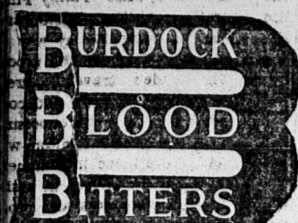


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CHAPTER 68 THE STOLEN BRIDE

Shirley telephoned Rodney at his hotel: "He has come!" She heard his exclamation. Then there was silence. Finally he said: "When I got home last night, I found a message from Isabelle. She took an earlier train and she is here now."

Shirley answered steadily: "Then this is good-by." He cried out a protest: "Not like this! We can't part like this! I've got to see you again. I must!"

But she said: "Better to leave it as it is. We had our perfect day, remember." "I can't give you up without seeing you again."

She was so long silent that he thought the connection had been broken, and he cried brokenly, desperately: "Shirley!"

Faint as a breath, he heard her whisper, a mere sigh along the wires: "Good-by, my dear, my dear!"

A moment later the operator said: "Number, please." Shirley had rung off.

She dressed herself with hands that trembled, but she was very painstaking about her appearance. In return for his marriage settlement, the Commodore had a right to a pretty bride. The soft, dove-gray silk gown she wore was beautiful.

When she was ready, she pinned against her breast a cluster of Cape jasmine. Rodney had brought the blossoms to her the day before. She pressed her lips to their cool, white, fragrant petals and, as she did so, there came vividly to her memory the vision of another girl, clad in gray, lying face downward in a pool of crimson, with Cape jasmine strewn all about her—the picture that Miss Liz had painted for her of Mary Lou's wedding-morning.

And curiously, instead of horror, she felt a sense of infinite peace. She took from her bag the miniature of Bianca Van Dorn and looked at it with perplexed eyes.

"I should hate you, and yet I know I would have loved you . . . Mother." Her eyes filled with stinging tears, and she pressed her gloved fingers to them.

It was the cry of an unhappy, lonely girl, who, renouncing happiness, goes to marry a man she doesn't love; goes without the comfort of a mother's unflinching understanding. Shirley had no one to wish her well on her wedding-day. She went alone to the yacht, except for the officer of the Sea Nymph, who ran the motor-boat.

It was he who had brought the Commodore's note, telling her that all arrangements had been made. He saw to the transfer of her luggage while she paid her bill at the hotel. There was a forlorn expression on her pretty face as she realized that it took almost the last of her money.

"I shall put you aboard the yacht now, if you are ready," Bertrand's aid told Shirley, "and then I must return to bring the minister. He has another wedding this morning and can't get away until eleven o'clock."

They took a taxi to the dock, where the motor-launch was waiting. He handed Shirley aboard with gallant deference. In another moment they were speeding across the placid water in the early spring sunshine. Shirley turned for one last glimpse of the shore, wrapped in a silvery mist that softened the ugly outlines of warehouses along the river. Somewhere beyond that mist was the man she loved. Her heart called to him as she went to her wedding with another.

The Sea Nymph loomed before her.

CHAPTER 69 THE IRATE FIANCEE

In her hotel suite, Isabelle Bannerman waited impatiently for Rodney to come for her. She was not in the best mood that morning. The fact that he had not been at his hotel the previous evening to receive her telegram and had not, therefore, met her train, angered her. Now that she had won her hand-fought battle, she no longer troubled to hide her imperious will under an air of sweetness. She meant to make him understand that he must work for the money that their marriage was to give him. He must earn it by humoring her whims and deferring always to her wishes.

"What on earth can be keeping him?" she demanded of her mother, for the eighteenth time within the hour.

Mrs. Bannerman, wearing a fashionable new negligee, answered apathetically that she couldn't for the life of her guess. She gazed with disfavor at the spring blossoms in the park below.

"Mean little flowers!" she commented. "I'd take a whole bed of them to make one decent bouquet. And trees! Why, there ain't one that gives any shade!"

"Mama, for Heaven's sake, stop being so critical," snapped Isabelle irritably.

Mrs. Bannerman opened her eyes wide.

"Why, honey, I'm only acting home-like. I got to stop being high and mighty sometimes, just for a rest."

"Where on earth do you suppose that idiot is?" muttered her daughter, referring to her laggard fiancé.

Her foot tapped the floor impatiently. Her gaze was fixed on the motor entrance below her window.

"Maybe he's got drunk," remarked her mother, brightening pathetically.

