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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 II.—(Continued.)

A cry of dismay broke from Florabel's lips; but he held the little slim, white, fluttering hand closer, continuing, rapidly:

"The spirit of mischief led me into the deception when you innocently raised those dark eyes to mine, and, mistaking me for the new gardener who was expected, bade me go to work and assist you. The situation was novel to me, and, highly amused, I carried out the deception. I honestly believe there was fate in it, Florabel," he continued. "For, otherwise we might never have met and learned to care for each other. I went away and did my best to forget you, but I could not; and now I am here to plead with you to be my wife, little Florabel."

"Your wife!" she echoed in dismay, looking up at him with dark, startled eyes. "Oh, that could never be now!"

"Why not?" he asked, quickly. "Don't you love me?"

"It is not that," faltered Florabel, naively.

"Then what is it?" he whispered, bending his handsome head still nearer the blushing, down-cast face.

"I could never be your wife, because you are so far above me," she replied, chokingly. "If you are Max Forrester you must be very rich indeed; I have heard Evelyn and Maud say so, and I am only poor—little—little—"

She could not have touched handsome Max Forrester more deeply.

"You are a little darling," he interrupted, hastily, clasping the little roseleaf hand he held still closer.

"Wealth shall be no barrier between us, Florabel," he cried. "What is all the wealth in the world compared to love? Love outweighs everything. Be my bride, and all I have in this world shall be yours. Even though you bid me go away and forget you, I could not do it. I cannot live without you: so say 'Yes,' dear."

Pretty little Florabel looked up at him, so bewildered between sorrow and joy, so dazzled by the happiness that fate had sent her, yet so piteously uncertain, that handsome Max was more charmed with her than ever.

The glamor of love was upon him; he could see no faults in artless little Florabel.

True, she knew little of learning or books. She was like an untamed robin—beautiful as a wild flower is beautiful—a child of nature, not art; and Max, used as he was to city belles and their caprices, declared to himself he liked Florabel all the better for being simple, sweet and true.

That rosebud mouth was meant for kisses, not grammar.

Other men had cared little enough for the world's opinion, and had married just such girls, and had had a happy life of it. Why shouldn't he?

He stood beside her, watching the conflict going on in the girl's heart.

"I lay my life, my love and my happiness in the two little white hands I am clasping," he murmured.

"Remember, the fate of two hearts depends upon the answer you give me."

He was so handsome, so eager, so thoroughly the impassioned lover. His hands were clinging to her own—his pleading, bonny blue eyes regarding her so intently.

He forgot the terrible stern anger of the stern father, who never forgave or forgave, which would be so sure to follow. Handsome Max forgot everything save his love for the fair young girl standing beside him.

As for Florabel, she was young and impressive. It was sweet to be wooed in such a fashion—to have such promise of love and devotion made to her, and hear such a loving voice pleading with her—and then it would be so nice to have a husband to care for and protect her.

With the girl's natural craving for love and protection, it could end but one way.

"Is it to be 'yes,' or 'no,' Florabel?" he asked, eagerly.

The peachy bloom on her face deepened.

"Yes," she murmured, shyly, and in the prettiest girlish confusion.

He caught her to his heart in a rapture of delight.

"We will be married at once," he declared; "delays are dangerous sometimes. From this hour we belong to each other. We will be made one in

name as well as in 'hédit' within the hour. Are you willing?"

And again she answered, "Yes."

The wind that stirred the lily-bells and the roses near her seemed to die over the river in a long, low wail, as though it knew and realized that a human soul was in danger—aye, in most piteous peril. The birds flew from their nests in the apple tree above their heads with startled cries, as though they were warning her to beware. But if Florabel heard, she did not heed them.

She married handsome Max—and that was the beginning of one of the most pitiful stories that ever was written. And yet young girls will sigh for love, even though they weep tears of pity over beautiful, hapless Florabel's sad fate.

CHAPTER III.

