

"THREE WIVES"

By RALPH
MATTHEWS

Leslie Kayne Makes a Losing Fight Against Falling in Love with His Former Sweetheart, Now the Wife of Another

WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR—

Leslie Kayne, a young Baltimorean, disappointed in love, has forsaken his profession of law, and is in New York, where he has made an enviable reputation as a song-writer.

His disappointment has made him a cynic, and he has turned against all established institutions, such as love, marriage and the church. He has related to his friend, Al Freeman, how he was robbed of his sweetheart, Gwendolyn Maynard, of Washington, by Rupert Clifford, a former classmate.

He is just retiring on a snowy night, when Gwendolyn comes to his apartment. Before he could find out her mission, she faints.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

CHAPTER II

It was three minutes, which seemed like as many hours to Leslie, before she opened her eyes. His face flushed as she drew away her hand which he had been rubbing vigorously. Tears were in her eyes as she pulled herself up.

Leslie was standing over her now.

"What are you driving at?" he demanded. "What note?"

"Forgetful boy," she said when she had recovered. "The note you wrote calling off our wedding. That hurt me, Les. I couldn't believe my own eyes. I tried not to believe that it was your writing, your paper, but one thing you said in that note, although it was four years ago, gave me courage to come to you tonight. You said if I ever needed a friend to call on you, and God knows I need one now!"

Leslie made no comment. He was kneeling at her feet and looking off into space. He could see it all now. Some dirty dog had sent her a letter calling off the wedding; had used his paper and imitated his hand-writing—some forger, Rupert?

The girl was talking again. "I was hurt that night, Les, I was mad—insane. I must have been, for when Rupert came along and asked

me to go for a ride I went, and when he asked me to marry him, I did—to get even with you, Les. I regretted it a moment after and have regretted it ever since."

"You have left him, then?"

"Yes, Les. I could stand his beatings, his rantings, his liquor parties no longer. Then, too, he was running around with other women. Not that I was jealous or cared where he went or what he did, but he was my husband, and the way he treated me was common gossip."

"You must have cared, to run away. Probably expected him to look for you and beg forgiveness."

"Why, Leslie. That is so different from what I had expected from you, even though you told me that you realized that I was not the kind of girl for you, I, at least, expected sympathy for old time's sake."

"Well, why did you leave?"

"Because I came home late one night from a club meeting and a brother of one of the girls accompanied me home because it was dark on our street. Rupert was drunk. He saw us, and waited in the vestibule. I saw him. He would have beaten me, as he had done on previous occasions. But I revolted against his treatment. I did not go home that night and have not been home since. I came to New York because my fam-

ily in Washington would have nothing to do with me. But it was winter and I could get no work. I soon exhausted what resources I had, and tonight I am destitute."

"There is the alimony route," suggested Leslie, "most wives choose that."

"But for me, I have already been accused of marrying that man for his money, and now I am done with him. I want nothing he has. You talk as though marriage means nothing to a woman but money."

"Well, I have come to look upon it as nothing more than an accepted form of prostitution, into which women sell themselves for board and keep."

"Leslie," she cried, "how could you say such a thing? Has New York brought you as low as that?"

"No, but you have. I can see that, that perhaps it was not your fault."

"No, Leslie," she replied, "it was not my fault. I could not see it then, but could see our position later. You were so young. You perhaps did not know your own mind and then you were just out of school. You were not adjusted then, your whole fortune was before you. Your career, I upbraided myself for my selfishness and forgave you and tried to forget—but I couldn't Leslie. I loved you then, and I still do."

"I am to believe that, I suppose?" asked Kayne ruefully. "If my experience around New York has taught me nothing else, it has at least taught me not to believe a woman's pretense at love when—when she wants something."

"Why, Leslie. It matters not what other treatment I deserve at your hands, I surely do not deserve your insults. Has not life been cruel enough to me without that from you? My happiness, my family, my home—everything and everybody—has turned against me, and now you, like all the rest. You once said that I was worth more than anything in the world to you."

She burst into tears when she saw no trace of sympathy in those cold, relentless eyes that looked into hers.

"And I suppose you expect me to place the same value on you now that I did when you were young and innocent? You forget that the best that you can offer me is damaged goods. Damaged by marriage, damaged by that viper, Rupert, your husband. Even in human souls you must allow a discount for second hand goods."

"You are just like the rest of your sex. The one who is to blame for a girl's condition is the first one to condemn her, and you are responsible for mine. Your fickleness made me marry Rupert and that marriage brought me where I am tonight."

"Not my fickleness, but Rupert's deceit," corrected Kayne. "Listen, and I'll tell you a story."

"I think we were both victims of fate," said the girl, after Leslie had related his experiences on the night that they had planned to wed.

They were very close to each other as Leslie bent over her, wrapping a heavy blanket about her shoulders.

Her arm crept up over his shoulders. She pulled him closer.

"It's been so lonely for me here; New York is so cold."

She was breathing rapidly. Leslie could see her heaving bosom. His lips almost touched hers. He pulled himself away with a jerk.

"I can't Gwen," he cried, "by God, I can't! You are another man's wife. You can't stay here tonight, even though we love each other. There are those damned custom-made laws, and we cannot lose our self-respect. You'll have to leave, Gwen."

The girl was crying. Her body shook all over. Leslie thought it was emotion, but a second glance told him it was a chill. He felt her forehead. It was hot. She was ill!

Leslie rushed into his bedroom, and soon he reappeared, fully dressed. "I am going for a doctor, Gwen," he said.

"Don't leave me," she cried, "please don't, Les. I'll be all right. Just stay here with me." She struggled to her feet. "Please stay. Hold me."

She threw her arms around his neck hysterically.

asleep. He slipped away from her.

His brain was in turmoil—such thoughts! A flickering light played upon her face. Her drawn features were mute testimony of what she had gone through—and she was once so pretty, so talented, he thought.

That hacking cough raised a question in his mind. Could she ever sing again? Had the physical exposure she had suffered affected her voice? Had the disillusion she had experienced robbed her life of its sweetness—its melody? But why should he bother? She meant nothing to him—she belonged to some one else. He cursed under his breath, the whole institution. He cursed Rupert.

He could not go on thinking these things. It was driving him mad. He walked to his radio and began adjusting the dials. He had to do something to take the load off his mind. Even while he was turning the dials, the thought kept repeating itself over and over again—"She is another man's wife."

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"Even in human souls you must allow a discount for second-hand goods," said Leslie.

"I know you think I am the worst woman on earth," she faltered, "coming to your apartment at this hour in the night."

"I do," said Leslie, coldly, "but not for that reason. Here, drink this, it will bring you around."

He handed her a glass. She pushed it aside.

"I'm all right now, except for this cough," she added, as she was seized with a spell of coughing.

"Well, hurry and tell me what you wish. It's time I was in bed now. I would ask you to rest your things but I am not in the habit of entertaining women in my rooms; and then you will be going away soon, I presume?"

"That's just the trouble, Les. I haven't a friend in New York. I'm alone. I saw you the other day and have been looking for you ever since. I need your help, Les, don't you understand?"

"Too darned well from your appearance, but I wonder that you had nerve enough to come to me after—after the way you treated me."

The girl looked her bewilderment.

"Treated you," she replied. "Don't you think it was the other way around? I was the one who was mistreated. I swore that I would die before I would come to you, but I remembered your note and I was in such reduced circumstances—" She again broke into coughing.

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