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GRACE AYTON:

OR, THE YOUNG WIFE'S TRIALS.

A true bridal-day it was. The sun was shining out from the small white clouds that hung like ringlets round the broad face of heaven, and birds were singing through the blue air, and flowers were waving in the warm breeze, and swarming insects were clustering between the shadow and the sun, as if creation celebrated one large holiday to-day, and life meant nothing but a palpitating throeb of ecstasy.

The bright June morning!—it seemed made for brides and laughing children—for the shy glance beneath the lime-tree walk, and the merry play on the cowslip mead—for the downcast face of virgin love, and the floating hair and wild blue eyes of infant innocence. Nothing harsher or more sad than these ought to have raised its brow on the beaming sky of Grace Ayton's wedding-day.

And well worthy was sweet Grace of all sunshine above and happiness below. No morbid fancies, no jaundiced tempers, no irritable selfishness, no moody sulks, made darkness her fit companion; all was gaiety and sweetness, love, trust, and devotion, childlike merriment and childlike purity. A more laughing lip, or a brighter eye than hers, could not be found; she made a clearer atmosphere wherever she went, and carried peace, as flowers bring odors, by her mere presence.

The foulest fiend that ever brooded over men's souls, and hatched discontent and spleen from black imaginings, must have turned himself to love if Grace had exorcised him by her great grey eyes of guilelessness and joy.

These were her only visible characteristics as yet; and none knew that anything more heroic was lying beneath the girlish glee and the girlish fondness, like a pearl beneath the waters. But relations are proverbially blind to the real natures of their kinsfolk.

And so Grace Ayton left her little cottage-home on this beautiful June morning, regretted for her brightness and regretted for her love, but with not a thought of honor for her courage, her endurance, her constancy, or her heroism. These were virtues which must blossom in a rougher soil than that quiet country-house in the Hawthorn lane.

Yet what a happy marriage this promised to be! Every blessing surrounded it in the present, and every prospect of increased felicity in the future. Though not exactly rich, they were what people call 'well off,' with the certainty of a handsome income in a few years, time, if Herbert was industrious in his profession—he had lately been taken into partnership in an old-established office, where his share of profit depended on his contribution of work—and if they were moderately careful in their house-keeping. They had a nice house near Connaught Square—one of those new houses, clean and fresh, which seem made for young married people; and they had furnished it elegantly, with the due amount of pretty fancies and popular 'art' which all women think so necessary; and had hired two servants, who were to turn out domestic miracles; and altogether, they were starting in life with as much promise of success and happiness as falls to the lot of most people.

Herbert was one of the tenderest of husbands, too, and one of the kindest of men; a little given to self-indulgence, perhaps, and not overcareful in his choice of associates; but then he was so affectionate and so hopeful, so boyish in his universal sympathy, and so lovable in his very weaknesses, that even his harshest friends were fain to end their upbraidings with a kiss, and a smiling hope that all would turn out for the best. Besides, he had a wonderful power of what is vulgarly called 'getting over' people. He would explain away this, and soften down that, and plead so eloquently for charitable judgment here and there and everywhere—with half-laughing, half-serious references to his knowledge of the world—that he somehow metamorphosed the most glaringly imprudent actions into really very cunning strokes of policy, and invested the most notoriously unworthy characters with patent claims on every one's respect and charity. All this entranced Grace. His affectionate generosity of trust and allowance riveted her respect, as well as won her sympathy; it captured her heart while enslaving her judgment. She was too young and too ignorant yet to see the fallacy she followed; and too fond, to criticise the doctrines she believed in. Her reliance on Herbert's wisdom and goodness was such as one gives to a superior being. Herbert's dictum was Grace's law—Herbert's wishes, Grace's duties.

