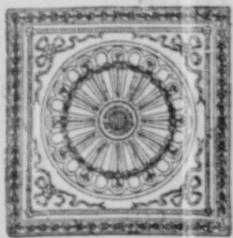


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FLORABEL'S LOVER

By LAURA JEAN LIBBEY

Author of "When Lovely Maiden Stoops to Folly," "A Broken Betrothal," "Parted by Fate," "Parted at the Altar," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I—(Continued.)

ner musing was brought to an end suddenly. "I beg your pardon, Miss," said a rich, masculine voice, from the other side of the low stone wall. "Is this Pemberton Hall, and are you one of the Misses Pemberton?"

Florabel sprang to her feet, flushing red in girlish confusion. A young man stood leaning on the other side of the stone wall, gazing curiously at the petite girl with mild rose coloring in her face, a quizzical smile playing about his mustached lips.

A fair-haired, handsome young fellow he was, in a long, dusty linen coat, and rather a smashed-appearing broad-brimmed hat, from beneath which a pair of laughing blue eyes looked down into her own.

And this was the picture the stranger saw, and which was graven on his heart long years after:

A slender, girlish figure, in a torn, gray dress; a dark, startled, gypsyish face, with the color like the heart of a red rose blooming on it, framed in a mass of tumbled, tawny, crinkling curls; and a pair of wondrously bright hazel eyes, that dropped confusedly beneath his curious gaze.

With the wild flowers twined in her loose, tangled curls, even in her torn dress, and with the huge basket of glowing fruit in her slim brown hands, she formed the prettiest picture of health and beauty the young man's eyes had ever rested on.

In an instant Florabel remembered his question, and gained something like composure.

"This is Pemberton Hall," she answered, shyly, "but I am not one of the Misses Pemberton. Oh, dear, no! I am only Florabel Dean." A sudden idea seemed to flash over her brain.

"Oh, I know now who you are!" she cried, in accents of the greatest relief. "You are the new gardener whom we have been expecting. I am so glad you are come, for I have to fill the great iron preserving kettle to the brim before noon; and if you had not come I should have had to fill these great heavy baskets all myself."

The stranger looked at her aghast. "Wouldn't those two young ladies sitting on the porch yonder come to your rescue in such a dilemma as that?" he asked, nodding towards Evelyn and Maud.

"Oh, dear, no!" replied Florabel. "They are all dressed up to receive the handsome young man who is coming to-day. And even if they were not, they wouldn't like to spoil their white hands."

There was no intention of malice in her words; it was only the frank expression of a thoughtless young girl.

"So you recognize, in me the new gardener whom you were expecting to-day?" he asked, a dancing light in his bonny blue eyes, and a peculiar smile hovering about his handsome mustached mouth.

"Oh, on," returned Florabel, quickly. "Squire Pemberton telegraphed to the city for a gardener; he had no idea what person would be sent to us. I hope, though, that you can work as well as John, our last, could." This with a dubious glance at the stranger's white, shapely hands.

"Come," she added, hastily, "if you are the new gardener, suppose you go to work at once and help me fill up these baskets; that's what John would have had to do."

"I'm perfectly willing" returned the young man, swinging open the gate, and kneeling down among the green leaves and crimson fruit by her side, the mischievous smile still on his lips.

It was wonderful how quickly the huge baskets were filled up with the glowing, luscious fruit as the hours rolled by.

Once or twice Florabel had reprimanded her companion for stopping to gaze at her; and then again he was a little awkward at handling the huge basket, and generally ate the largest and best of the berries. But, then, he was so good natured, and laughed so loud at her frowns and scoldings, that, before they had passed an hour together, Florabel thought:

"What a really nice young man he is! Even if he is a poor gardener he's as polite as any of the city beaux that come out here to visit Evelyn and Maud."

From their position in the garden they could both see and hear all that transpired on the porch where the girls sat, and Rupert Hale, as the new

gardener called himself, often glanced in their direction with a strange, fun-loving gleam in his blue eyes.

They saw the carriage dash up the broad drive to the porch, and both of the girls step flutteringly forward, blushing and smiling their sweetest.

"Oh! it's papa and Mr. Forrester at last!" cried Maud.

But only the old gentleman emerged from the vehicle.

"Spare your blushes and welcomes, my dears," exclaimed the old squire, bluntly. "Mr. Forrester did not come. The boat was in half an hour before I reached the landing; but it's all the same—he did not come on it."

"How provoking!" cried Evelyn, stamping her slipped foot in vexation.

