

QUEEN OF THE MAY.

BY EMMA HOWARD WIGHT.

GREAT was the sensation in the town of Ardine when the 'Squire of the Manor stooped from his high estate and took for his bride Aileen O'Connor, the daughter of his Irish gamekeeper. She had been educated above her station, the people of Ardine said, when she came back from her convent school, and the 'Squire was bewitched by her beauty—the rose-leaf skin, the Irish violet eyes, the gold-hued hair. The girl yielded up her heart to her lordly lover, but she shrank from the high estate to which his love would lift her.

"No, no!" she would murmur, "I am not fit. 'Tis better you forget me."

But he smiled at her fears; for, though she had no noble blood in her veins, she was very beautiful, and she was stainless and pure of heart. So he made her the lady of the Manor, and the people of Ardine marveled indeed when a priest married them. For a Catholic was a thing unknown in the whole history of the Manor; and it was well known to all save his fair bride that the 'Squire had but little faith in anything pertaining to God, and none at all in a religion which he considered a mass of superstition and humbuggery. What they did not know, and would have been slow to credit, was that the girl would have shrunk from him in horror had she known this; for, dearly as she loved him, she loved God and her religion far more. The 'Squire's proud lip curled when he stood before the white-haired priest on his wedding-day; but the brief ceremony over, he turned with rapture to the fair bride by his side, so beautiful in her white bridal robes. He waited impatiently while the old priest laid his hand on her golden, flower-crowned head and asked God's blessing on her new life.

So gentle Aileen was made lady of the Manor, and went from her humble cottage-home to the stately one of her husband's. She had a certain gentle pride, and soon bore the honors of her husband's house as gracefully as any of the proud, high-born dames who had ruled before her at Ardine Manor.

Then, one morning, the joy-bells rang out announcing the birth of the 'Squire's child, but the 'Squire's heart was filled with bitter disappointment when they told him 'twas a girl. But he gave no sign of it when he bent over his wife, and, as he kissed her beautiful, white face, met the wistful, questioning look in her soft, violet eyes. And he said nothing when the white-haired priest was sent for and the child made one of the fold of the Catholic Church. But the mother clasping her little one tightly to her heart, after the waters of baptism had been poured upon it, would have been stricken with anguish and fear could she have read his thoughts. For thus they ran:

"This child is a girl; therefore, 'tis but fair that the mother should ordain its future; but when the boy comes, his future is mine, and I'll have no priestly mummery or superstitious folly about him."

But the years went by and no other children were born to the 'Squire. It was a bitter disappointment to him; but when ten years had passed he buried that disappointment deep in his heart, and turned all his hopes upon the little girl whom it seemed was destined to reign some day at the Manor. She was a beautiful child, with all her mother's fair loveliness, and as pure and sweet, under that gentle mother's training, as the lilies after which they had named her. Notwithstanding his desire for a son, and his great disappointment, the 'Squire was very fond of his lovely little daughter, and, when he ceased to hope for a son, centred all his ambition on her.

It was a bright Sunday afternoon in early May, and the 'Squire and his wife were sitting in the stately drawing-room of the Manor. The child had gone to the Catholic Sunday-school in the village, which she regularly attended. Aileen, lady of the Manor, had lost none of her fair loveliness, though at times there came a sad, wistful look, into her soft violet eyes. Her gentle life knew but two sorrows: One, that she had never given her husband a son to succeed him, and the other, that her husband had not become a Catholic, which was her daily prayer. But both these sorrows were

tempered by her faith in God's wisdom, and the thought: "He knows best," was her consolation.

Suddenly the proud face of the father and the beautiful, gentle one of the mother softened into infinite tenderness as the door was thrown open and a small, white-robed figure, with golden, flowing curls, bounded into the room. A charming, childish face was upraised for the father's kiss, and then two arms encircled the mother's neck, and breathlessly, she cried:

"Oh, mamma, papa, what do you think? I am going to be Queen of the May. All the other children choose me, and I am to be crowned to-morrow on the lawn in front of the church, and you both must come."

"So my little girl is to be a queen," said the 'Squire, smiling; "and some day, when she has grown to be a woman, she will be queen of the Manor. A wise, gracious, and brilliant queen I hope she will make, too."

The child looked up into his face with her clear, violet eyes:

"When I grow up, papa," she said, gravely, "I am going to be a Sister of Charity, like those who nursed the poor people who were hurt in the factory last winter. I would rather be a Sister than queen of the Manor."

She paused suddenly, for there gathered upon the 'Squire's brow such a dark, black frown, that mother and child shrank back in sudden fear. And when he saw that he turned and walked away to the other end of the room and stood with his back to them.

"Mamma," half sobbed the child, "is papa angry with me?"

"No, darling," answered the mother, softly stroking the golden curls, while her own heart beat heavily with a sick feeling of dread. "But run away now, I want to speak to papa."

The child kissed her and then went, obediently, away. Aileen arose slowly, and, going up to her husband, laid her hand gently on his arm. He turned, and as he met the wistful, questioning look in her beautiful eyes, the frown faded, but there was a stern, determined look in his eyes she had never seen there before.

"Aileen, I have something to say to you," he said. Then he took her hand and led her back to her seat. Still she did not speak, but her eyes never left his face.

"Aileen," he began, "I have never interfered with your religion (either in regard to yourself or our child. I never should have done so if I had a son to succeed me. But I have not; the girl is the last of my race. She will reign here in the home of my forefathers. It is my dearest hope to rear her so that she will be in every way suitable for her position. The words she spoke a few moments ago have suddenly opened my eyes to the danger to this hope in allowing her to be raised in this religion of yours. Of course they were only the words of an unthinking child, but who can say to what this training may not lead when she has become a woman? Therefore, I have decided she must not be raised in the Catholic faith."

A low cry from the mother's lips interrupted him. She started up, a look of anguished fear in her violet eyes.

"No, no!" she cried, "you cannot mean it. You cannot put this sorrow upon me. Do you not know the agony of seeing my little one dead would be less than that of knowing she was lost to God and her faith?"

"Do not say such things, Aileen," he cried, more sternly than he had ever spoken to her before. "You do not realize what you say. You can bring up your child to be a pure, good woman, as have been all the women who have reigned here without this religion; but we will not dwell upon that. What I wish to say to you is this: "Aileen, will you promise to teach Lilly no more of this religion? Bring her up as you yourself are, good, pure, and true; but no more of the Catholic religion."

"But," she panted, "whatever little goodness or virtue I may possess is due to my religion."

"I do not agree with you; but we will not discuss it," he replied. "Will you make me this promise?"

"I cannot," she murmured, with white lips.