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Parted by Fate

By LAURA JEAN LIBBEY

Author of "Parted at the Altar," "Lovely Maiden," "Florabel's Lover," "Ione," Etc., Etc.

CHAPTER XXXIV Continued

"I was so nappy with the whole world," Rutledge told himself, impulsively, "that he ought to make overtures of friendship to his old chum, who had lost what he had won."

All the world seemed joyous, for was he not in the coming fortnight to claim his darling Verlie as his bride?

"Lansing," said Rutledge, touching him lightly on the arm, and addressing him in the old, familiar way, "would you mind walking a short distance with me? I should like to let by-gones be by-gones. I would be pleased to renew the old friendship."

Captain Lansing laughed a harsh, bitter laugh. He drew back haughtily, paling to the lips, his eyes flashing fire.

"Go your way, Rutledge Chester," he cried, fiercely. "You insult me by imagining I could be friendly with the man who has wrecked my life, and stole from me the only woman whom I could ever love."

"I am sorry you look at it in that way," replied Rutledge, with pained gravity. "If you had been successful in winning my Verlie's love, I should have bowed to it as the will of Heaven."

A sneering laugh fell again from Captain Lansing's lips.

"I make no pretense of being a saint," he retorted, bitterly; "and I own frankly, I hate you with all my heart, and I live for the one hope of revenge!" he cried, rashly, scarcely heeding, in his bitterness, the words he was using.

"I hate you so desperately," he went on, recklessly, "that, if I could snatch Verlie Sefton from your arms at the very altar, I should do it, no matter what the cost might be. I would rather see her lying dead at my feet than hear you call the only girl I could ever love your bride."

Every one in the club-room heard the horrible words, and there came an hour in which they remembered them all too well.

"It is useless to ask you to come to our wedding, then?" asked Rutledge, sorrowfully. "I am much grieved, Lansing."

"You know that is false, every word you have uttered," cried Lansing. "You laugh at my defeat, and come here to taunt me with your approaching marriage. I warn you—take care!—beware how you goad me on. I tell you there is a limit to my forbearance in this case."

"Captain Lansing, you forget yourself," said Rutledge, haughtily.

The captain turned with a muttered curse, and, without casting one backward glance at the handsome, pained face of



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the more fortunate lover, strode angrily down the marble steps and on down the avenue.

"Of course his rival's angry words meant nothing," Rutledge told himself, with a forced laugh. Whether they did or not, we are soon to see. Ah, if Rutledge could but have foreseen the horrible future!

CHAPTER XXXIV. THE DECREE OF FATE.

The arrangements for the fatal marriage were nearing completion. Rutledge had endeavored to persuade Verlie not to have the all-important ceremony performed in Black-Tor Light-House; but in this she was not to be shaken from her resolution.

"I love the old, dark stone pile, with the white-capped waves curling about it," she answered, softly. "Do not try to oppose me, Rutledge."

The pretty bridesmaids were delighted at the novel, romantic idea.

"It was decidedly out of the common," they declared, unanimously. "Let the marriage take place at the light-house by all means."

Rutledge had therefore to set to work, sparing neither pains nor money, to make the place a veritable fairy bower for the great occasion. Although Mark Sefton had been raised to great wealth and affluence, he could never be induced to give up possession of the old light-house. It had been placed in the care of a trusted assistant.

It was the merriest party that ever boarded a steam yacht, that stepped on board the Island Queen that 20th day of June.

The ceremony was to take place two days later—on the evening of the 22nd. How proud Nella Sefton was of her beautiful daughter Verlie. As she watched her standing on deck by Rutledge Chester's side, she noted how fond they were of each other; and in that moment a thought of Uldene who had come between them, came to her. Ah, how strange it was that these two young girls had been destined to love the same man. During the whole journey the memory of Uldene haunted her. She could not tell why. She could not forget a remark Uldene had once made, which at the time, although spoken in jest, had made a great impression upon her.

