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A BROKEN BETROTHAL

By Laura Jean Libbey

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

He was obliged, however, to put all thoughts of Theo from his mind, for the time being, as this case of a voice affection, upon which he had been called upon to consult, had assumed dangerous proportions, and all the skill of the physicians combined was called into requisition.

At this state of affairs, one of the experienced nurses of the institution, who had watched untiringly by Violet's couch, succumbed to overexertion and fatigue, and, in spite of the pleadings of one of the gentle sisters, Theo could not refuse to take her place at her rival's bedside for that night, until a nurse could be substituted on the following morning.

"Is there such great danger, doctor?" Theo had asked, in apprehension, as the consulting physicians rose to take their leave.

It was Dr. Melville who answered.

"So great," he replied, gravely, "that if these drops we leave with you should fail to be given her exactly on the stroke of the midnight hour, her life would pay the forfeit ere the day dawned."

Silently and gravely the physicians filed from the room, leaving these two alone together.

For hours as the moments dragged slowly by, Theo watched the beautiful white face lying so still against the pillow—watched it with a strange fierce, yearning pain at her heart.

"But for you, he might have loved me," murmured Theo, watching the contour of Violet's lovely face. "He was betrothed to me by words that were solemn as life itself, and registered in the angel's book in heaven. You came between us; he loved your fair face better than he did mine, and he chafed against the fetters that bound him to me until I set him free. Yes, I set him free that he might marry you; my rival. You have cursed my life, Violet. My life is ruined because our betrothal was broken," she murmured, wringing her white hands together with an hysterical sob, "and all for the sake of your fair face, Violet—all for the sake of your fair face! But have you possessed with the lover you wrested from me, Violet? Ah, no, no! He who is false to one can seldom be true to another. You won him from poor, unhappy, thoughtless, loving Theo—I could have won him from you again, in turn," "Won him!" Her heart almost ceased to beat at the thought. There could be no thought of winning or losing won him, while Violet lived.

"While Violet lived!" How the strange words seemed to hang her! Pity of it was that she dared to listen to the strange, sibilant voice that was whispering to her heart.

Long hours Theo sat there with only her thoughts for companions—and there was danger in that.

"If Violet were dead," that same terrible voice whispered to her beating heart, "Harry Strathmore—the lord of her life, the one above all others to whom her soul yearned with a passionate yearning—would be free!"

How strangely her heart beat at the thought! Her terrible folly first commenced in not putting the thought from her. There was danger in ruminating over it—a peril so horrible that she should have shunk from it.

Slowly the clock on the mantle ticked the hours away. It wanted five minutes now to the time she must give Violet the life-giving cordial.

The doctor's words recurred to her with a strange thrill: "The patient's danger is so great that if these drops we leave with you shall fail to be given her exactly on the stroke of the midnight hour, her life would pay the forfeit ere the day dawned."

It wanted five minutes to that time now. Theo reached out her white hand for the vial. Something seemed to clutch at her nerveless fingers, holding them spellbound, and the same still, small, tempting voice whispered, more boldly, because she had listened to it:

"Why should you save your rival—the woman who stands between you and the hopes of a lifetime, the one who stands between you and love and happiness? You would but have to sit still and motionless in your chair with your hands clasped together in your lap while the moments drained themselves by. The result would be freedom for the one you love. Decide your own future. Will you have the love your heart craves, or doom yourself to eternal misery?"

The clock on the mantel was on the stroke of twelve now. With slow, measured chimes it tolled the midnight hour.

She grasped the vial with her white death-cold hands and slowly poured out the glittering life-giving drops, as the doctor had minutely directed—the drops that were to give Violet life and love, and doom her whose white hand gave it to the depths of despair, such as always follows a life bereft of love—a loveless life.

Five—ten drops she poured out with a shaking hand, and, with a face pallid as marble, she approached Violet's couch.

"I can give no love, no happiness—doom yourself to everlasting wretchedness and a desolate, loveless life like this!" cried the same still, small, mocking voice.

The girl had listened too long. The terrible force of the mightiest temptation that ever sued for the mastery of a human heart overcame her.

Theo had listened too long to the tempting voice of conscience. With a cry of remorse, pitiful in its struggling despair, Theo dashed the silver spoon with its glittering contents from her. Violet should not be saved to enjoy Harry Strathmore's love!

The hour and the moment had come and gone. She threw up her hands, with a wild, hushed cry, and fell by the couch of the girl whose doom she had decided, in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

The faint into which Theo had fallen lasted for long hours. The gray dawn was struggling through the clouds in the eastern sky, and the clock on the mantel had slowly chimed the hour of two as she opened her dark, terrified eyes.

