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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.

The early rays of a sunshine morning glint with a touch of crimson and gold, a tall, square, gray stone house, half buried by climbing roses and grand old trees, that stands on the banks of the green sloping hill that overlooks the little village of Deepdale, on the banks of the Kennebec. The sunlight slants down through the net work of blossoms that twine about the porch, upon the faces of two young and lovely girls—one swinging to and fro in a hammock, her sun hat tilted down over her fair curls, and the other walking up and down the long porch in quite a fever of excitement.

They are Evelyn and Maud Pemberton, the acknowledged beauties and belles of the village.

Dark eyed Evelyn is two and twenty; her fair haired sister is eighteen.

The cause of their flushed cheeks and expectant faces on this particular morning was due to the letter their father, Squire Pemberton, had received the day before, and which read as follows:

"My Dear Mr. Pemberton:—My son Max has business to attend to for me near Deepdale, and will take the opportunity of running up there to make the acquaintance of yourself and charming daughters. He will come up on the 9 a. m. boat, Tuesday next. Yours in great haste.

Herman Forrester.

This announcement had caused quite a flutter of excitement in the hearts of the squire's two pretty daughters.

"We must give the young man a hearty welcome," declared the squire. "The son of such a father must be a noble fellow."

"Wouldn't it be a splendid idea to give a grand lawn party in honor of his coming?" said Evelyn, when the two girls were discussing the affair an hour after.

"A yachting party over to the island would be so much nicer," declared Maud, adding, eagerly: "One of the girls who was visiting in the village last summer knows him well, and was always speaking of him. She said: 'He's a gay, dashing young fellow, handsome as a Saxon prince, whom all the girls are sure to fall in love with at first sight. He has but one fault. He cannot resist a pretty face—'"

Here Maud stopped short. "Well, why don't you finish what you commence to tell?" said Evelyn, impatiently. "I want to hear all about him."

"Well, why don't you give me time?" replied Maud, continuing: "They say he is as good as engaged to an heiress, and he will marry her soon unless he meets a prettier girl before the matrimonial noose is slipped about his neck."

"If handsome Max Forrester is as fickle as all that, who knows but what either you or I might cut this heiress out," laughed Evelyn, glancing complacently in the mirror, which certainly reflected a very beautiful face. "I say, Maud," she went on, "let's make a secret bargain. If you find that handsome Max prefers my dark style of beauty, do, for pity's sake, give me a chance will you?"

"And what if he should happen to take a notion to me?" asked Maud, a little nettled at her sister's cool assurance.

"Then let's both try to win him," answered Evelyn. "That reminds me," she exclaimed, springing from the willow rocker, and stepping to the lace-draped window, "I must call Florabel Dean, and have her get our white dresses and do them up at once."

"Florabel! Flor-a-bel!" she called, sharply, from the window. "Come here at once."

A slim young girl, standing in the peach orchard, crested her golden head and listened. Over the waving roses, and through the green boughs of the trees, came the sound of the shrill voice again calling: "Florabel! Flo-ra-bel!"

Florabel Dean turned and walked hurriedly back to the house.

"Did you call, Evelyn?" she asks, thrusting a gypsyish face and a tawny head, covered with crinkling curls, in at the door.

"Did I yell? you had better ask," snaps Evelyn Pemberton, crossly.

The constant abrasion and decay of our lives make the coil of our future growth

"Yes, I called. I want you to go up to my room and fetch down my white organdie muslin dress and Maud's. They're to be done up so we can have them to put on the first thing in the morning."

"But," gasped pretty little Florabel Dean, in dismay, "I did them up only yesterday."

"Well, what if you did?" retorts Evelyn, coolly. "They're wrinkled, and have to be done up all over again to-day."

"Of course they will have to be done over again," puts in Maud.

Florabel Dean turned away with a little sigh, and ran directly into the arms of Squire Pemberton, who had just entered the room in time to hear that sigh and Evelyn's remark.

When Florabel got out of sight and hearing, he turned, with an angry frown on his face, to his daughters.

"It's about time you two girls were beginning to feel ashamed of the way you treat poor little Florabel Dean," he declared. "You must put a stop to it. Why don't each of you do up your own dresses, and not put everything on poor Florabel to do?"

Both of the girls glanced down at their own pretty pink and white palms, then indignantly back to the squire.

"Why shouldn't Florabel Dean do up our dresses, I should like to know?" demanded Evelyn, arching her brows haughtily. "She ought to expect to work for the bread she eats. She's no blood relative of ours, I'm sure."

No blood relative! That was quite true; but the words brought back a strange sensation to the squire's heart.

And his thoughts flew back to that summer day, long years before, when the governess he had advertised for to teach his motherless daughters, appeared at the Hall, heavily draped in widow's weeds, and holding a young child by the hand.

"I could not leave my little Florabel behind," she said, raising her sweet, appealing eyes to the squire's face. "If I can only keep her with me I will accept a much smaller salary than the price you have named."

He was tender of heart, and so the widow's little child was allowed to remain.

A hard enough life the young governess had of it with the squire's daughters, and she would have left the Hall in despair if the squire had not begged her to stay as his wife.

The new state of affairs made matters a thousand times worse. The squire's daughters made the poor bride's life a torture. She had wedded into a cold world that chilled and blighted her, and she faded like a flower. In less than a year from the time she married the squire she was buried under the old willow in the churchyard, leaving her darling, her idol, poor little Florabel, then a child of five, quite alone in the world. Yes, alone—Heaven help her!—to meet, unaided, the strangest fate that ever crossed the life of a young girl.

That had been twelve long years ago, and Florabel still lived on at Pemberton Hall. The neighbors knew what kind of a life lovely Florabel had of it; but the good old squire never dreamed of how matters existed under his own roof.

All that summer day, while Evelyn

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and Maud swung in the hammocks on the vine-wreathed porch, Florabel Dean, the pretty little creature who owed her daily bread to the old squire's bounty, was toiling, hot and flushed, over the white organdie muslin dresses which were to adorn the young ladies on the morrow, and after that she had to prepare the room for the coming guest.

The morrow, as well as being baking day, would be quite a busy day for Florabel. She would have to gather fruit for preserving from the orchard, for at that critical time John, the gardener, had taken it into his head to leave without a moment's warning.

Another gardener had been sent for, but in all probability he would not show his face for a day or so. And poor Florabel sat down among the finery of the guest's room with something like a sob as she thought of the heavy baskets of fruit that her tired hands, and hers alone, must gather on the morrow, and probably the next day, before the new gardener would come to her assistance.

Despite the lateness of the hour of her retiring, Florabel was up with the sun the next morning, and while Evelyn and Maud sat on the vine-wreathed porch in their finery, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the handsome guest—for the squire had gone down with the carriage to the landing some quarter of an hour before—Florabel had tied on her broad brimmed sun hat, and had gone down through the orchard to the strawberry beds to commence her day's task, little dreaming that each step brought her nearer to her fate.

Florabel set down her basket, and was soon busily at work.

"I wonder if they will have that yachting party Maudie was speaking about, when the guest they are expecting comes, and if they will invite me. But of course they won't," she murmured, half aloud.

(To be continued.)

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