. She is the only person I know who sings it, and I always claim it from her as a treat. I was brought up on a farm, you see, and I can appreciate 'The Old Oaken Bucket.'"

"I will ask her to sing it," Harry said. He thought he understood the motive of the lady in asking for the song. She was a true friend to Nina, and she wanted to break up the tete-a-tete between her and the man whose name gossip had linked with hers.

Harry went directly across to the curtained recess where the two were sitting on the cushioned seat that fitted the niche, with a canopy of pink and white azaleas breathing perfume over their heads.

They were too much absorbed to notice his approach until he stood before them, and bending slightly, said, in clear tones:

"Nina, my love, excuse me for interrupting your conversation, but Mrs. Pierson is going directly, and she begs you will sing her favorite—'The Old Oaken Bucket.'"

When he said "Nina, my love," she smiled to herself to see the startled, resentful way the lady lifted her head and stared at him. He had called her "Nina" several times tonight; that was a part of his role. But to add "my love!" Her look of haughty offense said plainly: "You are acting a little too well, sir."

The next instant she remembered that she, too, had a part to play, and she called up a smile—a cold one it was—to her lips. But she did not speak at first.

"I have promised that you would sing for her," Harry went on. "The devil you have!" muttered Floyd, below his breath.

He had frowned fiercely when Lee first spoke, but Harry paid no attention to him.

Nina hesitated. Mrs. Pierson was a lady of high social influence in her circle. Besides, Nina really liked and valued her friendship.

She glanced appealingly at Floyd. "Send her word you can't sing. You are really not in good voice tonight. Then you will need a tenor for the chorus, and I am hoarse," murmured Floyd.

Harry smiled coolly, scornfully. "No need to worry, as to that," he said. "I think Mrs. Lee will be able to manage the song in a way to please her friends without the inestimable aid of your tenor. Come, Nina!" he broke off, in a louder tone, extending his hand.

She gave him a look of defiance, but her expression changed instantly. She knew there were many eyes upon her. She controlled herself, and forcing a smile, gave her hand to her husband and moved away with him, glancing back at Floyd and murmuring something deprecating.

"Oh, it doesn't matter," he answered lightly, his tone conveying sulky disdain. "I simply dislike to have you do yourself injustice—as I fear you will."

It looked at first as though his words would prove true. When she began to sing her voice was husky and uncertain. All at once another voice joined itself to hers—a rich, sweet tenor. She looked around surprised. Harry stood by her, singing with her. "The Old Oaken Bucket" was a favorite of his also. His voice, if a little uncultivated, was infinitely deeper and richer than Floyd's.

The song was vigorously applauded, and Harry's tenor was greatly praised. He looked around for Floyd, but he had slipped out of the room. Mrs. Child was delighted. Nina gave herself to her guests, and was charmingly entertaining; but Harry felt the undercurrent of cold displeasure toward him in her manner. As soon as the last of the company had taken leave, she said to him:

"I will not detain you, Mr. Lee. I suppose you are as weary as I am. I wish you good-night, with a little dismissing wave of the hand as she sank back on the lounge.

"I foresee lots of disagreeable clashing," thought Harry, as he smoked a cigar in his bachelor-

bride-room apartments half an hour later. "Why doesn't she go to Dakota at once? I'll speak to Mrs. Childs about it."

CHAPTER XI

The reception was a sample of what followed during the succeeding two weeks.

They were the weeks preceding Lent, and, as usual, any amount of gaiety was crowded into them by the social pleasure lovers, who seem determined to get their fill of frivolity before the season of penance came round.

Teas, receptions, dances, theatre-parties, musicales, were the order of the day, and of the night. The heiress-bridal and her husband had invitations showered upon them. They were rich, attractive and newly married, and there was surrounding them a little rose-colored halo of romance, with just a shade of doubt and vague suspicion about it, enough to stimulate curiosity, and make people look for some kind of drama in which the two, or the three—rather—for Floyd was always with them—would be the actors.

Nina had determined not to go to Dakota until Lent began. She could not bear to go away and leave Floyd here in the midst of the social whirl. There were only a few more weeks of the season. She would enjoy these to the utmost.