Theo sprang to her feet with a low cry. Was it some terrible dream she had had that clutched so heavily at her heart? Her eyes encountered the spoon lying upon the carpet, then the white face of Violet against the pillow; and then Heaven help her, she remembered all, and the cry of agony she uttered was fearful to hear.

How white Violet's face looked in the gray uncertain light! She resembled a corpse as she lay dead.

"God be merciful to me!" moaned the girl. "Oh, Violet, Violet, I am terrified at what I have done! If I could give my life to save your, I would do it! Oh, Violet, Violet!"

When the doctors entered and gathered around Violet's bedside, what was that slightly English face of them? Would they discover the cause of death? What could she say in defence? That sleep had overcome her, and the hours had gone by?

Sleep! How could she say that she had dared to sleep when a human life was entrusted to her care?

Oh, could the love of man ever atone for what she was suffering then? Kneeling there beside Violet's couch, she suffered a lifetime of misery.

How the terrible moments passed she never knew. She heard the tread of feet in the corridor without, and she knew that it was the consulting physicians—they were coming at last.

The gentle sisters were with them; she could hear their low hushed voices—she could hear their expressions of hope that they would find the beautiful stranger's condition greatly improved—the powerful medicine would bring her back from the gates of death, if anything could.

How Theo cowered as she heard the words—how she wished that God in His mercy would strike her dead for yielding to the horrible temptation to withhold the life-giving cordial from her rival's lips!

They had called her the "Angel of the Helpless." Oh, if they but knew—oh, if they but knew what she had done!

Softly they opened the door and entered, advancing at once to Violet's couch. One of them crossed over to the window, drew aside the heavy curtains, and let in a flood of bright, invigorating sunshine.

"How is our patient this morning?" asked one of the doctors, taking one of the white hands in his and bending his ear down to listen to the faint throbbings of the sufferer's heart.

The words were addressed to Theo; but she dared not look up or raise her head from the coverlet, lest they should read horrible guilty fear and despair in her death-white face and terror-stricken eyes. She neither moved nor spoke. She could not have replied if her life had depended upon the utterance of a single word.

For a moment that seemed the length of eternity to the guilty girl, a death-like silence reigned in the room.

"Were the doctors looking at each other with horror in their faces? Theo wondered vaguely. "Would the horrible stillness be broken by the stern awful words: 'What does this mean? the cordial has not been given the patient,' for of course the wise doctors would know—oh, yes, they would know.

How oppressive the silence grew! Were they pointing to her with significant glances? How she wished she dare raise her face and see what this silence meant—see what was passing around her.

It was one of the sisters who spoke—the sister who said Theo was rightly named when they called her the "Angel of the Helpless."

She had bent over the lovely white face lying against the pillow with hatred breath, then a sharp cry broke from her lips.

"Doctor," she cried, her low, sweet voice quivering with alarm and pain, "this is not life! See, the gray pallor around the lovely mouth, the glaze of death is creeping over those eyes, death-damp stands out on the blue-veined forehead. The sight of death is not new to me; the gift is dying!"

Ah, me, how the wind among the trees, whose leafy branches fluttered against the casement, seemed to take up the word with the low, moaning shriek and whisper it to the wide world outside. And it whispered something else, too—something that caused Theo, kneeling in such abject terror at Violet's bedside, to know and understand.

They wondered vaguely why the doctors did not answer the startling, reproachful words that fell from the gentle sister's lips.

"The lovely young stranger is dying, doctor," repeated the sister, sobbingly.

"It looks strangely, strangely like it," responded one of the physicians gravely. "If you ladies will kindly leave the room we will hold a consultation. This case seems to have taken an unlooked-for unusual turn. I am mystified. As you say, good sister, the young girl before us has every appearance of death."

Only Heaven alone knew of the superhuman effort Theo put forth to prevent giving utterance to the shrieks of terror that seemed to rise up in her throat and kill her.

Like one stricken blind, she struggled up from her knees and groped her way with unsteady steps from the room.

No one seemed to notice her—every thought seemed bent upon Violet. She made her way down the cool, wide corridor, past the wards of the many who had blessed her and kissed the folds of her robe with reverent lips, calling her the "Angel of the Helpless."

How stealthily she crept past them, her beautiful golden head bent heavily and dejectedly on her breast—crept down into the silence of the garden, throwing herself upon her knees among the long grasses, and lifting her white, agonized face to the morning sunlight. She dared not pray, though the white lips moved dumbly. There was no pardon for what she had done.

