

UPON MY WORD SHE DID!

Her hair was black. "But black," she sighed, "is very much too cold;" And so she bleached her locks until They looked almost like gold. A simple satin robe she wore, Which closely to her clung (In fact it was extremely scant), And from her belt a lily pale And four sunflowers hung— Four big sunflowers hung.

She would not touch a bit of meat, But oft she'd sit and weep, To think the broiled chops were once Part of a baby sheep. "And oh!" she'd moan, "these seared steaks, So full of gravy now!" (This was a slight mistake, I think). "Once wandered o'er the fields and meads, Attaché to a cow— A gentle browsing cow."

She was the most poetic thing; She wouldn't harm a fly; "Its life is short at best," she'd say— "Oh, pray don't make it die!" The very cat for catching mice In tearful voice she chide. And then at last she married (And seemed quite glad to get him, too) A butcher; yes, she did! Upon my word she did!

—MARGARET EYTINGE, in *Harper's*

MAJOR ASHTON'S MISTAKE.

Mrs. Damer knelt before the kitchen fire, toasting a thin slice of bread. Very careful attention that morsel of wheaten loaf required. It must be neither too brown nor too pale in hue, but must acquire exactly that crisp golden tint which is the height of perfection in toast; for was it not about to present itself in company with a cup of fragrant "five-o'clock tea" before the most "particular" lodger Octagon House had ever known—Major Roland Ashton, who lay on the shabby couch in Mrs. Damer's little drawing-room, hearkening to the splash of the waves on the rocks, and thinking his landlady was a trifle less attentive than usual this soft April afternoon, when purple clouds were floating over the faint blue sky and rain-drops hung on the wall-flower in the window, whilst a delicately-tinted rainbow drooped over the ancient church on the hill-side?

Mrs. Damer looked decidedly unfit for making dainty toast or doing anything else to which her undivided attention should be given—a tall, thin woman, clad in a garb of rusty brown linsey, having a small drab shawl pinned across her lean shoulders, a tumbled cap of black lace, decorated with dirty pink roses, on her head, over pale silvering hair twisted into a flat curl on either side of her sunken cheeks, whilst an arched nose of unusual dimensions gave to her features a decidedly parrot-like expression, increased by the wide-reaching mouth and somewhat elevated chin. Yet there were not wanting, even now, those who said, when a kindly smile lit up the faded blue eyes, that Martha Damer was no bad-looking woman; and one or two elderly folk, who had known her before the life-story had graven itself in deep lines across the brow, and small channels, the result of much weeping, showed themselves at the corners of the eyes, declared that she had been a beauty in the spring-tide of her youth. But the sweet primrose days had floated into the "pitiless past" many a year ago.

Tears were heavy in the sad blue eyes just now, and a sob trembled in her throat. "Did you manage all right, Sep?" she asked eagerly, as light footsteps hastened down the dingy kitchen-stairs, and a fresh-cheeked young girl came to her side.

"Yes, aunt, famously," the girl replied. "I popped into the post-office when nobody else was there, and no one saw me go out or come in. Sophie didn't see me, though she was matching her ribbons in Fisher's shop. The letter and the order are on their way now, and, the man told me, will be sure to reach London in the morning. I did just see the Major on the West Hill as I was going, but I don't think he saw me. I went that way because I thought Jack might see me in the High Street; and, aunt dear, you gave me sixpence too much."

"Keep it, child," said Mrs. Damer, drawing down the flowerlike face to her own and kissing it tenderly. "I'll buy you a bit of velvet for your locket. You've been a good, good girl. I've been in such a fidget since you went, for fear Jack or Sophie should see you and wonder where you were going. So think I couldn't trust my own girls! But you are just like your poor mother, true as steel. Shall I ever forget—Bless me, there's the Major's bell! The cream and the tray are laid, Sep; and, when you've taken up the tea, run and see what Bell is doing. Her father will be so vexed if his tea is not ready; and I've ducks to stuff, and shrimps to shell for sauce—the Major has two gentlemen to dinner—and Jack's best shirt to iron; and you've flowers to get for the table, and all the silver to rub. Tell Bell she must come down."

