

THRICE WEDDED.

CHAPTER I.

"GO! AND MY WORST CURSES GO WITH YOU!"

In a retired street in one of the inland cities of Massachusetts stood a neat and attractive little cottage of purest white, the dark green of its blinds making it seem still whiter beneath the dazzling sunshine of a lovely June morning.

Its little gem of a yard was surrounded by the daintiest of white fences, and filled with the brightest and choicest of flowers, showing that the owner was a person of taste and refinement.

The neatly gravelled walk, from which every intruding blade of grass was carefully plucked, led to a smooth, wide stepping-stone as clean and spotless as a daily application of soap and water could make it.

The door stands invitingly open this bright morning, but we will not enter just yet. An introduction first is necessary to its inmates.

The sound of wheels is heard, and down the street comes a light, elegant buggy, drawn by a noble, spirited, but yet gentle horse of coal black. On and on it comes, until, at a word from the driver, it stops directly in front of the gate before the little cottage.

A boy of perhaps fourteen or fifteen years of age sprang lightly to the ground, tied his horse, then, with a look of eager expectation upon his face, walked quickly toward the open door.

He was a bright and active-appearing youth, with a full, round face, whose frank, open expression won you at once. His eyes were a fine hazel, large and full. His forehead, as he lifted his hat and ran his fingers through the clustering rings of chestnut hair that crowned his head, shone white and fair as polished marble, and was broad and high. His nose was straight and rather thin for the rest of his face, while his mouth was small but very pleasant in its expression, though there were certain lines about it that indicated firmness and a will of his own.

He was manly in form and bearing, and there was a look of conscious pride upon his beaming face as he glanced complacently back at the handsome equipage at the gate, while the silver tinkle of a bell gave back an answering echo to his touch.

"Oh, mamma, Robbie has come at last."

And a bright little elf sprang dancing into the hall, and instantly a pair of chubby arms were around Robbie's neck, and a hearty smack testified to the warmth of his reception.

She was just the sweetest little bit of sunshine ever caught and imprisoned in human form. A little round rosy face, all smiles and dimples; a pair of laughing blue eyes that danced and sparkled every minute in the day with fun and mischief. A pug nose and a rosebud mouth, always ready to give and take the sweetest kisses, as she had already proved. Her hair hung in curls around her plump cheeks, and was a sort of yellowish brown—not at all red, reader, but the brightest and richest auburn you ever saw.

Her figure was short and plump, while her little skipping fairy feet seemed almost too tiny to hold up so much precious flesh and blood.

"Oh, Robbie!" she said, almost breathless with delight and anticipation. "I thought you never, never, never would come; and mamma has coaxed and scolded to get me from the window, watching for you. She says it is so unbecoming and unladylike to be so impatient; but I couldn't help it, it's so long since I had a ride. How nice the old pony looks, doesn't he? and o-oh! you've had the buggy newly painted, too. What a grand time we will have! Come, I can't wait any longer."

The little witch was about to spring down the step, when a voice from within arrested her.

"Dora, Dora, wait, my child, you have no collar or gloves. Your hat is on wrong side front, and your cape is not fastened; come here, my dear, and let me fix you?"

A quiet, lady-like little woman followed the pleasant voice, and approached her lovely little daughter with the missing collar and gloves.

"Good-morning, Robert," she said, smiling. "Did you ever see such a little Miss Wild-fire before?"

"Good-morning, auntie! I can't blame Dora a mite, for I can hardly keep still myself this bright day. I wish you could go with us."

"Thank you, I fear Dora would hardly consent, for she thinks it is a great thing for you to take her out alone. How is your father to-day?"

"He is about as usual, only he does not seem to be in very good spirits. I told him the other day he would be happier if he was a poor man and had to work for a living. He would then have something besides himself to think about."

"What did he say to that?" asked Mrs. Dupont.

"Oh, he only laughed and said I was a queer boy, and that I might work for my living if I wanted to."

"Now, Dora," said her mother, "you must hold still or I shall never be able to dress you. Put on your gloves while I pin the collar. I fear Robert will not wish to take you riding often if you don't make a better appearance. Ladies never go to ride without their gloves."

"Put, mamma, I ain't a lady; I'm only a little girl, and I hate gloves and starched things."

The bright little face was very red just now from the effort of putting on the troublesome gloves, and there was something like a pout upon the red lips.

"Well, never mind, dear," returned her mother, kindly, "you will forget all about them after you have started. Have a happy time, and come home and tell me all about it. I hope you are a careful driver," she added, turning to Robert. "You won't forget that Dora is my all now."

"You may trust me, auntie, and then old Prince is so gentle there is no fear. Come, Brightie, you are ready now, and we will start."

He took Dora by the hand, and leading her to the buggy, put her carefully in; then unfastening the horse he sprang lightly after her, and with smiles and wavings of hands they started, and were soon out of sight.

Mrs. Dupont stood looking after them for a few minutes, a happy smile upon her fine face. She was a widow, and this one pet lamb—this bright and winsome Dora—was her all in the world.

Her husband had been a physician, and had settled in S— soon after marriage, building up a good practice, which increased every year; until he had earned this snug little home, which with a few thousand at interest, made him feel quite easy as to the future. Besides this he had his life insured for five thousand more, and so when he was suddenly stricken with a malignant fever, and knew he could not live, he felt that he should leave his dear ones in comfortable circumstances if not in affluence. It was a heavy blow to Mrs. Dupont, for it left her almost alone in the world. She was an orphan, with no relatives except a maiden aunt, who, disapproving her union with the poor physician, had cast her off forever, and threatened to leave her large fortune to some charitable institution.

Maggie Alroyd, scorning the fortune, married her own true love, and was happy with the penniless doctor. He had been dead now four years, having died when Dora was eight years of age. But he was not forgotten. His memory was still fondly cherished in their hearts, and not a day passed that loving words did not testify to the strength and depth of their affection for him.

Robert Ellerton, Jr., was the son of one of Dr. Dupont's patients. A rich and influential man, who was proud as Lucifer of his wealth, and also his name, which he claimed was spotless. His wife had died when Robert, their only child, was born, and he had never married again, his household affairs being governed by a maiden sister. He had conceived a sudden attachment for Dr. Dupont, who had saved Robert's life—for Mr. Ellerton declared that he did—when he had a severe attack of the croup.

There was nothing he would not do for the doctor after that; the families immediately became intimate, while Robert and Dora grew to love each other like brother and sister. Better, in fact, for Robert used to tell her that some time she should be "his little bright-eyed wife." And he always called Mrs. Dupont Auntie.

After the doctor died the intimacy continued, until within the last year or two, Mr. Ellerton had suddenly become cold and distant, though he still allowed Robert and Dora to visit each other. Whenever questioned why he did not visit them, his reply invariably was that his health was failing and he did not go out much. Indeed, it seemed to be, for he grew thin, pale, sullen and cross to everybody about him.

Even Robert began to fear him and keep out of his way. But in his secret heart he worshipped his bright and handsome boy, and planned his future course, building wondrous castles in the air for him.

He was beginning to think that it was about time to put a stop to "Robert's foolish fancy for that girl Dora," for they could not always expect to keep it up. His son would be rich, and would move in very different circles from the doctor's daughter, who was comparatively poor.