

COQUETTE

The Interesting Story of a Cruel Flirt

By
LEON H. HARDWICK

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floor and through the noisily chatting couples.

Out on the porch it was very cool and pleasant; they found a secluded seat. Lola sat still without uttering a word. Somehow she couldn't. She seemed to be under a spell and for once her gay, frivolous self was abandoned.

Lowell smiled to himself. He could see that already he was affecting this pretty coquette at his side. He was playing a game at which he was a master hand. He turned to Lola and looked into her eyes. "Why so dull and silent, Lola? Don't you like me?" he asked, a bored expression passing over his face.

"Why, of course, I like you," she replied, secretly, hoping that he'd never find how much. "And you? Do you like me?"

Lowell bowed his head. "Very much so." And lapsed back into his stolid silence.

Lola crept to him and brought her face close to his. "You seem to be so bored, so dreadfully indifferent to me, big boy." She stroked the side of his face with the palm of her soft little hand. "And Lola don't like her big moment to act like that," she said coyly and nestled up close to him.

Lowell seemed to become intoxicated with her nearness. A faint odor of some sort of sweet perfume assailed his nostrils. Her fragrant hair and beauty hypnotized him. My, but she was so desirable.

"Oh, yeah," he spoke very low and casual. "Maybe Lola likes her big moment to grab her like this." He put his arms about her tenderly, "and hold her tightly to him."

Lola was thrilled through and through. She knew at that moment that Lowell appealed to her inner self. She seemed to want him madly. Placing her arms about his neck she raised her head until her lips sought his, but Lowell drew back slightly. Surprised, Lola drew back and looked at him, her eyes widened in astonishment.

Lowell shook his head and smiled wilyly. "No, my dear girl. You can't tempt me like that."

Then Lola hated him. Hated him

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because he dared to resist her charms. "Very well, Mr. Strong-Will, I won't try to tempt you any longer," she said in a sarcastic tone. "And now I'm going in the house."

She attempted to rise, but Lowell held her. "You are not going anywhere until I kiss you," he spoke slow and grimly, "and kiss you like I want to."

With his arms already around her, he pressed his lips to hers fervently and held them there while she frantically, but hopelessly resisted. He kissed her eyes, her cheeks, her hair, everything. Then he let her go.

"You may go now, I'm through," he said coolly. Lola stood up with her eyes blazing. "You—you cad," she blurted out, "I hate you, I detest you. Oh, I never want to see the sight of you again." And she turned and hurried into the house.

Lowell smiled broadly. He watched her fly into the house and then he took out a cigarette and lit it. Watching the smoke curl upward, he was quite pleased with himself. She had said she hated him, but he knew different. Her eyes plainly belied her words.

When Lowell finally re-entered the dancing room, Lola was dancing with one of her uninteresting admirers. She glanced at Lowell and then quickly turned her head and pretended to be deeply interested in her dancing partner. Lowell smiled and walked on to the checking room for his hat and cane. Then as he was leaving he could see Lola watching although he pretended not to notice. He knew that he had succeeded. She had fallen for him—and how!

When she saw Lowell leaving, Lola seemed to find all the joy gone. A strange emotion was rising up within her. A conviction that with his departure all beauty and loveliness were departing from her life forever, leaving her inexpressibly lonely. She had a mad impulse to run after him and beg him to forgive her. And it was with the greatest kind of an effort that she curbed this desire.

Lola could not help thinking of this handsome stranger, try as hard as she might. Even in her dreams that night she could see his face beckoning to her and then mocking her as she tried to reach it.

During the following days a strange sort of feeling welled up in Lola's heart and she knew it was love even though she had never experienced it before. There was a gnawing sensation eating away at her very heart and an almost overwhelming longing to see the unusual man, that she had met at the party, just once again. She realized she had fallen in love at last, and that this man of her dreams had seemed to scarcely notice her. Oh, if she could only see him once more.

"Low," Wayne had said, a week or so later, "at last you've seemed to open my eyes about Lola. I see now what a darned fool I was for thinking I loved her. Why man, I was stone blind. But by gad, I'm not any more. I see now just what sort of a woman she is: I know now I never really loved her at all. Just a sort of longing for someone to love. But I'm over it all now. I'm through with her." And he meant what he said. Her spell over him was broken.

The days melted into weeks, and soon it was time for Lowell to leave town. He had not seen Lola since that night of the party, but he had heard she had changed considerably. She didn't like to flirt so much of late. And she attended very few parties. Lowell wisely guessed the reason. She was in love.

So before it was time to leave, he thought he would see her just once more and tell her just what he thought of her.

That evening, when he called on her, Lowell found Lola, just as he expected. The wild gleam of joy at his arrival shone unmistakably in her eyes. She tried to hide her eagerness by trying to act calm and reserved, but Lowell saw it nevertheless.

"Lola, I've come to say good-by to you." He saw her start slightly and a look of disappointment appeared in her face. "I'm leaving town to-night, and I thought it altogether fitting that I should bid you a fond adieu."