Glancing up at Violet's window she saw the doctors move hurriedly to and fro with white faces. She knew well what that meant. Oh, yes, she knew! It told her throbbing heart that Violet was dead.

But such was not really the case, however. We must go back a little to the midnight hour when Theo sat at Violet's bedside. At the moment Theo had raised the vial in her death-cold hands and turned toward Violet's couch, a firm, white hand had turned the knob softly, pushed open the door and stood on the threshold.

It was Dr. Melville. He had been detained by other patients in the building, and was just preparing to depart when he found that he had left his medicine-case in the ward where Violet Kensington lay.

He had returned for it, entering the room noiselessly, thinking he would be in time to administer the cordial to Violet himself.

He entered the apartment as we have just said, just as Theo was turning toward the bedside.

The expression of her face startled him, holding him spell-bound, and the low muttered words that fell from her colorless, compressed lips held him fascinated to the spot.

Was it fancy or did he hear her murmur faintly as I lent over Violet:

"God forgive me, the terrible temptation has conquered me! I shall not save her to enjoy the love that but for her would now be mine! She has cheated me out of my life, ruined my life! Why should I raise my hand to save her? I will not!"

Then to his deep horror and dismay, he saw her dash the spoon with its contents upon the floor, throw up her white hands, and fall headlong beside Violet's couch in a dead faint.

Dr. Melville crossed swiftly to the table, picked up another spoon, poured out from the vial the required amount, and forced it down the sufferer's lips as the clock on the mantel in slow, measured strokes, tolled the midnight hour.

Violet was now in God's hands; she died, mortal agency was not now responsible for it.

It would be more merciful for us not to attempt to restore her," he thought with compassionate pity, looking down upon Theo's white face. "It is best that she should come to by herself."

As silently as Dr. Melville had entered the room he quitted it. The heavy in his bosom as heavy as lead.

He had made a startling discovery. He had received a terrible shock. His faith in womankind was crushed.

Yet, what his eyes had seen, his ears heard, he was bound to believe.

How long Theo knelt in the garish sunlight among the tall grasses, she never knew. A step roused her; she looked up in affright and saw one of the doctors approaching.

"He is coming to tell me Violet's fate," she thought. "He knows all. He has come to accuse me. Heaven pity me! What shall I do?"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

The doctor rapidly came nearer. A vague presentiment crossed Theo's mind that he was searching for her and a wild, mad impulse to fly—to hide—to anywhere—anywhere, occurred to her.

She saw now how imminent was her peril. She had stood quietly by while the life of Harry Strathmore's bride had slowly drifted out, without lifting her hand to save her; yet she might have saved her if she would.

Ah, yes! she could have saved her, but she did not. Now they were coming to accuse her for it.

With a white, ghastly face, and eyes dilating with fear, she struggled to her feet, and fled swiftly through the green, sunlit grounds that surrounded the hospital—ran fleetly, swiftly, to hide in the thick green covers of the park; but the swift footsteps seemed to gain upon her. It was no delusion, then; they had discovered what she had done, and they were pursuing her. At that moment she was mad with fear.

And of all the pain she had suffered since her path and Violet's had first crossed—pain of blighted love, the keen, torturing pangs of bitterest jealousy, temptation and remorse—none was so great as this she felt hiding among the green trees on which the golden sunlight fell—hiding in sorrow, in shame and in fear.

No one could deny the swift and sure punishment of sin who could have seen that white, terror-distorted face, and the wild, frightened eyes peering out from the midst of the thick green leaves.

She had hoped that the doctor had not seen her—that he would pass her by; but when he had reached the line of bushes behind which she crouched in the long green grass, he paused. With folded arms, young Dr. Melville gazed pityingly down upon the white-faced girl, cowering at the foot of the guarded beech-trees.

With gentle hands he raised her, placing her upon one of the garden chairs. He was touched by the sight of her utter terror and abject fear. Alas! how fatally lovely she was in her helplessness. Even had he come there to condemn her, he would have found that the words would have died unuttered on his lips.

The dark eyes looking down into her own with such a strange light in them terrified her more than words could have done.

"It is right that you should feel remorse for what you have done—or rather for what you failed to do. Still, you need not stand in such terror of me, although I know all. I, and I alone, possessed of last night's mystery," he said, slowly.

With a superhuman effort, Theo raised her dark, dazed eyes to his face.

"Oh, sir, as you are strong, be merciful!" she answered. "I was so sorely tempted. I did not mean to do wrong; I could have died sooner than harm one hair of Violet's head. I—oh, be merciful and spare me!"