"What a disappointment!" echoed Maud; "and Eve and I sitting here in our best white dresses waiting him. He will be sure to come tomorrow, but they will be all wrinkled and soiled by that time."

"Florabel shall do them up again to-night," retorted Evelyn, "and every night until he does come, as for that matter."

This event seemed to put the two angry beauties in the worst of temper, and, as usual, they vented their ill humor upon poor Florabel, heedless of the new gardener's presence, upon whom they never once deigned to cast their eyes.

A few days later the new gardener, without a word of warning, mysteriously disappeared. This was sorrowful news for little Florabel, and for a few days her heart was very heavy over his loss; and if she shed a few tears over it, nobody ever knew it.

But, though she missed his handsome, bonny face more than she would admit even to herself, her girlish heart did not break.

"If he can leave without one word of farewell to me, I shall not give him one thought," she told herself; and she did her best to forget him.

As for the young man himself, though whirling away from Deepdale as fast as steam could take him, and never intending to see the place again, a pair of hazel eyes, and a pretty dimple face, framed in crinkled, tawny masses of golden hair, haunted him.

"The little witch is not for me, that's certain," he mused, lighting a choice Havana, and watching the blue smoke as it curled upward. "I was learning to care for her, and that must not be. Her path and mine run in widely different grooves. I must bow to the inevitable, and give up all thoughts of little Florabel, though I might as well own the truth to myself for the first and last time—I love her. Yes, I love her, and I can never give her up—never!"

CHAPTER II

After ten days of ceaseless watching for the expected guest, both Maud and Evelyn gave up all hopes of seeing handsome Max Forrester.

And certainly, with each day, the temper of the two beauties was by no means improved in consequence.

"I—I won't endure Evelyn's scolding any longer," sobbed Florabel one morning. "I shall run away soon, or something quite desperate. I don't

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believe Maud or Evelyn would care. No one cares for me except the poor old squire. He loves me a little, I often think, for poor mamma's sake," she sighed.

"I wonder if it would be right to go to him and tell him how matters stand. Yes, I will," she murmured, brushing away the great pearly tears from her long golden lashes.

She knew where to find him. He was always in the library at this time, looking over the afternoon papers.

Acting on the impulse of the moment, she flew down to the library, knocking timidly at the door. There was no answer, and she pushed the door open, and walked into the room.

The squire sat at his writing desk. He did not raise his head as Florabel entered, and the girl coughed slightly to acquaint him of her presence.

The old squire had always been fond of the beautiful, motherless girl fate had thrown on his hands, and he made no secret of it that she should certainly inherit quite as much of his fortune as his own daughters Evelyn and Maud. Perhaps this was one reason why the two girls had such a bitter hatred in their hearts toward lovely little Florabel.

A great wave of pity stirred Florabel's heart as she saw how white and haggard the old squire's face looked in the waning sunlight.

"Squire Pemberton," she said, softly stealing up behind him, and kneeling down by the side of his chair, "won't you listen for just one moment to something I have to tell you? and, oh, please don't scold me for coming to you to settle a difficulty between Evelyn and me."

The fresh young voice hesitated a little.

No exclamation—no word of surprise broke from the squire's stern, set lips. The portly form never moved from its position; the hand which held the pen, poised ever so slightly over the half written page, did not wander to the bowed, curly head; no soothing voice answered that girlish outburst as it was won't to do.

With a low sob, the girl bent her curly head low, until it rested upon the hand lying idly on the arm of the chair. What was there in that cold, clammy touch that sent such a chill of horror to her heart? She springs to her feet, stoops, and gazes, for one breathless moment, into the pallid face, into the glazed eyes that flash back no look of recognition into her own.

Then a piercing shriek rings through the library.

"Oh, my God! my God! Squire Pemberton is dead!"

Yes, the good old squire was dead, and by his death poor Florabel had lost the only friend she had in the world; and bending frantically over him, calling him piteously by every tender, imploring name, this fair young girl was all unconscious of the terrible complications of fate in store for her which his death would bring about.

For days Pemberton Hall was wrapped in the deepest gloom. Servants came and went, with quiet tread and solemn faces; people came and went on business connected with the final ceremonies. Crushing sorrow and numbing woe reigned everywhere, but, somehow, Florabel lived through those days, and, somehow, found herself settling down into the routine of daily life and duty again.

The funeral was over; the dear, kindly face was gone forever; the chair he had used would be vacant forever of his presence. The house seemed doubly lonely to poor Florabel now; for, since the funeral, Evelyn and Maud had been passing the time in Boston.

The Hall had been closed and the servants discharged, all save Mrs. Whitney, the old housekeeper, and she was but to stay until the end of the coming fortnight.

