Snatched From The Burning

An Old Time Romance

By F. A. MITCHEL

Carrie, my niece, has asked me to put the story of my life in writing. She says that it may save many a girl who is disposed to turn aside warnings of those who are older than she from yielding to a love which they can see is not for her good and may be for her ruin.

It is an old fashioned story, for it occurred in an old fashioned time and in an old fashioned country. The state where I was born—Georgia—was then a slave state, and conditions were adapted to that institution. There were three distinct classes—the planters, the poor whites and the negroes. My parents sprang from the poor white class, but my father was a very industrious man for one living in an enervating climate and accumulated enough means to buy a small plantation and a few negroes. Consequently I grew up between two classes. We were above the poor whites, but were not received by the planters.

It was said that at seventeen I was a beauty. Alas, no one would think it to see me now, a shriveled old woman with thin snow white hair. They did not tell me so, and I was unconscious of my good looks. Social life in those days was very different from what it is now. I suppose human nature is always the same, but it seems to me now that good persons—I refer to the higher classes—were better than now and the bad were worse. This was especially so with our young men. Many of them—most of them, I should say—were imbued with noble sentiments. With them to be a gentleman was to be honorable. But there were bad ones, who were especially unscrupulous in their dealings with women—men who regarded it the part of a gentleman to make a conquest even to the ruin of the object of his attentions. The atmosphere of that period has completely passed away, the good and the bad having been fused between the two. There are now few, if any, young men with the noble impulses of the typical gentleman of that day, nor are there any such evil characters as were portrayed by the novelists of that period.

It fell to my lot to be caught between two men who were representatives of these two classes. They were both gentlemen, the one of a kindly nature, who would consider that a mean or dishonorable act would not only disgrace him, but his family even back to generations long dead; the other without any conscience whatever.

When I was fifteen years old my father one day sent me with a note to Colonel Carroll, one of the wealthiest and most respected planters of our region. On the veranda sat a youth of about twenty at a table with books before him. He was Courtney Carroll, a recent graduate of the University of Virginia. As I ascended the steps he looked up at me and I saw admiration in his eyes. He rose and advanced to meet me, and I handed him the note. He called a negro, told him to take it to his father, and selecting a comfortable chair handed it to me. He refrained from his books while I waited, seeming to consider it incumbent upon him to entertain me while I waited for an answer to the note. Colonel Carroll brought it out to me himself and apologized for not sending one of his negroes with it, courteously thanking me for consenting to be its bearer.

Naturally I, a girl still in short dresses, was much impressed with so much consideration from such high grade persons. How remarkable that one whose father had but recently emerged from the poor white class should be an object of attention from those who owned a thousand slaves.

When I was seventeen years old I met another of the aristocrats of that day, who turned out to be the reverse of a Carroll. I was leaning on the fence of my father's plantation one day when a gay party of hunters came galloping by. They disappeared down the road, and presently a young man, also in the scarlet coat of a huntsman, came along and, reining up before me, asked me if I had seen the others. I told him they had just passed and if he rode on he would soon overtake them. But it was evident from the way his eyes were fixed on me that he was disposed to turn from the game he was pursuing to a different kind. I remember that my eyes dropped before his gaze and I felt a warmth in my cheeks.

This young man was Harry Du Bois, who had by the death of his father just come into possession of a large plantation. He asked me a number of questions, evidently for excuses to talk with me instead of riding on, and presently, on pretense of tightening his saddle girth, he dismounted and stood near me on the other side of the fence, chatting glibly and paying me compliments. This was the first time any one had told me that I was beautiful, and it gave me a thrill I shall never forget. It was the second time I had noticed admiration in a young gentleman's eyes, but young Carroll had not paid me a single compliment.

Since my visit to the Carroll plantation Courtney had dominated my thoughts, but now he was superseded by Harry Du Bois. The former seemed cold beside the latter. Besides, Carroll did not seek me, while Du Bois rode by our little plantation frequently and, if I was within hearing, would always stop to chat. These meetings were at once noticed by my dear parents, and I remember with pain their troubled looks whenever I had been talking with Du Bois. Then mother spoke to me about the matter, telling me that when a gentleman became devoted to a girl beneath him in station only trouble would come of it. But I turned a deaf ear to what she said, so infatuated was I with the man who was charming me as a snake will charm a bird.