For instance, Herbert liked Frank Lawson and Hyde Smith, two young artists of questionable standing in society and decided worthlessness in art; and though she herself was repelled by them, and could not but think them vulgar and unpleasant, yet as Herbert knew them intimately, and she did not, of course he was the best judge of their characters, and their fitness as her associates. They were rude and coarse,

and took disagreeable liberties about the house, and said ungentlemanly things, and did ungentlemanly actions—she thought; but she had been brought up so entirely in the country that she was probably fastidious, and easily startled; while Herbert, who knew the world, must know best what was proper for his own house. So she concealed her disgust; and Frank and Hyde declared she was a 'jolly old girl,' and a 'regular brick.'

Never did young wife fulfill more heartily her marriage-vow, to love, honor, and obey her husband; never had husband a more plastic form to mould into what shape should best please his fancy—two more loving birds never hid within the thick woods, and no children gave themselves up to play on a violet bank with more unsuspectingness of sorrow to come, than did Herbert and Grace Ayton in the first months of their wedded life.

Sunshine above, in the bright summer sky, bathing roof and basement in one golden flood—love within, glorifying every small domestic event, and hallowing every fleeting feeling—trust and reverence, as befiteth woman, admiration and affection, as agreeeth best with man—a perfect union of hearts as well as of bands; such were the bright surrounding and glorious internal conditions of their lives; and Grace had reason when she knelt down at night and thanked God for her dear happiness.

They were very gay. Parties every evening, or theatres, concerts, or the current sights of the hour; pleasant excursions in the day down to Richmond or Hampton, Chislehurst—sweetest place of all—to East Barnet and to Sydenham; the Opera, where Grace in her private box (always in a good position, and on grand nights, no matter at what cost) looked like a beautiful picture enfram'd in the gorgeous draperies; select dinners, perfect in their arrangements, but fearfully costly; merry dances, where all enjoyed themselves as they never enjoyed themselves before—this was the life to which Herbert introduced his young wife, and in which she was the favorite and the belle.

Yet sometimes she half wished that they were more alone and at home. She enjoyed her gaieties extremely; but they came so often that she grew tired of them, and longed for quiet as a weary laborer longs for sleep. Still, if they were at home they were not suffered to be alone—Frank Lawson and Hyde Smith, with others of the same class, were always spending their evenings there; keeping Herbert down in the dining-room, while they drank and smoked, and tainted the room with stale tobacco for to-morrow's breakfast. So Grace was better pleased to be out in the grand world, where Herbert was at least in the same room with her, than to be up stairs alone for a whole evening, while he was kept away by those tiresome men: or, what was worse, while he brought them up, noisy and excited, and ordered coffee near upon midnight.

'Grace, my darling, I am going out for half an hour this evening. Shall you be dull, sweet?'

'O no, Herbert, dear! I have plenty to do. You will not be very long?'

'No; I'm only going to see a new picture that Hyde has in his rooms for a few days. We shall go nowhere else; and if Grace can live for half an hour without me, and I can survive her loss so long, we shall not be separated longer.'

All this was said with beaming smiles and the fondest looks, which of themselves would have reconciled Grace to any affliction; but when he came closer to her, and parting the hair from her forehead, kissed it, and said in a low sweet voice, 'I wish I could manage so as never to leave you,' why, then Grace would have given him her heart's blood if he had asked for it—not only have assented with the most loving cheerfulness to his spending half an hour away from her. And so Herbert left her, fully convinced that he had the dearest and most beautiful wife in London, but unable, as usual, to resist a temptation or deny a request.

The time passed well enough for the first two hours; then the young wife began to tire of her work—marvellous fine work was it; making up strange clothing problems of diminutive dimensions and infinitesimal proportions, more like dolls' clothes than anything else, and yet not dolls' clothes either. The candlelight at last hurt her eyes; so she rose and laid her work in her pretty basket, all pink and white, and stood there looking at it with many a half-smothered exclamation of pleasure. One article, something like a fairycap, she put on her own white hand, which suddenly transformed itself in her eyes to a baby's face, and which, on the strength of that transformation, received a kiss from her own lips. How she laughed at herself as the action recalled her wandering senses. She must do something more real than this; so she took up a book, attracted by a new binding. It was a law-book, which Herbert had brought home from the office more than a week since, to find out a legal point much wanted in a pending cause. The point had never been looked up yet, and the cause had been tried and lost. This would not do; so she found