"Oh, Mama, be quiet! You make me sick!"

"I'll be sick soon myself," mourned the old lady. "If I don't get my tonic, My neuralgia—"

A sharp exclamation from Isabelle made her look up, blinking.

"Is he coming?" "That girl!" said Isabelle, between her teeth, striking her palms together sharply. "I'll bet it's that girl!" "What girl, honey?"

"It's none of your business. For Heaven's sake, be quiet." She went on speaking to herself, her anger rising until her brown eyes were hard and shining. "She's here, of course. That's where he was last evening and all day yesterday. That's the reason he didn't get my wire."

She began to tear off her frock. "Get my walking-shoes and my gloves and the coat with the chin-chilla collar!" she ordered her goggling parent. "And be quick!"

Fifteen minutes later she was at Rodney's hotel. Approaching the desk languidly, she asked, with her sweetest smile, if Mr. Sheldon were in his room.

"Mr. Sheldon left a quarter of an hour ago," said the clerk.

"Oh! Isabelle pouted her disappointment. "You don't happen to know if he left a message, or said where he was going?"

The doorman was delivering a parcel at the desk. He overheard and turned around and touched his cap. "I called a cab for the gentleman, Miss, and I heard the address he gave. It was Pier No. 9 on the river."

Isabelle thanked him, requested a cab, and gave the identical address.

"At least, I'll find out what he's up to." And then fury seized her. Pier No. 9 must mean a boat, and a boat meant one of two things—some one was arriving whom he desired to see more than he desired to see her, or he himself was going away, fleeing from her at the eleventh hour.

She sat on the very edge of the seat, tense with anger, as the cab bumped her over the cobblestones beyond the Mall. Her painted lips were compressed to a scarlet line and her hard eyes boded ill for her fiancé.

"Here you are, Miss." The chauffeur reached around and opened the door. She sprang out, glanced around her in uncertainty, for a moment, and then, stalked across the street and descended a rickety pair of steps to a weather-beaten wharf.

Rodney and a man in a blue uniform were staring out across the water, with a curious, frightened absorption. A speed-boat chugged unheeded at their feet.

"Rodney!"

At Isabelle's sharp call, he turned. Stared at her absently, for a moment. Then his gaze swung back to the river.

"You're right! By Heaven, you're right!" he exclaimed to the man at his side. "She is moving!"

"Rodney!" His fiancée's voice was harsh and angry. "Are you out of your senses? Don't you realize that I'm speaking to you?"

The gesture he made was evidently meant to silence her.

"What can it mean?" he demanded frantically of the other man.

"It looks to me like he's running off with her, answered his companion excitedly. "Yes, sir, that bell you just heard means full steam ahead! Look at her! Man, she's flying! The fool! He'll never be able to follow the channel at that speed!"

Rodney, heedless of Isabelle, who was at his heels, almost incoherent with anger, was already plunging into the boat.

"Quick! Hurry!" he called to the other man. "We must overtake them."

Isabelle saw then that a yacht was flying down the river like a white bird. She heard Rodney's frantic urge for haste above the roar of the speed-boat's engine. She heard, too, the uniformed man's words about the din:

"Jumping Jupiter, she's missing on one cylinder! We'll never make it." He swore, regardless of Isabelle, who was standing on the wharf above them.

"Try! For Heaven's sake, try, man!" cried Rodney.

"Useless. We'd only be marooned in the middle river. The engine's sure to go dead on us."

Rodney leaped to the pier: "I'll get another boat!"

"No boat will ever make it," shouted the other. "Look! The Sea Nymph's already out of sight."

Rodney pushed Isabelle out of his way.

"A plane, then. A seaplane. We can land alongside. Quick! There's a hangar farther down, beyond the point. We'll make them take us."

He was already running toward his waiting taxi.

Isabelle stopped him with an imperious command. He looked at her vaguely. "Shirley Rand is on that yacht. Bertrand is abducting her." Isabelle stamped her foot and screamed with rage. She knew it was useless to try to stop him. (To be Continued)



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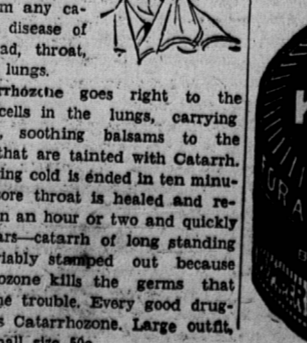
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