She would revel in the happiness bestowed by the presence of her lover, and the knowledge that he was reconciled to her and would soon claim her as his own. With all the intensity of her tropical nature she threw herself into the pleasures which those charmed days brought to her. She seemed to lose sight of prudence, to forget her fear of that grim social bugbear—"They Say," which she had once dreaded. She seemed to imagine that now she was married and had the tests of a husband's presence around her, gossip could not hurt her. She still expected her legal husband to accompany her everywhere, and she made an effort to sustain the part of newly married wife; but in this she was hampered by the presence and the watchful, disapproving eyes of her lover.

Wherever they went, Floyd was sure to be there and to find his way to her side. It seemed impossible to her to repulse him. She was so happy in his presence, so remorseful of having once misunderstood him and made him unhappy.

Their mutual devotion could not but be noticed and gossiped about. Harry saw it, and he did his best to counteract it. Mrs. Child's rheumatism kept her at home nearly always now, but Harry faithfully went to "functions" he took no interest in, and kept as near his bride-in-law as possible, thus preventing compromising tete-a-tetes and strolls in the conservatories.

To exercise this surveillance was hateful to him. He felt as if he were an interloper—almost a spy, even, and he saw that Nina was even annoyed and angered by his watchfulness. But he felt he was doing his duty. Mere figure-head thought he had tied himself, he held that he was called upon to protect the reputation of the woman who was his wife in name. Moreover, he felt for her both gratitude and sympathy as well as the admiration which her honest, sincere though erratic nature would evoke from one who understood her.

He would even have felt a sympathy for Floyd if he could have believed that he really loved Nina. "But does he?" questioned Harry to himself. "I know he lied to her; he was certainly engaged to Ada. Did he love Miss de Vasco all the while, and was it only pique and anger, as he says, that made him forsake her, or was there a baser motive? He can not have any true love for her, or he would be more careful of her good name," thought Harry. "He seems quite willing that she should betray herself. He is jealous and exacting; but that is proof of selfish passion, not love."

Floyd was certainly peculiar of Nina's legal husband. If he had dared, he would have been insolent to him when Lee came between them; but a look flashed at him from Harry's expressive eyes had warned him to be civil. Harry forced himself to treat the young man, when in company, with a consideration he was far from feeling. He knew it was best for Nina's sake that Floyd should appear in the light of a mutual friend.

But when they were alone, Harry took no pains to conceal his contempt for the handsome Floyd, who revenged himself by poisoning Nina's mind against him.

When Harry had tried to warn her against being imprudent, Floyd sneeringly misinterpreted his motives to her, and made her believe that the man she had married in name was trying to assume in reality the role of lord and master.

One evening, after a dance, when Harry had accompanied her into the hall, and was about to leave her, she said a few words of caution to her. She listened in silence, tapping her tiny satin slipper foot impatiently on the rug. When he finished, she

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"Sir!"

He met the indignant lightning that leaped from her eyes without flinching. He went on steadily:

"You asked for the loan of a name as honorable as your own. It was given you by the contract, but it was taken for granted that you would keep the honor of that name unspotted. I agreed, in the terms of the contract, to appear as your husband, but I did not agree to pose as that laughing-stock of the world—a husband whose wife has a preferred lover always at her side. When a woman brings scandal on herself, madame, she also brings contempt on the man whose name she bears—even if he be only her legal husband."

The words were cruel—he knew it; but he felt that, like the surgeon, he must wound to heal.

He expected a burst of stormy anger from the proud girl, but instead, she turned a shade paler, and her features grew fixed and hard.

"Your words are an insult," she said, with enforced calmness. "Leave my presence—and never come to it again!" She pointed to the door as she spoke. "Go!" she commanded, imperiously.

He bowed, and left the room.

When the door had closed behind him, she stood motionless for an instant, then the marble-like rigidity left her, the flame died out in her dilated eyes—drowned in a rush of tears. She sank into a seat, and sobbed stormily.

Floyd dropped down on his knees beside her. He tried to take her hands, he tried to soothe her, then he broke out into bitter abuse of Lee.

"The low-born scoundrel!" he exclaimed. "I will hold him to account for what he said!"

To his surprise she turned to him and said vehemently:

"You will do no such thing! I forbid it. And he is not what you say. He is not a low-born scoundrel; he is an honorable man. He was right in what he said to me."

"Right! Then why did you order him to leave?"

"Because he dared to say it. He shall never speak to me again. But what he said was true. I have been acting disgracefully—and you—no; it is only I, alone am to blame."

"I don't see anything dreadful that either of us have done," interposed Floyd. "We have been together a little too much; but how could it be?"