I can only refer without particularizing to the courtship. I have wondered since that at so tender an age I should have resisted one so persuasive. Perhaps this was due to the influence of my mother, who, if she could not induce me to break with my lover, at least convinced me that if he was sincere he would ask me to be his wife. So at last he did, but said that his mother, who was living, would not consent to the alliance. She was very feeble and could last but a short time. So Harry persuaded me to marry him clandestinely.

When I remember that I was to be made the victim of a mock marriage I realize how far I am now removed from that age. Such weddings were then a common method of victimizing innocent girls. Now they are unheard of. The little church where I met Du Bois is still standing, though the persons who worship in it are much changed. The ceremony was to take place at night, for I was pledged to keep it a secret from my parents. I remember that I passed through a severe mental struggle before I could bring myself to deceive them, but I tried to think of how proud they would be when I was acknowledged as the wife of a wealthy and aristocratic planter. Yet in my heart I knew that I did not confide in them, for they would surely prevent the marriage if they knew it was to take place.

It was near midnight when I got out of my window on to the veranda and descended by the limb of a magnolia tree that overhung it. I can see now in the moonlight the manor house, the negroes' white cabins flanking it, the double row of moss covered trees leading to the gate. I had scarcely reached it when Harry clasped me in his arms. My legs seemed about to give way beneath me, and he carried me to a two wheeled cart, placed me in it and drove me to the church. It was dark, the reflected light of the moon only shining from a pane of glass.

Some one opened a side door and I was led in, the moonlight streaming through gothic windows, to the chancel. There stood a clergyman in his vestments. A lamp such as is used to throw a light on a sermon alone was burning low. He turned it up, its light falling on a prayer book. Then he began to read the marriage service. He seemed to be unfamiliar with it and constantly stumbled. But so far as I was able to take cognizance of this I attributed it to haste. He came to the part where an opportunity is given to enter a protest against the marriage, when a voice from behind said:

"Don't make a noise, gentlemen. I got word of your scheme this afternoon. You talked too loud at the St. Leger tavern. On the young lady's account this affair must be kept quiet. Du Bois, you are a villain of the deepest dye. As for you, Markham, you are beneath contempt."

These words sounded in my ears as if they came from a distance. Others were spoken, but I don't remember them. Then the same voice spoke to me, the light fell for a moment on the speaker's features, and I saw Courtney Carroll.

"Will you permit me to get you home? I will try to do so without your return being known."

I knew now that I had been tricked and that I had been saved. I put my trembling hand on Carroll's arm and left the church with him. When I got home I was too weak to ascend to my room as I had come down from it, and Carroll climbed the magnolia, went into my room, stepped downstairs and opened the door for me. I reached my chamber without arousing any one.

The next morning I deferred going downstairs till all had breakfasted. When I entered the dining room, pale and trembling, Susan, the servant, said to me:

"Laws a-massy, Missy Alice, hab yo' hearn de awful news?"

"No. For heaven's sake, what is it?"

"Dis mawnin' about sun up Marse Courtney Carroll and Marse Harry Du Bois fit a duel, and Marse Carroll done got pretty nigh killed."

How I bore this second blow I cannot conceive. It took Susan but a moment to hurl the shaft, but the pain I suffered is with me today, an old woman.

Courtney Carroll lingered for several days, then died. Shortly before his death he sent for me to come to him. I was carried there in a benumbed state of feeling and received by his father. I can see to this day on his face the look of loving sympathy and distress at his approaching loss. He led, or rather supported, me to his son's chamber and left me there, all others having gone out at my arrival.

"Pardon my interference in your affair," he said. "Had I not known you were to be made a victim I would have left you to do as you liked. I have sent for you not only to apologize for my interference, but to confess to you that ever since your coming here two years ago I have been battling with a desire to become a suitor for your hand. Why I was deterred from doing so need not be mentioned. I was about to yield when I learned that Du Bois had stepped in before me. That is all. I preferred that you should know that I had more than an ordinary reason for becoming your champion."

Tabitha Interferes

"Things Are Not What They Seem"

By ADELAIDE BURNHAM

From her seat behind the parlor curtains Tabitha Campbell listened shamelessly to the words that young Frederick Lee was murmuring to pretty Agatha, her niece.

