

WHITE LILIES.

BY HUNTER DUVAR.

I.

Long ago there lived a great lord, whose castle was in a kingdom where there were always great wars. The king of that country was a cruel tyrant, which made all his barons tyrants too, so that they oppressed the common people, for the nobles always follow the bad ways of their king, and that brings misery and trouble on the land. The baron I speak of had lived to middle life, in the midst of war and turmoil, till at length he thought he would marry and settle down and employ his leisure in hunting boars when he was not hunting men. Now, it chanced that near him lived a lady of high estate, beautiful exceedingly, but more haughty than if she had been a king's daughter, for she owned, in her own right, a great part of the country, as well as the mountains, where elves and erdsprites and gnomes had their homes. A marriage was arranged between the baron and this haughty lady and it was to be celebrated with great pomp. Lords and ladies were to come from far and near, and there were to be tournaments by day and the dance of the *pavon*, or peacock, at night, with much feasting. Gallant minstrels on prancing steeds, with their jongleurs, or attendants, on mules, carrying the rebecs and music of the masters, filed in, to the great content of the ladies, who hoped to hear their own praises carolled as the fairest of the fair, and to see some knight knocked on the head, or run through the midriff, in trying to prove that his favourite She was as fair as minstrels had sung. Everything was to be as gay, fantastic and cruel as befitted the cultivated taste of the high-born company that would be there assembled. As it was not necessary with so rich a lady to make any marriage settlements on the bride, the baron served out new doublets to his jackmen, and made known the programme of the day, detailing as many men as could be spared to make an imposing procession, with a strong reserve to hold the salient points of the castle and take the initiative in firing on any of the guests that attempted a surprise. None of the commonalty were to be admitted, it being felt that their presence would be vulgar, but in return for many days' hard labour in preparing for the occasion, without wages, a quantity of beef and ale was sent to the hamlet, that lay about three arrow-flights from the outer defences.

Now, it happened that, from time immemorial, friendship had existed between the elves of the hill and the ancestors of the haughty lady who was now a bride. Not a marriage or birth in the direct line of descent but the elves had sent to pay their compliments, and when any evil or misfortune was about to befall, notice was given by voices crying mournfully, as can be proved by many credible witnesses. Accordingly, on the occasion of the stout baron's nuptials with the haughty lady, one of the elves of the hill was deputed to pay their respects. This lady-elf did herself in her best attire and took a basket of white buds on her arm, and put on her steeple hat and her gown, with so many short skirts, that she looked quite bunch-about; also her buckled shoes and red stockings, as if she were high up in holy orders. Thus accountred, she presented herself on the threshold of the baron's hall and gravely said "safe all here!"

"Arroynt thee, jade!" cried the baron, who was flushed with wine; "what fool's egg-wife have we here?"

"May it please your Valiancy," replied an old retainer, "this is one of the Good Elves, whom it is ill-fortune to unfriend."

"Good wife or ill wife!" roared the incensed noble. "What ho! menials! Scourge me this old guff off the premises, and see that ye spare not stirrup leather!"

The unwilling grooms obeyed orders and belted her to the edge of the mote, where she majestically shot up to a stupendous height, and, stretching forth her arm in a threatening attitude, said in a voice that all the company heard:

"Hark thee! proud and cruel lord! No son

shall bear thy name. Thy house shall pass away without a head, and the flowers shall wither on thy grave." Then she disappeared.

The impenitent baron spluttered forth some of the worst epithets in the language, and called on the musicians to strike up, which they did, and the nuptial feast lasted its three days, and came to an end with no more than the usual quantity of cracked helms and broken bones.

II.

Seven years passed on and seven daughters had been born to the warlike baron, but no son. Then the haughty lady died and the seven little maids were motherless.

I have already said that the king of that country was a cruel tyrant, and he was much addicted to hanging up his subjects on lamp-posts, on slight pretext. This he called "Regulating the Commons." A favourite employment of his leisure was besieging and burning the baronial castles in his dominions and putting the owners to fire and sword and confiscating their estates, which he described as "Repressing the Nobles." Ostensibly he was desirous of building up a middle class, which he did by imposing immense fines on every industry, and retaining in his own hands the monopoly of wool, salt and other paying businesses. The domain of the crown thus grew very large, and the principal officers of his staff were the provost-marshal and headsman. He was his own chancellor of the exchequer and his prime minister was also his barber. In addition to this he was a very pious person, and stuck images of saints in his hat, for which he is well spoken of in history. Notwithstanding his good intentions, the monarch was exposed to the ingratitude of his people. It is true the commonalty could do nothing but submit to be hanged, and the middle class must either pay or be starved out, but the turbulence of the nobles was such that they retreated to their strongholds and showed fight. Among these truculent barons was the father of the seven little maids, who fortified his castle and, summoning in his tenants on pain of instant death, several times defeated the royal contingent sent against him. This undutiful conduct so wounded the monarch's feelings that he sent a polite message to the rebellious noble to the effect that he, the king himself, would (D.V.) come in person, on Tuesday of next week, as soon after breakfast as convenient, and decapitate him on his own doorstep. Which the good king did, and likewise hanged the garrison, besides burning the castle, but the seven small daughters were not to be found, notwithstanding that the king (who was somewhat parsimonious) offered a reward of a florin a head, or three dollars and a half for the lot, vowing by St. Jude that when he caught them he would have them brought up as scullions in a convent or thrown to the horseboys. Thus was the first part of the elf-wife's prophecy fulfilled, for the race of the baron was, literally and figuratively, without a head.