"I couldn't bear to see you with him and have him act as though you belonged to him. Oh! I say, dearest, why not take steps at once to end this difficult situation? Why not go to Dakota and arrange for a divorce?"

"I will," she said, starting up. "I will go. I have been dreading to go to that strange, wild part of the country, and stay there alone, for Jim Child declares she can not go with me. She has heard there as a resident three months in Dakota before I can make application for a divorce. How shall I go about becoming a resident? How shall I know where to settle? I need some one to arrange everything for me."

"Why couldn't I?" asked Floyd. "There was a little lack of earnestness in the tone in which the proposal was made, that caught the sensitive ear of Nina. She shook her head."

"It would not be prudent, Mrs. Child says. And besides, dear, I don't believe you could. You haven't the head for such things."

"Haven't I?" he retorted, pettishly. "Well, who has? Lee, I suppose?"

"Yes," she assented. "I looked to him to make all arrangements for me in that direction."

"Well, let him do it. That is what he is for."

"It is impossible now. He is gone. I have driven him from me."

"Recall him, then."

"No, I will not do that. I am deeply offended with him. All the same, I will do him justice. He is sincere, and he is efficient. He has lots of judgment and manly sense. A woman can depend on him."

"What else?" sneered Floyd, flushing to the roots of his fair hair. "Do you think it is pleasant to me to listen to you sound that fellow's praise? He went on, getting up and walking about with his hands in his pockets. "A woman is a bundle of inconsistencies, anyway," he said. "Just now you were ready to shoot that man for insulting you; now you are grieving because you sent him away, and finding that really you can't exist without him. Pray write and tell him so."

"Now you are absolutely unjust and jealous," she said. "I have not the slightest idea of recalling Mr. Lee. I shall never—"

Here she was interrupted by a knock on the door, followed by the entrance of James. He brought her a note which he delivered with much solemnity. Nina changed color when she saw the superscription. She recognized Lee's clear, bold chirography. She tore open the envelope and read:

"My Dear Miss de Vasco: I hope you will pardon my seeming rudeness in speaking to you as I did just now. It was not done to wound you; it was not done with any wish to control you, or to arrogate to myself the authority of a real husband. It was done merely to remind you that you were treading on dangerous ground; that others did not understand your peculiar situation, and therefore would not judge you correctly. It is natural you should forget the false part you have to play

as a wife, and be taken up with the man you love. It is my duty to think for you, or so I take it. Forgive me if in fulfilling this duty, I have made myself disagreeable. I have too much respect for you—I have too much to thank you for—not to wish to part from you in a spirit of friendliness."

"Trusting that in your heart you understand my motive, and will not think badly of me, I will say a final good-bye—after one suggestion. Your position is a very difficult one. The sooner it ends, the better. I think you can end it speedily, and that you need not go to Dakota, and reside there for three months. You can go to Florida instead. You can claim to be a resident of that state. You have a home there—so Mrs. Child told me yesterday. Your father bought a house and an orange plantation on India River two years before his death. He lived there on account of his health, and you lived with him. You still keep up the place, and visit it occasionally. Therefore you can claim to be a resident of Florida. You can go there at once and enter suit for divorce on the ground of incompatibility of temper."

"In a few weeks you can be free. I will do everything I can—without exposing myself to the charge of collusion—to facilitate your getting the divorce. I will call at your door tomorrow morning to know what you have decided to do. You can inform me by a note, which James can hand me. With much respect, H. W. Lee"

Nina read the letter with varying emotions. She sat looking down at it a moment in silence, then she gave it to Floyd, who had been watching her intently. While he read it, she kept her eyes on the floor, her face thoughtful and disturbed.

"That's good news!" Floyd exclaimed, throwing down the letter. "The Florida scheme is well thought of. I wonder it did not occur to us before."

"I told you it was he who thought of everything," she answered, dreamily, her eyes still on the floor.

Floyd frowned, and gave his blonde head an impatient jerk. Then he said:

"I fancy the fellow is as anxious to be free as you are. There's a woman he loves and wants to marry. She is rich. Mr. Warrington Lee has an eye to the shekels always."

"Are you speaking of something you know, or only imagine?" asked Miss de Vasco, raising her head and looking at him with an expression of interest.

"I am not guessing. I know the woman he loves. I am sure I do. By a singular coincidence, she is the same orphan heiress of a rich grandfather whom the papers obligingly gave me. Her grandmother told me that the girl had a love affair with a man named Lee. She showed me his picture in a photograph album. Our man here has the same face, the same name; so I am sure he is the fair Ada's lover."