The subject under discussion had been a young lover who had married a year after the death of a pretty sweetheart, who had pined away because her guardian had separated her from this lover. "He should never have married. He should have been true to her memory while his life lasted!" Uldene had cried, her cheeks flushing, and her great, dark, glorious eyes gleaming like stars. Adding, excitedly: "If I had been that girl, I should have come back from my grave to have snatched him from another at the altar. They could not bury me so deep but what I should have risen."

The words haunted the mother's anxious heart, try hard as she could to forget them.

"Uldene is lying cold and dead in her grave," she murmured, gazing down into the blue waves. "She can never come between Verlie and her love again."

There was a merry party waiting at the light-house to receive them, and welcome the bride-elect back to her old home.

"Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam, Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home!"

murmured Verlie, with tears in her pretty blue eyes, as she walked up the well-remembered path, surrounded by her friends.

Early the next morning the bridal trousseau—a marvel of art—arrived. Nedly Temple was alone with Verlie when it was unpacked.

"Oh, do try it on, dear," she cried, enthusiastically. "I cannot wait patiently until to-morrow evening to see the effect. Do try it on. That's a darling."

Against her better judgment, Verlie allowed herself to be persuaded into donning it, even to the tiny white kid slippers, the orange wreath and filmy veil.

"You will look like an angel, Verlie," declared Nedly, impulsively throwing her arms around her friend, and kissing her rapturously. "Rutledge will be the happiest man in the world when he leads you to the altar. Your fair, dazzling loveliness will bewilder the adoring fellow."

"Flatterer!" laughed Verlie, blushing. "I shall take my death of cold in the breeze you're giving me."

The laughter of the two girls was suddenly cut short by the entrance of the old housekeeper.

"You did not hear me knock, I reckon, Miss Verlie. I thought—"

The sentence never was finished. "Good Lord!" gasped the old woman, adding up her hands in dismay, and staring with all her might at the slim, graceful figure that wheeled around from the mirror. "Oh, Lord, if she hadn't got on her wedding gown an' all the fixin's! May the saints preserve us from the unlucky omen! Oh, poor lamb—poor lamb! Take 'em off, quick!"

"What on earth do you mean, my good woman?" exclaimed Nedly, sharply, seeing that all the color had fled from

Verlie's cheeks, and left them pale as marble.

"I mean that's unlucky to try on a weddin' gown, and all the fixin's, on the day before the weddin'," answered the old woman, bluntly. "No good ever comes of it."

"That's all old women's nonsense," declared Nedly, giving her a knowing wink behind Verlie's back, and holding up her little white hand with a warning gesture. "Come, now, Mrs. Dunn, own up that you just said that to have a little fun with Verlie. Why, the girl actually thinks you are in dead earnest." Evidently the blunt old housekeeper was too obtuse to catch Nedly's meaning.

"It's the truth, miss," she stoutly declared, solemnly. "I'd as soon hev seen her a standin' there in her shroud."

"You horrible creature!" cried the exasperated Nedly. "It's positively wicked to croak of evil. Why you make one's blood run cold! Thank goodness I've too much good sense to believe in omens."

"You're a rattle-brained piece, with no sense to speak of to spare," mumbled the old woman, quitting the room, and banging the door after her.

Nedly's sharp ears had heard, however, and a wicked, rollicking laugh floated after her.

Nedly was just the girl to talk Verlie out of what she had heard; and in half an hour's time, surrounded by her girl friends, she had quite forgotten the unpleasant occurrence.

On that same day—aye, that very hour—a strange scene was being enacted in the little cottage in which hapless Uldene had found shelter.

The delirium of fever which had kept her senses enthralled had at last subsided, and she opened her dark eyes to consciousness.

For one moment the large, pathetic eyes studied the white, anxious face bending over her.

"Where am I?" she cried, starting up from her couch—in the greatest bewilderment.

"You have been ill for many days," answered Miss Lennox, pushing the heavy, dark curls from the white face on her pillow. "Do you not remember me, my dear?"

At the sound of her voice memory rushed back to Uldene's busy brain in an instant.

"I remember all," she murmured, faintly. "You say I have been ill many days," she said, wonderingly.

"Quite two weeks," declared Miss Lennox. "The bridesmaid dress came in to me to make on the day you were taken ill. It was finished and delivered a week ago."

(To be Continued.)

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