"It's my duty by a motherless girl," said Tabitha defiantly to her conscience, and she turned her good ear close to the curtains sagging against the open window.

"Tomorrow night, then," said Frederick with a long sigh of relief.

"Yes," assented Agatha timorously.

"At 11 o'clock. Surely?"

"Yes."

"I'll drive you to Milton, and the minister there will"— His words drifted into an indistinct murmur as the wind rushed through the garden and stirred the syringa bushes.

Tabitha arose and went into the sitting room, where she blinked at the lighted lamp. She was a little, hard featured, black eyed woman with white hair and sprightly movements that made her appear even younger than her fifty years. Now her black eyes snapped with anger as she sat down in a rocking chair and picked up some knitting.

Agatha came in and locked the front door. When she appeared in the sitting room her blue eyes were very bright and a pink flush stained her usually pale cheeks.

"I thought I told you I wouldn't have Jacob Lee's boy running here," snapped Tabitha.

Agatha was silent.

"Has he got a job?" pursued Tabitha.

"Yes. I told you his father had taken him into the bank," replied Agatha spiritedly. "Frederick is—is—nice. I don't see why you dis-dislike him so, Aunt Tab."

"I have my reasons."

"If you would only tell me, just tell me what it is you have against him, Aunt Tab, I might understand."

"It's all in the past," murmured Tabitha somewhat vaguely. Her cheeks reddened as if at some unpleasant memory.

"It's not fair to keep me in the dark, and I shall never believe one word against him unless you prove it, so there!" Agatha whirled out of the room and up the stairs into her own little room overhead.

What Agatha did not know was that once upon a time Tabitha had been a black eyed beauty engaged to marry Jacob Lee. But Jacob had proved a fickle lover, and when he took a bride to his home it was a handsome girl from Milton who had money in her own right. That Jacob's wife died and left him with little Frederick three years after the marriage did not move Tabitha Campbell to pity. In the meantime her hair had whitened and her face grown sharp and peaked. Now she became the village dressmaker, and when Agatha came to live with her every one said how nice it was that Tabitha would not be alone.

Now Agatha was planning to elope with Frederick Lee.

Tabitha's eyes burned strangely in the darkness as she thought of these things.

The next day passed quietly, as usual. Tabitha sewed busily in her sharp, jerky way in the room devoted to her work. Several customers came and tried on garments and looked over the pile of fashion books on the table or examined the tissue paper patterns pinned on a tape along the wall. Agatha did the housework deftly and between whiles stitched on the sewing machine in the corner.

As evening drew near the two women became distinctly nervous. Tabitha cut Mrs. Demmet's gray cashmere into a three piece skirt by a twenty-two inch waist pattern when Mrs. Demmet measured thirty-four inches and was proportionately massive. It was characteristic of Tabitha's mood that she first threw the mangled cashmere across the room with the scissors flying in its wake. Then she picked them up and, tucking the cashmere under her arm, went grimly forth to interview Mrs. Demmet.

When bedtime came Agatha came and placed her arms around Tabitha's neck. The astonished spinster did not move, but silently endured the embrace, and if there were tears in her hard eyes the girl did not see them. She went to the door and turned a wistful gaze on the older woman.

"I'm sorry you don't like him," she said painfully, and went slowly upstairs.

Tabitha put out the light and went silently about her preparations. She went upstairs and closed the door of her bedroom and then returned to the sitting room to envelop herself in a long gray cloak and tie a white chiffon veil over her face and hair. She slipped out of the side door and went across the grass to an opening in the boxwood hedge that bordered the garden. Standing outside there on the path in the shadow of the maple trees, she awaited the coming of Agatha's lover.

Clouds were drifting overhead, and now and then the moon peeped out. The little house lay in deep shadow.

Presently the church clock struck 11, and at the same instant came the sound of hoofs on the sandy road. A covered buggy came slowly along, and the horse stopped in front of Tabitha's gate.

In an instant she had reached the vehicle and had climbed into its dark interior. A man's startled voice uttered a sharp exclamation of surprise.

"Hurry!" whispered Tabitha. "Get away as fast as you can. She is coming after me."