where her favorite Tennyson was lying, and turned over the leaves lovingly. But Mariana in the Moated Grange made her feel very lonely, and the May Queen nearly broke her heart. She had not been quite well lately; indeed, she had been delicate for some weeks now, and to-day especially she had been faint and nervous. She looked at the clock, and wished that Herbert was at home. It was getting late now—past eleven—and it was only just seven when he went out. She wondered at Frank Lawson and that horrible Hyde Smith. They might be a little more considerate, and not drag Herbert so much from his home. They were such detestable men—and then she checked herself, as if she had thought something sinful; for were they not Herbert's friends?

She sat by the open window; screening herself from the street, and looking out on the long lines between the gas-lights, listening for the beloved foot whose faintest tread was her most exquisite music. But the ceaseless stream of rapid steps brought nothing to her heart. Friend and husbands hastened home to others, but no one came to her.

For a long time she bore up against the darkening influence gathering round her; but weary with watching, and terrified lest accident or worse might have detained Herbert, she leaned her head upon her hands, and burst into a flood of tears of sorrow since she married. How they startled her—how they agonised her! Was she then indeed so miserable as this? Could a slight disappointment cause such terrible grief; or was there a deeper wound beneath? She dare not probe her own heart: shuddering, she drew back the veil, and shut out the ghastly image whose shroud had just fluttered in her eyes. She would not look nearer: she did not wish to learn more.

The night-air blew chill; but the young wife did not feel it. Her head was throbbing, and her forehead and hands burned like fire. The servants had been gone to bed for some time, and she was the only one up and awake in the house. This gave her a terrible sensation of dread. She was angry with herself for her folly, but she could not conquer it.

A consciousness of some hideous presence behind her, strange breaths drawn deep close to her ear, strange feet creaking up the stairs, and once, she could have sworn to it, the handle of her door moved softly and the door itself partially opened; all these nervous fancies, added to her anguish of fear for Herbert, lest some hideous mischief had befallen him, left her for awhile speechless and powerless from agony. One o'clock sounded—two—half-past chimed, and then the quarter; when a burst of rollicking voices came revelling up the street, and the three friends rushed tumultuously to the door.

Shivering, terrified, as if about to encounter some misfortune, yet transported, too, at having her beloved husband once more so near her, Grace ran down to open the door. At a glance she saw that Frank Lawson and Hyde Smith were tipsy, and that Herbert—dear, beautiful Herbert!—he too was excited and uproarious, and unlike his usual glorious self.

'Ab, my sweet! it's late for you to be up,' he cried, throwing his arm around his wife's waist, and kissing her more than once, though the two men were there staggering and laughing, and the policeman, not two yards off, was looking on with the composed gravity and careful scrutiny of a night-watch.

Grace blushed painfully, and put away her husband's hands, but quite gently.

'Never mind the hour,' she said, smiling nervously; 'it does not signify, now that you are at home again. But we had better not stand here. It is too late to ask you in,' she continued, turning to the artists, and speaking in a hurried manner, 'and I am cold already; so, good night.'

'By Jove, we won't stand this!' cried Frank, the most tipsy of the two; 'we must have the old port to-night, Mrs. Herbert,' with a familiar gesture. It would have been a chuck under the chin, if she had been near enough.

Grace shrank back.

'Herbert,' she said in a low tone, 'send these men away. It is not proper that they should come in at this hour of the night.'

Herbert looked embarrassed.

'Just a moment, Grace dear,' he said coaxingly, below his breath.

'No, no, Herbert,' she urged.

'Come away, Frank,' said Hyde, the coarsest but the most good-natured; 'don't you see the missis doesn't want us?'

The wind was blowing through the girl's chestnut curls, lifting them off her forehead, and throwing them across her eyes, breaking the the heavier masses into a thousand airy rings and graceful waves, and heightening her beauty by the unstudied grace of their fall. Never had she looked more lovely than at this moment, when, flushed and agitated, she stood beneath the gas-light, with every line broken by the heavy wind, and giving but one effect of ceaseless undulation. It was the very study for a painter.