"Why has he not married her?"

"The old lady broke up the match. She told me about it. She got furious with Lee for not believing in her faith, and for calling her a crank, which, by the way, she certainly is. She forbade his coming to the house. The pair were too poor to marry without her to help them. Now it will be different, thanks to the forty thousand you have given him."

He watched her closely as he told her this little story. She was silent for awhile. Presently she said:

"I am glad if I have been the means of removing the obstacle to his happiness. I think his wife need not be pitted. He is a man a woman can rely upon. He has really behaved well in this miserable marriage business. I will give him much justice, though I shall have nothing more to do with him. Come! let us go into the sitting-room. It is chilly here, and I want to tell Mrs. Child of the change of plan. I am afraid, though, she will not go to Florida. She will be sure there is malaria there. She is as afraid of malaria as she is of Indians."

Sure enough, Mrs. Child declined to go to Florida. She was confident the climate would upset her liver.

"I am sorry, my dear," she said. "But I haven't been well for a long time, as you know. All this anxiety and excitement has worn me out. I'll stay with my cousin, Sallie Levert until you come back."

"Tell the truth, my dear Child," said Nina, taking the fair, plump face between her palms, and looking at her chaperon, half sadly, half playfully. "You are glad of the excuse for washing your hands of such an erratic charge as I have proved myself to be of late."

"No no," protested the good lady, hurriedly, a pink flush of embarrassment coming into her cheeks. "I am fond of you, my dear Nina. I am grieved to the heart over your troubles, and I would go with you if I were needed. But you don't require a chaperon now. You have a husband to take charge of you. He will go with you to Florida, and—"

"You seem to forget that I am going to Florida for the express purpose of separating for good from this husband who is to take such good care of me."

"Oh, dear! yes, I do forget that. I am always forgetting that dreadful divorce. I wish you could forget it, too, my child. Mr. Lee seems really a man who would make a woman a good husband, and—"

"And you are simply talking nonsense, my dear little Mother Bunch. There is but one man in the world who can be my husband in truth. As for Mr. Lee, I am done with him for good and all. He is not going to Florida with me even. He has gone away."

"Gone! without telling me good-bye! Why did he go away so suddenly?"

"I told him to. He was—official—"

"Oh, dear, dear! That is a pity. What will you do without him? He would have been such a help to you going on your trip."

"I don't need his help. I can travel very well alone. I have no more to do with Mr. Lee except to write a note to let him know that I have decided to go to Florida at once."

She did write the note—a short, cold message—but, oh, caprice of woman! she did not send it. She tore it up, and the next morning, when Lee rang the door-bell, she told James to bring him into the library. When he entered, expecting the coldest of receptions, he was surprised when she came forward to meet him smiling and cordial. She ignored the unpleasantness of the evening before.

"Yes, I will go to Florida at once," she said. "I thank you for bringing it to mind. But I hate to go alone; I have never traveled by myself. I have always had somebody—a man—to take care of me. It was poor papa until he died, and afterward Colonel Carmichael—papa's old friend—who died last fall at his place in Florida. Mrs. Child will not go. She is afraid of Captain Shakes—that is what they call the chills and fever in Florida. Now, don't you see it is your solemn duty to go with me yourself?"

"What! when you are going there to get rid of me?" he said, in her own tone of playful earnestness.

A blush flitted into her cheek.

"Oh, you will leave me there, and come back as soon as you have seen me in my home. There is a very respectable man and his wife staying on my place to take care of it. Will you go? I really wish it."

She looked up at him with a pretty air of entreaty. She was very lively in her graceful morning gown of soft mauve cashmere.

Lee was perplexed. He had hoped to have the next week or two to look after his own affairs. The home at Green Valley was now ready for his father and Lucille. He had had it renovated outside and in, and today the former owners were to go out and take possession. He was going with his father and Lucille. He had promised himself much pleasure when he should show his betrothed her beautiful little suite of rooms—bedroom and dressing-room, boudoir, or sitting-room, with a new bay window filled with her favorite plants.

He had telegraphed to the housekeeper to have a nice supper at seven, the hour when the afternoon train would arrive at Green Valley. It was a disappointment, then, when Lucille declared she could not go today. She had some more shopping to do. Ada had invited her to stay with her. She would go there for a few days, and come to Green Valley later on. She was very sweet and coaxing, but also very much determined to have her own way