Sep laid aside her hat, and, twisting up the shower of sun-kissed hair loosened by the April breezes, took up her load and went to do her aunt's bidding.

Old Mr. Damer was sitting with the Major when the little maiden entered with her tray. On Wednesday afternoons, when his handful of scholars rejoiced in a half-holiday, the old man usually ventured to inquire after the health of his lodger, and the Major would generally ask him to sit and chat a while; for Roland Ashton was somewhat lonely in his retreat by the sea, whither he had come to recruit his strength

after an illness consequent upon a wound from a cruel assegai received in an encounter with stalwart Zulus. And Mr. Damer, though pompous and prosy, was withal a human being with whom speech might be interchanged.

Still, for all his solitude, the young soldier was rapidly regaining strength and health in the salt breezes of Beachley, and was well content. Portly Mr. Damer rose as his niece came in with her load.

"I wish you a very good evening, sir, and wish you better," said he; and, the Major responding with a bow, Sep heard the heavy footsteps go "tramp, tramp" down to the stone-floored kitchen, where he expected tea to be awaiting him, and where as yet tea was not.

Sep drew a little table to Major Ashton's side, growing scarlet as she did so, for somehow the keen blue eyes of the young officer always would bring the hot blood to the girl's cheeks. She was anxious speedily to fulfil the behests of aunt Martha; but Roland Ashton would not let her go immediately. He liked to talk to Mrs. Damer's niece, to watch the graceful movements of the slender supple figure in the worn black dress; he liked to ask questions of the girl, to make the tender gray eyes glance timidly up at him from beneath the heavy-fringed lashes, to hear the soft voice, in which there was just a ring of the plaintive Irish accent, responding to his queries; albeit at that very moment Lady Adelaide Frere, his affianced wife, sat in the drawing-room at Ashton Manor, working point-lace and talking to his widowed mother, Lady Ashton. And Sep thought she had never heard tones so sweet and low as those of Roland Ashton.

"Why do they call you 'Sep'?" he asked now. "Your name cannot be Septimus!"

"No," she said shyly.

"Will you tell me what it really is?"

"Persephone," she said, "who gathered daffodils and was lost. But I am always called 'Sep.'"

"Persephone," he said, who gathered daffodils; and, taking some golden stars from a glass near him, he drew the girl closer and fastened the fragrant blossoms in her belt.

Sep crimsoned more deeply than ever then, and, hastening away, she thrust the spring flowers into the bosom of her dress, lest Bell should see them and wonder.

Bell was standing with bare shoulders before the little mirror, twisting her brass-colored locks into a heavy coil when Sep reached her.

"Please, Bell, do come and get tea," she urged.

"I'll come when I choose, and not half a fraction of a second before," replied that young lady.

"Won't you come, Bell?" she entreated.

"Goosey," answered Bell, "if you'd a lover to please as I have, you'd find you must make yourself look decent. 'Arry's not easy to please either; he went on like anything the other night, because I didn't wear my blue silk when we went to tea at his mother's."

Sep crept down-stairs then with quaking heart, fearing her uncle Damer's wrath.

There was to be festivity in Beachley on that April night—fireworks and divers games in the grounds of "Nathaniel B. Bolton, Esquire, of Shrublands," the prominent teetotaler. Mr. Damer, who was strong on the temperance question, had received tickets for himself and his family. For the past week Bell and Sophie had been planning what they should wear, and Sep, whose treats were very few, had ironed out her lilac muslin and polished up her one ornament, a silver locket which had belonged to her dead mother, till it shone again.