"I do not want to be anything but merciful," he said, gently. "At the same time I cannot be just." The cry of mortal terror that fell from her lips was painful to hear; then she looked up into his face with the calmness of utter despair.

"I shall not be harsh and cruel to you," he went on, decidedly. "I would rather shield you than betray you. I will tell you why I would keep the knowledge of what you have done from the world." He went on with sorrowful gentleness. "It is because I once loved you, Theo Chester—and I love you still."

A thunder-bolt falling from the sunlit sky at the girl's feet could not have startled her more. This dark, bronzed, bearded doctor, whom she never remembered having seen before, loved her! Why surely the man was mad!

"You have looked into my face and have not recognized me. Suns of foreign countries have tanned me, and, together with this beard, have, I am, no doubt, greatly changed. Look in the opposite one who will befriend and protect you, if you say so, Theo—Dr. Walter Melville, of Roscliff."

A cry of dismay broke from Theo's quivering lips. How strange that she had not recognized him! Yet she looked up into his face, as he spoke, greatly altered.

A sudden inspiration came to her. Could she recall upon him to go away—leave her, and keep her secret? He loved her once well enough to shield her from the world's scorn. Sure, she might influence him now. She would try.

She rose from the garden seat and flung herself on the green grass at his feet, clinging to him with hot, burning hands, as imploringly, as beseechingly, that he was compelled to listen.

"You will not betray me, Dr. Melville?" she sobbed. "By the old love which once filled your heart for me, I pray you to shield me—to never let the world know—and I will atone for it all the years of my life. I was mad to listen to the voice of temptation, madder still to yield to it."

Walter Melville took her burning hands in his, and raised her to her feet, his passionate eyes devouring her fair loveliness. She was more beautiful to him with all her faults than a saint would have been.

"I will shield you, Theo," he said, drawing her so firmly within the shelter of his arms that she could not break away from his clasp. "In one way, and one way only, and that, is that you must be—my wife!" I will show you all consideration. I will swear never to breath one word of the terrible secret that shocked me so—never mention it even to you after to-day. I will not ask you what prompted you to do it—you and I will forget it."

"What would the alternative be?" she whispered, in a voice so hoarse he could scarcely have recognized it as hers.

He stooped down and whispered a few words in her ear.

She fell back in his arms as white as death.

"Give me time," she cried, wildly—"I must have time to think it over."

"I will give you time, Theo," he said. "It is morning now; I will come for my answer here, to this very spot beneath the beeches, when twilight falls. I shall expect to find you here."

He placed her gently on the garden chair from which she had risen, turned, and walked rapidly away.

The sounds of his footsteps died away on the pebbled walk; then, with a cry so bitter it startled even the singing birds in the trees, she fell forward, burying her face in the long grass. The sun shone on her as she lay there, the summer wind swept over her, bearing odors from the hot, fragrant blossoms of the flowers, she lay there long hours, heedless of who might be passing around her, wildly praying for death.

Was it a dream—a hideous nightmare—the events of the last twenty-four hours? she asked herself.

Was she, whom they called the "Angel of the Helpless," she who had always shuddered at the bare mention of sin, she who had grieved with all the pitying tenderness of her heart over a butterfly's broken wing, or a bird's death—could it be true that the blackest and most pitiful of all crimes that a woman could be arraigned against a human being's name was entered against her? Would the world ever pardon her, or visit a harsher judgment upon her than she had visited upon herself?

Had ever a young girl been tempted so cruelly to sin so pitiful, strange a way for mercy's sake?

Had Theo not believed Violet to be Harry Strathmore's bride, she would not have withheld the antidote from those white lips, crying out in the bitterness of her despair:

"Why should I give her back to Harry Strathmore's arms to him who I love better than life itself? I can not, oh, I can not!"

Slowly Theo raised her head from the grass. She saw that the sun was slowly sinking in the west, and she knew that she must have been lying there hours. She dared not raise her eyes to Violet's window as she crept slowly and wearily through the shady paths of the park to the mansion.

How Harry Strathmore would scorn her if he knew what she had done, and she might do worse than the thunderer cast for vengeance against her for withholding his bride's life-giving cordial—a worse and more heinous crime.

The world is severe in its censure and condemnation. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a life for a life, are its sentiments.

Would they deal hardly with her if she refused to marry Dr. Melville, and he told the world what she knew? She grew wild with terror as she thought of it.

Then a fresh access of despair seized her. Marry Dr. Melville, forsooth! Let him demand it, she would. Let him do what he would, she would. Let him do what he would, she would. Let him do what he would