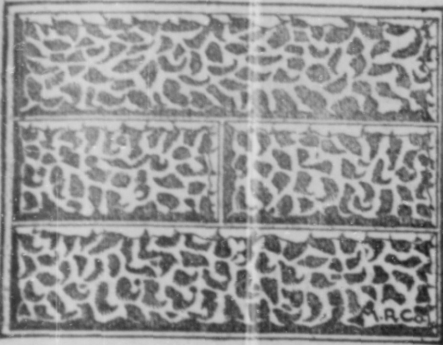


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FLORABEL'S LOVER

By LAURA JEAN LIBBEY

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

SYNOPSIS.

Florabel was a dependent of her step-father, Squire Pemberton. His daughters hate Florabel, and when the Squire dies, order her out of the old home. Max Forester a rich young man marries her and introduces her into his family, the members of which disapprove of his marriage, as they wanted him to marry Miss Claverling, an heiress.

CHAPTER XIV—(Continued.)

"The poor little thing must be given a name," said the matron, as she handed the baby over to an attendant. "With face so sweet, she should have a very pretty name."

It must have been the very irony of fate that suggested itself to her to call baby "Flora"—Flora Winters.

Inez reached the house, and gained Florabel's chamber without having been missed.

It was quite half an hour later ere Florabel opened her eyes. Inez bent quickly over her.

"Is it a dream, Inez," she whispered, vaguely, "or was there a little child? Have I really a—little child?"

"Try to forget it, dear," murmured guilty Inez. "There was a little child, but it is no more, and it was taken away. You must forget it."

Florabel sobbed aloud. "Taken away before I had time to kiss its little face!" she sobbed, piteously. "Ah, Heaven, why must I lose everything I love? I should have loved it so much."

"You must be content," returned Inez, hoarsely.

"How can I be content with my heart and my arms both empty?" moaned poor Florabel. "Oh, Inez, it is hard, very hard. I wish I had died, too, with poor baby. It was a little girl, wasn't it, Inez?"

"Yes, but you must not talk about it; you will make yourself ill," declared Inez, nervously. "Here, drink this; it is a quieting draught."

Florabel quietly obeyed. An hour later Mrs. Burgoyne came to relieve Inez.

"Why, where is the baby?" she cried out, in amazement, as she turned the coverlet down.

"Hush!" whispered Inez, cautiously. "The child died and the doctor took it away with him."

The steady gaze of the cold, hard, brilliant eyes that met Mrs. Burgoyne's never flinched.

"The child died!" muttered Mrs. Burgoyne, when she found herself alone. "A likely story for you to attempt to make me believe, Inez Claverling. You have made away with it in some fashion. I will make it my business to find out where it is; then I will have you in my power. You shall pay me handsomely for holding my tongue, or I will go to this girl and tell her all."

"How do you like the new comer?" chorused the girls, gathering around their leader at lunch hour.

"I hate her," muttered Aletha Van Horn, in a low voice.

One of her companions laughed aloud.

"That is because she has a pretty face, and you are afraid your lover, the floor manager, may fall in love with her, Aletha," she declared.

The rest all tittered, for they knew it was the truth.

"If he should fall in love with her pretty pink and white face, I would make her rue the day she ever came here, I can tell you that much."

As Aletha glanced in the direction of the handsome young floor manager, Charlie Whitney, she turned deathly pale. He was watching Florabel with his heart in his eyes. Ah, if Florabel could have but foreseen the horrible end of this affair.

Weary life had commenced again for poor Florabel; death would not come for the asking.

The day came at last when she told Inez she could consent to be a burden upon her no longer.

"I will never make another appeal to Max to take me back to his heart, now that baby is dead," she said, her lovely eyes filling with tears.

"The time has come when I must do something for myself."

"What could you do?" asked Inez, curiously.

"Whatever I can get to do," responded Florabel, bravely. "I was speaking to Mrs. Burgoyne about it yesterday, and she was telling me of a vacancy in one of the large dry goods stores. I might try there."

"If I can be of any use to you at any time in the future you have but to command me," said Inez.

"Will you write to me once in a while, Inez, and tell me how he is? I am different from him. If he were ill, I would go to the other end of the world to him. Ah, that is true love, Inez. I thought when I married Max he loved me like that."

"Max was always fickle in love affairs, as his mother says. Have spirit about you, Florabel. Show him your heart is not broken."

"But it is broken," declared Florabel, piteously. "Any one who looks in my face can see that."

There were many applicants for the vacancy in the great dry goods house already waiting when Florabel reached there the following morning. It was from the many Florabel was selected for the position. Her pretty face and modest, retiring manners pleased the proprietor, Mr. Wallingford, immensely. Here, also, Florabel gave her name as Miss Dean.

"You may commence your duties as soon as convenient," he said.

"You are to be in the ribbon department. Miss Van Horn, one of the young ladies in charge, will show you all that is required."

In all working places, wherever there are a number of young ladies employed, there is always one who reigns supreme over the other girls; and in this mammoth dry goods house, Aletha Van Horn, a pretty, dark eyed brunette, was the ruling spirit.

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CHAPTER XXV.

The first day of Florabel's life at Messrs. Wallingford & Co.'s was one of many trials. Intuitively she felt that she was not liked by the young girls about her, and that was a cruel experience to one as sensitive as Florabel. She little imagined their dislike was caused by envy of her beautiful face.

Charlie Whitney, the young manager, had fallen in love with her at first sight; that was clearly apparent to every one; and in proportion to his admiration Aletha Van Horn hated her.

There was no end of petty annoyances that she did not subject poor Florabel to, until at last life became almost unendurable to Florabel. She found buffeting with the world pitifully hard.

And, to add to her trouble and alarm, the young manager became marked in his attentions to her.

He insisted upon calling at her boarding place, and became bitterly angry because she refused repeatedly to go riding with him.

And at last that which she began to dread came about. At last young Mr. Whitney asked her to be his wife.

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"You are very kind," said Florabel, with tears in her eyes. "and I shall always thank you for paying me the honor; but, indeed, Mr. Whitney, I can never marry you."

"Why?" he demanded.

"In the first place, I do not love you," faltered Florabel.

"You will learn to love me in time!" he cried, eagerly. "I am willing to marry you without love, and trust to the future for you to learn to care for me."

"No, no," faltered Florabel. "It can never be."

"Many a girl—Miss Van Horn, for instance—would jump at an offer of marriage from me," declared the young fellow, vainly.

"I repeat that I appreciate your offer; but, though you were King Olaf himself, I would not marry you. I could not."

"Take care, Miss Dean!" he cried. "The warmest love can cool; the most ardent passion turn to hate. Do not make an enemy of me. Remember I have it in my power to discharge you if I will."

"I shall not make that necessary," returned Florabel, proudly. "I intend to leave. I can endure the persecutions I receive here no longer."

Young Whitney was furious.

"You must not—you shall not leave. Why, do you know I could prevent you from obtaining employment in any other place, if I wanted to?"

"Would you be so mean, so cowardly, as to interfere with my chances of earning a livelihood? If that is the case, you disgrace the word gentleman; your love is an insult."

"You shall have cause to bitterly rue these words," he answered, with a taunting laugh.

(To be continued.)

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