"I am sure I do not know what you will do after I am gone," she often said, anxiously, to Florabel; "surely they do not intend you to live here and take care of this house all by yourself? The thought troubles me, child; yes, troubles me—I don't know why."

One morning, some ten days after the departure of the young ladies, Florabel and the old housekeeper stood together among the wilderness of roses that rioted in the old garden. There was a puzzled look on the dimpled face of the girl, and a far-away expression in the hazel eyes.

"It is nearly two weeks since I have heard from either Evelyn or Maud, Mrs. Whitney," she said, thoughtfully. "What do you suppose is the matter? Do you think either of them is ill, grieving for the dear old squire?"

The housekeeper flushed uneasily under the gaze of the girl's clear, searching eyes.

She had been standing there beside poor, helpless Florabel, trying, for the last five minutes, to summon up courage to tell her that which she had

"brought her out among the roses to disclose to her, but the words died away unspoken on her lips. Ah, how could she tell her?"

"The mails were delayed this morning, my dear," she said, hesitatingly, "but they brought us several letters." Again her face flushed distressedly. "A letter from a Boston lawyer came for me. Here is one for you. I see, by the envelope, that it is from the same person, presumably."

"A letter for me!" cried Florabel, holding out her white hand. "Cruel Mrs. Whitney, to keep it from me so long. You should have brought it to me at once."

Then she took from the old housekeeper's unwilling hands the letter that was to change the whole current of her eventful young life.

She wondered why Mrs. Whitney still lingered beside her, looking at her with such wistful eyes.

"Throwing off her sun hat, Florabel sat down on the rustic bench beneath the old apple tree, and hastily broke the seal.

"What a very short letter," she said. Then she stopped short with a sudden gasp, the darkness of death falling around her. These were the words that made the pulse of life almost cease beating:

"Miss Florabel Dean—Dear Miss: I have to inform you as administrator settling up the estate of the late Mr. Pemberton, that the sale of Pemberton Hall and the grounds adjoining it has just been effected, and the purchaser is desirous of taking immediate possession. I am requested by the Misses Pemberton to add, they would be pleased if you can find it convenient to find a home elsewhere. Yours very respectfully,

"A. H. Burdick, Attorney and Counselor at Law."

Slowly the letter fell from Florabel's hands and fluttered down among the roses at her feet. A piteous wail broke from her ashen lips, and the light seemed to die out of her eyes. Like one dead, she fell face downward in the long, green grass.

"Oh, little Florabel, my poor lamb, don't take it so hard!" sobbed the old housekeeper, stroking the lovely, tumbled, golden curls. "Don't, dear; you break my heart."

Florabel turned her face away with bitter moans, praying to be left alone, and the old housekeeper walked slowly back to the Hall, believing the most merciful thing she could do for her would be to leave her in solitude to battle with this terrible sorrow alone.

"I shall never enter these doors again after this!" Florabel cried, springing to her feet and dashing the tears from her eyes in bitter despair.

At the end of the chestnut drive she ran straight into the arms of the handsome Rupert Hale, who was approaching with rapid strides. He certainly looked more like a young gentleman of leisure and of fashion, judging from his natty navy blue suit and white straw hat, with the blue band around it, to say nothing of the flashing diamonds that adorned his white, shapely hand.

"I—I thought that you had left the

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village for \$500, Mr. Little," she faltered, timidly.

"So I did; but I have returned, because I cannot stay away. But where are you going, Florabel?" he asked, quickly. "You have been crying. There are traces of tears on your cheeks. What is the matter?"

For answer she placed the lawyer's letter in his hands, sobbing afresh as though her heart would break.

As he read his brow darkened. "Great Heaven! can Evelyn and Maud Pemberton be as heartless as this letter indicates? But I might have anticipated this by what I saw of them when I heard of the squire's sudden death.

"Do not weep, little Florabel. I have something to tell you—something I came up to the Hall to say to you particularly. Can you not guess what it is?" She glanced up at him with shy, startled eyes. He took her little trembling hand in his. "It is this, my darling: I love you, and want you for my own. Do you care for me, Florabel?" he went on, clasping the little hand still more tightly, and bending his handsome face lower over the curly golden head—Do you?"

"I think so," she whispered, shyly, her eyes drooping beneath his gaze.

"Well enough to pardon a—a little deception I have been guilty of?" he asked, eagerly.

"Yes," she faltered, timidly. "Know, then, my little Florabel," he said, softly, "I am not the poor gardener whom you have believed me to be... I am, Max Forrester!"

(To be continued.)

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