'By George! my Venus Rising,' cried Frank, taking out his pocket-book.

Even Herbert did not like this.

'Go in, love—go in,' he said hurriedly.

'Come with me then, Herbert, and send these men away.'

In her earnestness she took his hand between both her own, and attempted to draw him to the door.

'Hyde,' laughed Frank, with his thick speech and drunken accent, 'can't you get an attitude for your Mrs. Potiphar?'

This decided it. Herbert drove the men away, though with perfect good-humor, and entered the house with Grace, still in the gayest spirits, and more than ordinarily fascinating. He said she was tired, and insisted on carrying her up the stairs; which he did with boyish delight, humming an air from *l'Elisir d'Amore* all the way.

'Look here, my sweet!' he cried, when they got up stairs, jingling his purse before her eyes—'I have won all this to-night; or don't frown—no, you never do that—but don't look sad, which is worse, at my being away from you so long. I did it on purpose darling; for I was in such a vein of good luck, it would really have been a sin to have stopped; and as I was playing with half-a-dozen rich fellows, I had no compunction in winning their money. I wanted to pay that fellow the upholsterer. He had been boring me to death with his duns; and really this was a better way of raising the wind than by screwing six and eight-pences out of some poor devil who can't afford them. So you see, darling, it was not pleasure, but business, and even consideration for others, that kept me at the club so long.'

Now, in all this Herbert did not wilfully lie. He had so accustomed himself to the moral sybaritism of believing that all his actions sprang from good motives, that, unknown to himself, he was for ever his own hero, even when most culpable; and being gifted with a fertile imagination, it was not difficult for him to imagine certain springs of action, and then to believe in them. Many men have the same delusion of implicit belief in the good intentions of their worst actions.

Grace nestled closer to him. Every word of his gospel truth, which it would have been sinful to disobey. She was quite happy now, only sobbing a little at intervals, like a child whose passion has overpast. Herbert was much distressed. He took her to him, and caressed her fondly; and when he heard those long drawn sighs and shuddering sobs, he blamed himself with such unnecessary bitterness for having left her—even for their mutual advantage, and on principle—that Grace suddenly found herself in the position of a selfish *exigeante*, and took sore blame to herself therefrom. And then Herbert told her how devotedly he loved her, and how often he had thought of her and longed to be with her that evening—which was true enough; and he repeated some favorite verses of poetry in his sweetest voice; and his accents trembled and sank low, and the tears gathered up behind his bright blue eyes when he came to anything peculiarly tender or appropriate; and then he said how inadequate was it all to express his adoration for her, and how much better he loved her than ever poet had been able to declare.—And so they were firmer friends and more devoted lovers than ever. And Grace never felt more intensely happy than when Herbert gave her his last caress, and loudly praised her glossy hair and brilliant eyes as she left the room. Poor Grace! she never thought that it was champagne and success which had so brightened her eyes and curls!

By degrees—not coming harshly or suddenly—this kind of life won upon Herbert. The state of her health made it necessary for Grace to avoid late hours, fatigue, and excitement; and Herbert soon found his quiet evenings dull and uninteresting compared to the excitements of a man of pleasure. He yielded more and more, crowning his cup of life with all the flowers he could gather on every side, and flinging his whole soul into the whirlpool of dissipation. But as yet it was dissipation heightened into poetry by the refinement of the mind brought into it and the grace of the manners which accepted it.—Herbert Ayton was no sottish sensualist; he owned the beauty of refinement in his pleasures yet, at least. But for how long? Alas!

Still Grace never complained. He was not to blame, but on the contrary, to be pitied, for his friends would not leave him alone. And he hated this constant excitement as much as any one could—he said he did! Come what might, her husband should be faultless!

At last the child was born; Grace narrowly escaping with her life. The chance of losing her sobered Herbert, and weakened the enchantments which had woven such mighty spells over him. But no sooner was the term of necessary quiet over, than the same state of things recommenced, in spite of all that Grace might endeavor.