"But"— began the familiar voice of Frederick Lee, and Tabitha hushed him desperately.

"Hurry, please hurry, or I shall go back!"

"All right. I suppose you know where you're going," said the man grimly.

"Milton, of course," snapped Tabitha so sharply that he leaned down and tried to look into her face, but it was too dark to distinguish anything except the pale, cloudy outline of her veil.

He clucked to the horse, and they went noiselessly down the road on rubber tired wheels. At the crossing they turned into the Milton highway.

Tabitha was somewhat disturbed at the success of her maneuver. She had planned to elope with Frederick Lee and at a convenient opportunity, perhaps in the very presence of the waiting minister, she would disclose her identity and "give Frederick a piece of her mind." Yet, somehow, in spite of her disguise and the darkness of the night, Frederick seemed suspicious of her. If he had been sure it was Agatha, the girl so soon to become his wife, would he not, being an ordinary young man, have placed his arm about her or at least saluted her with a kiss?

Out of the fullness of her own past romance Tabitha told herself he would have done all these things, yet there they sat speechless, slowly driving into Milton to be married, or at least Frederick expected to be.

"Where are we going?" asked the man suddenly as they turned into a sparsely settled section on the outskirts of Milton.

"Do you mean to say you don't know?" shrilled Tabitha through the folds of white chiffon.

"Of course not." His voice was indignant. "You're Tabitha Campbell's niece, aren't you?"

"I'm Miss Campbell," whispered Tabitha, a great fear clutching at her heart, for the voice was that of Frederick Lee, but it held deeper, richer notes. Perhaps Frederick's would reach that pitch some day if he lived long enough. There was only one other who could have spoken with that same intonation, and that other was Frederick's father.

"Well, Agatha Campbell," said Jacob Lee kindly, "what do you want? You asked me to carry you to Milton, and when we arrive you will not tell me where you want to go. Now, there is something queer about this, and I'm going to take you back to Farmdale and straight to your aunt." He spoke with an air of authority and at the same moment turned the horse about and went back over the road they had traveled.

Tabitha sat crushed and stunned in the corner, shrinking away from her old lover. What would he say if he knew she—Tabitha—was there beside him? They rode together twenty-five years ago, and since then they had passed each other with averted faces. Swiftly they rolled along through the wooded way until a carriage approaching from the opposite direction caused them to turn aside into the thicket to permit the other vehicle to pass.

The other carriage struck a "Thank you ma'am," and a girlish shriek startled them. "Don't be afraid, Agatha," said Frederick's tender voice. Then they were gone.

After awhile Tabitha's companion spoke:

"That was my son's voice, and he was talking to Agatha Campbell," he said sternly. "Now, who are you?"

Tabitha stiffened. "I am Tabitha Campbell," she said haughtily.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the man.

They rode on in silence. When they were in front of Tabitha's cottage the driver let down the buggy top so that the moonlight fell on Tabitha's face. Gently he untied the white veil while she sat in frozen silence. When it had fallen about her shoulders in a swirling cloud he leaned forward, and she saw that it was indeed Jacob Lee.

"Tell me all about it, Tabitha," he said gently. "You are in trouble."

Tabitha caught her breath—why, it was all just as though the dreary years had not come between them. Jacob was speaking in his old authoritative tone.

She told him the story of the projected elopement.

"You mean—you mean that you were set against my boy?" he asked in a stunned tone.

Tabitha was silent.

"Well," he drew a deep breath, "if you've held resentment all these years, Tab, why, you must have cared, although somebody told me that you were tired of me. Well, that doesn't excuse me for what I did, but I've had years enough to think it all over and to be ashamed of the part I played."

Still Tabitha was silent.

"If you—why, perhaps you—Tabitha, do you still care after all these years?" How wonderfully tender was his voice!

"I don't know," quavered Tabitha, "but I've been so lonely, and it seems good for you to be here."

"Then it is all right, Tab," he cried gayly. His arm slipped around her, and she fell naturally into the curve of it. "We will have some happy years yet if God is willing. I guess we met Fred and Agatha in the woods. They must be married by this time. Shall we drive on to meet them and tell Fred how near he came to eloping with you?" He laughed softly.

"Yes, do," whispered Tabitha meekly. "And you can tell him I decided to elope with his father instead."