She raised her eyebrows and smiled weakly. "So you're leaving town, are you?" Her voice sounded hollow and mechanical. "I'm sure I can only

wish you all the luck in the world, Lowell. I've often thought of—," she bit her lips. She was saying too much.

Lowell grasped her hands in both of his and looked deeply into her eyes. Her eyelids were half shut and she was looking at him dreamily.

"Lola, do you still like me or do you still hate me for the way I acted that night?"

She began to waver but still held a grip on herself. She looked off. She dared not face him.

"Lola, girl, you love me, now don't you?" Lowell cried, sweeping her into his arms.

She nestled close to him. Her heart was beating like a trip-hammer. Hadn't this been just what she had dreamed of many times—his holding her in his arms like this? She cast all her reserve aside and broke down completely.

"Yes, yes, Lowell, I do love you," she whispered. "I've loved you ever since I first saw you."

"You pretty little devil," Lowell murmured, bending over her. His arms folded around her tighter and he reached down and rained kisses on her mouth. She returned his kisses ardently. She was in paradise. Through a mist she saw Lowell's strained, corded, but handsome, face bent over her. Her soft, tender body yielded in his passionate grip and she completely succumbed to his fiery, tempestuous kisses. It was like being swept away on a magic carpet, she thought. Her very soul, every atom of her body cried out for this man who held her as if he would never let her go.

And suddenly she started. The spell had spent itself. And Lowell had dropped back and was sneering at her. She couldn't believe her eyes. Yes, he was actually sneering.

"Why, Lowell, darling, what is the matter?" she queried anxiously. She was puzzled at his sudden change of attitude toward her. "What's wrong?"

The muscles of Lowell's jaws tightened. He scoffed. "Everything's wrong with you, you flirt. I hate the very sight of you."

She jerked forward. Peering into his eyes she could see this was no farce. "How do you get that way?" she asked. "Why just a minute ago you were kissing me and making violent love, Lowell."

He laughed shortly—cruelly: "Of course, I was making violent love and all that sort of thing, but I was simply playing with you, sweetheart. Just seeing how far I could take you."

She began to see clearly then. "I understand now. You don't love me. You were just playing with me."

"Yes, I was just playing with you. Playing as you have played with the other men in your life." He took her roughly by the shoulders. "You little flirt, get this: I've never liked you, not even when I pretended I did. I knew you for what you really were—a common coquette. You made a fool of my brother and the others just for your own selfish enjoyment. I swore I would make a fool of you and I certainly have." And he deliberately laughed in her face. "I made you fall for me and now I'm telling you I hate you. Hate you very soul. Now you understand fully, don't you?"

Lola couldn't speak. She was choked to the utmost. Hot and cold flashes swept over her graceful body. She sank weakly to the sofa. "And—so that was your game, was it. Well you get this. I hate you, too. I'm glad you are going away. I never want to lay my eyes on you again." And she threw her head in her arms.

Lowell shook his head. "You're lying, Lola. You know you love me. And I'm very sorry I can't return your pure and untainted love, dear heart," he taunted. "You, who have played men for suckers just to get

out of them what you wanted and then break their hearts for them."

He backed to the door. "Well I'm going out of your sweet young life forever now, like you told me to, darling. Some day, maybe you'll understand. I suppose you realize now that you can't play all men for suckers, Lola. But your realization came too late. You fell in love with me."

Lowell opened the door. "And to think you thought I could love a woman like you, an ordinary flirt," he flung back. "Ha, ha, that's great. No, no, sister some day I may fall in love but it certainly won't be with a common coquette—a little Miss Nobody."

The door closed and Lowell was gone. Lola remained motionless. She felt chilled and numb. A gnawing pain had welled up in her. Her throat was dry. Then suddenly the full realization of what had just occurred came over her. She tried to cry out but she couldn't. Slowly her brain began to function.

Lola looked at the door. Lowell had gone out of her life through that door and he had gone forever. She became frantic. She would never see him again. She wanted him, she couldn't let him go like that. Then she remembered his words. What was that he had called her? Oh, yes a coquette. Was that what she was? A common little flirt, he had said. But regardless of what he had called her she still loved him. She had given her whole love to this cruel man and in return had received only sneers and mockery. She had given her gold for dross.

Lola became hysterical. Lowell, her Lowell, was gone forever. And he had called her names, names whose meanings only now seemed to dawn fully upon her. That word kept flashing before her eyes—coquette—coquette—coquette. Yes, that was what she was. She had flirted with men. She had broken many of their hearts. Now she knew how it felt.

"Oh, Lowell, Lowell," she moaned and flung herself out on the large sofa. If he would just come back to her she would change. She would never flirt again. But it was too late. Lowell was gone. And it was he who had branded her a common coquette—a little Miss Nobody.

The large clock on the wall ticked away the minutes. Lola looked at it with eyes filled with tears. It seemed to be counting off the lonely years ahead of her. The tears trickled down her cheeks and the lovely Lola buried her face in the pillows and wept.

THE END

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By ANNE SCHUYLER

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