Meantime the seven little maids had been rescued and spirited away by the good old seneschal and his wife and conveyed to a small chateau far away and retired. Here they grew, in strict seclusion, from childhood to youth, and a lovelier bevy of damsels could not have been found in all fair France. As it would have attracted attention and discovery had they worn mourning garments for their father's death, their thoughtful guardians clad them in white, which colour they continued to wear, and when they grew up they were known to the few persons who were aware of their existence as the White Ladies. In due course of time the cruel king was poisoned by his *chef*, and his successor on the throne was occupied in fighting for a foreign duchy that he had no claim to and no use for, so that he had no time to seek out a parcel of women, who could not bear arms either for or against him. When their good protector and his wife died the ladies lived alone, the elder taking care of the younger. But the fame of their beauty had spread and reached the gallants of the period, whose chivalrous fancy painted them as something lovely and mysterious.

Now, seven gallant young knights of the first circle, feat and honourable as knights of the Table

Round, were looking out for adventures and heard of the seven White Ladies. Although many a lance had they shivered in joust for ladies' charms, their hearts were untouched, and their hard blows in honour of this or that fair one's beauty, in those belabouring times, were no more sincere than the drawling compliments that men pay now-a-days to a beauty at an evening party. The fame of the virtues and the comeliness of the recluse sisters awoke all that was pure and noble in the hearts of the seven young youths and predisposed them to love. Accordingly they set out together, gay and gallant, unattended by squires or other spies, and diplomatically taking advantage of an impending thunder storm as an excuse, drew up, with a great clatter of arms, at the gate of the lonely chateau and besought shelter. Unquestioning hospitality was a virtue of the age. The ladies were the descendants of a race of nobles, therefore they placed everything beneath the roof, excepting themselves, at the disposal of the unlooked-for guests. Thus it was that the knights who had come a-wooing, became inmates of the chateau of the seven sisters.

III.

It is not for me to trace the risings of love. That is a passion that comes to all once in a lifetime. Some who read this may have experienced its sweet pangs. To others it will come if they are good and virtuous. It came to these young people in the chateau, and each knight pledged to one of the sisters his hand, with his heart in it, and won in return the confession of her love.

Love, however, to the heart of a pure woman is a high and holy thing. Adela, who was the elder and acted as a mother to her sister maidens, became a little timid at what had been done, and consulted with an old hermit, their ancient friend. That good anchorite explained to the blushing maids that the passion of love was forbidden by the canons to all persons in orders, therefore he himself knew nothing of the feeling, but he believed it was customary to send away an ardent wooer for a time, so as to prove his constancy, at least so he remembered to have read when he was but a silly acolyte. He recommended that the knights be sent away for a year and a day to make trial of their faith.

In those days, gentle reader, men were true and faithful and willing to wait any length of time or undergo any trial for the ladies that they loved. I have heard that it is not so now. The knights sorrowfully assented to the arrangement. They were taking their last walk together in the garden, each maid hanging on the arm of her bachelor, full of sad farewells, when they saw a little old woman, with short skirts, a steeple hat, buckled shoes and red stockings, with a basket on her arm. The old dame was weeping and said:

"White Ladies, I am the elf-dame who foretold your father's fate," and as she said so she took from her basket and dropped on the ground seven clumps of lily roots, and, still weeping, receded from their view.

"Let us plant the lilies!" cried the knights, gaily. Then each couple planted a root and smoothed the ground. "Now let us name them!" So they named the lilies by the names of the ladies—Adela, Alice, Barbara, Eremé, Helen, Lilius, Yseult. Then, with fond adieus, the gallants did on their swords and sprang to saddle. For, as when the Seven Champions of Christianity came to a broad plain, on which stood a brazen pillar, where seven roads met, they, every one, went a separate way; so the seven knights departed—two to the north and two to the south, two to the west, and, with many backward glances, the youngest of all to the east. And thereafter the seven white ladies stayed sadly at home and watched the growth of the lilies.

Woe's me! Not long time had gone when a man-at-arms, sore bespent, with his armour hacked and his horse all foam, rode in from the north, with tidings of dole, that two of the knights, gay and gallant, had fallen with their faces to the foe, and the last words on their lips were Adela and Helen. Two hearts were broken in the lonely chateau. Yet, alas! misfortunes fall not singly, for the old monk soon came, looking very lugu-