'Dear Herbert! another dinner party to-day again?'

'Influential clients, my sweet. It is absolutely necessary they should be asked.'

'But, Herbert, dear, all this expense—'

'Never you fret about that, darling. I know my own affairs, and you may trust to my prudence. There is sometimes no real economy, darling, in shabbiness. The people who are coming to-day may throw into my hands work to two hundred times the amount of a paltry dinner.'

Grace shook her head mournfully.

'Now, Grace,' said Herbert, in a kind of coaxing, deprecating tone, 'don't look so unhappy for nothing. Don't you love me, Grace? and can I not therefore make you always happy under any circumstances?'

As these words were magical incantations yet to Grace, she assured him again, for the millionth time since her marriage, of her entire devotion, and held her peace. So the dinner was given; and when it was given, it turned out that the influential clients were merry artists, male and female; a few questionable city men of large expenditure and mysterious callings; a few clerks with more wit than work in them; and students of various sciences in appearance, but of London life in reality. But of all the guests, there was not one who could advance Herbert's business by a single fee, nor one whose acquaintance, for all prudential reasons, it were not better to decline than keep. And this dinner was followed by a second and a third like unto it; by dances, suppers, and carousals of every denomination; by idleness and extravagance under every form, to all of which Grace was obliged to consent with an aching heart and a troubled brow, knowing well that such recklessness as this must sooner or later end in destruction.

A change was creeping over the young wife. Herbert did not see it, but his friends did.—Their questions and banterings, constantly repeated, at last made Herbert sensible that something was changing—he scarcely knew what, for Grace was as gentle and loving as ever; but different, somehow. And she was different.—Still, and somewhat sad at times, with busy thoughts pressing round her heart, and dark forebodings glooming in the undetermined future, she was but little like the gleeful Grace of that bright June marriage-day! Her baby had called forth some of the latent power of her nature; and the holiest love which humanity can know, had begun to show her the truth of the most passionate; the little hands pressing the bending face had cleared something of the film from those loving eyes; and the mother must perform sit in judgment upon her husband, for love of that tiny thing nestled on her bosom. Yet how she grieved to think that part of her fairy bow had melted into thick cloud, and that what she had once held as almost divine, was but weak, frail humanity after all! But as yet nothing harsher than disappointment to find him weak had saddened her; it had never crossed her brain to believe her husband wicked. He was simply not all perfect, but yet most beautiful, most dear, most lovely of all the earth to her!

'You are ill, Herbert dear,' she said one night, when her husband, returning home after a delightful day among the chestnut trees of Busby, flung himself on the sofa, and fell suddenly into deep slumber.

'No, no,' he said, with a start, trying to shake off his depression.

But the anxiety of love has eyes which the craft of love can never evade. Grace saw through the cheat of that smiling lip, with the wandering eye above; and the smooth word of comfort affected her nothing, while the furrowed brow contradicted its assurances.

'Ah, I see it! Tell me, dear, what has gone wrong?' She sat by him caressing his hands.

He endeavored to laugh away her fears, but without success; and little retentive as he was at any time, she soon gathered the main part, that he had met with some annoyance. But he would not tell her any particulars.

'And yet, Herbert, I am your wife, and have a right to know what hurts you. Why do you conceal anything from me, dear?'

'Because I do not wish to sadden you, Grace. A man may bear any misfortune, but he should not burden his wife with his troubles.'

Grace put all this aside. She spoke of their holy union, and of their little one, and of the confidence which this sweet tie ought to have worked between them; and tears came into her eyes—her great gray eyes—as she said dear, eloquent words of love, and trust, and exhortation for reliance.

Herbert, easily moved for good or ill, was deeply affected. 'Ab, Grace!' he cried, 'I can never prize you as you deserve; but indeed, darling, if I do not tell you all my troubles, it is only because I would rather die than sadden you even for a moment.'

Grace smiled gently. She thought of all her days and melancholy evenings passed in such un-