The ceremony was over, and the news of the marriage was soon blazoned over the village.

The strange romance connected with the affair delighted everybody, and before nightfall every one in Deepdale knew the romantic story of how the great New York millionaire's handsome, reckless son had fallen in love at first sight with the pretty, dimpled face of shy little Florabel Dean; and how he had passed himself off as a common gardener, that he might be thrown into her society; of the cruelty of the Pemberton girls in asking her to leave the Hall after the old squire's death; and how handsome Max Forrester had thrown off his disguise and married her.

Maud and Evelyn Pemberton heard the whole story with the greatest amazement and dismay, and their intense anger and rage toward Florabel knew no bounds.

Now they understood why they had waited in vain for the coming of Max Forrester. Florabel's pretty face had been the magnet that had attracted him from them.

"Just think of all the scoldings he has heard us give that girl when we supposed he was only the new gardener," groaned Evelyn.

"It cannot be helped now," returned Maud. "He's married now, and there's no use wasting your thoughts and regrets on a married man."

"True," cried Evelyn, bitterly; "but I shall always hate Florabel for this. But for her, either you or I might have been Max Forrester's bride."

"The low marriage he has made will be a bitter blow to his relatives, and to that New York heiress who felt so sure of winning him," returned Maud, maliciously. "I shall write and tell them she need not claim relationship with us; none of our blood flows in her veins. Revenge is sweet, you know. I shall give her a good setting out." And, true to her word, the letter was sent.

Max took his little bride to Washington. He knew that everything there would be a novelty to her—hotel life, perhaps, the greatest of all—and Florabel was quite as delighted as he had expected she would be.

A week passed away like a happy dream to both of them.

Max was too much in love with pretty little Florabel to notice any imperfections in her. As yet there

was not the faintest cloud to mar their happiness.

A thousand times each day handsome Max thanked Heaven that he had wedded this fair young girl-wife.

It was so blissful to be loved for himself with such passionate devotion, and Florabel loved him so dearly.

Her education had been rather neglected, it was true; but what did he care for that? A few little eccentricities were less than nothing compared with her wonderful beauty. Besides, he could teach her.

"I suppose we may as well think about going home soon," he said one morning to Florabel.

She looked up at him with startled eyes.

"We are so happy here, Max," she answered, piteously. "Must we really go?"

And her heart grew heavy at the thought.

"Yes," he declared. "We cannot stay here forever. Besides, father will be needing me."

"Are we to live with your relatives, Max?" she asked, wistfully.

"For the present," he answered. "You know you have married a rich man's son; but I haven't much in my own right yet," he continued. "Eventually I shall inherit my father's wealth—though Heaven grant the time be distant—as I am his only son and heir. I may as well tell you something else, too. My father and mother have always had grand views for me. They expected me to marry well. By that I mean some one in their own social rank."

Tears began to gather in the lovely, childish, hazel eyes, shaded by the long curling lashes.

"I am so sorry, Max," she said, faintly. "I am afraid they will be angry with you for marrying me, and—and—want to take you from me. Then I shall surely die."

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He laughed merrily.

"By telling you this I merely wished to explain to you a few matters, Florabel," he said. "Be reasonable and listen."

She came to his side obediently, knelt down on the velvet hassock by his chair, and looked up wistfully in his face.

"There is a young girl visiting the house, whose parents are dear friends of mother's. They—my father and mother—have always been badgering my life out about marrying this girl. I have never met her, having seen only her portrait. But when it comes to marriage I believe every man should choose for himself."

(To be continued.)

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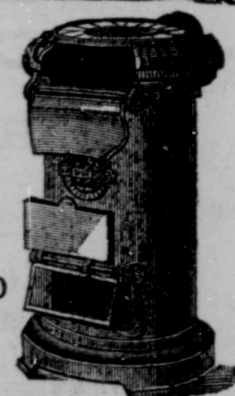
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