"Idle, useless hussies!" grumbled uncle Damer as Sep began to lay the tea things. "Nothing but dress and finery! Pity they hadn't feathers like the birds! What's this, miss?"—aloud. "Your aunt drove with work, the girls out of the way, and you stopping out two hours on your way to Jones's for eggs—needn't have taken ten minutes! And the Major saw you down over the West Hill with his own eyes—there! You don't go to-night; I will have order! No tea, and everything at sixes and sevens!"

"I went for aunt," rose to the girl's lips; but the memory of the anguish in aunt Martha's eyes choked back the words, and she walked silently away.

"Serves you right; don't wonder at pa being vexed, loitering about two hours when you could have been back in no time!" was the verdict of Bell and Sophie, on hearing of Sep's sentence.

So she helped her cousins to dress, and by-and-by they set off, Bell bearing a huge nosegay of gay flowers, presented to her by the devoted 'Arry, who, radiant in a violet velvet waistcoat, himself escorted the lady of his love and her fair sister.

When they turned the corner at the bottom of the hill, and, with many becks and nods, disappeared, the lonely little maiden, from her watch-tower in the attic window, looked longingly after them, shedding a few regretful tears. She sat there till she heard old Damer go out for his evening stroll, closing the door noisily behind him. Aunt Martha did not call the child to aid her; she guessed that Sep was fretting over her punishment, and she was thinking how best she might compensate her niece for the disappointment.

After a while the April twilight deepened, stars trembled through fleecy clouds, and the young moon laid a glittering chain athwart the restless waves. The Major and his friends sauntered down the hill to the beach; and Sep, her

daffodils shining at her breast, went down to the drawing-room, ostensibly to "put it tidy," in reality to kneel on the low window-sill and gaze out over the sea.

Kneeling thus, she could see a whole fleet of fishing-boats illumined by the moonbeams, and a great ship crossing the moonlit horizon, like some wild white bird; and, thus kneeling, the girl began to dream of the silent coming years and of the hero they would surely bring with them, who was to bear her away from this workaday life into enchanted lands.

Then Sep thought that it was a "wee bit" hard of Aunt Martha to see her punished for keeping her secret; and again she thought of the grief that might not be spoken, lying heavily at Mrs. Damer's sore heart; and then, starting at the sound of a light, firm footfall, Sep saw in the flood of silvery moonbeams Major Ashton close at her side. She had been thinking how unkind it was of him to tell her uncle that he had seen her on the West Hill, and she had been crying piteously alone in the April night. How silly he would think her!

Roland Ashton was always sorely troubled at the sight of a woman's tears; and the tears of this girl whom he liked, with the quaint sweet old name, distressed him sorely—so sorely that, when he had drawn from Sep the confession that he was, albeit unwittingly, the cause of her punishment, bending his shapely head, he drew lovely, sorrowful Sep close to him, and kissed her on brow and cheek and dainty lips, kissed her as he had never kissed Lady Adelaide Frere.

Persephone pulled her hands from his then, and turned with crimson face to the door. The passionate touch of the young man's lips on her own had taught Sep that her hero was not far away in Dreamland, but here in aunt Martha's shabby house, and that, come what might, the world would never hold another being who could fill every corner of her heart as did Roland Ashton. This knowledge had lain for weeks in the child's breast, but only now had it burst forth into free and vigorous life, awakened by his kiss; and the discovery of her love sent through her a thrill of pleasure touched by pain.

At the open door stood Bell and Sophie, "tumbled" and warm; and behind them shone out the yellow locks of 'Arry, the thriving carver and gilder.

"Quite like a play!" hissed Bell.

"I'll tell pa!" murmured Sophie.

They dared not venture on more till the Major's door was safely shut.

She slipped past them, and out into the stone yard. The night had turned chilly, and the stars had hidden their faces; rain was falling now, and the moaning sobs of the sea came loud and strong. The girl shivered as a cold sighing wind stirred the daffodils at her breast. What had she done—oh, what had she done? How could she let Major Ashton kiss her? If she could only run away—away where nobody knew her!

When she went to lay the cloth for supper in the back parlor, Sep could see that they had been talking of her. Old Damer was smoking his pipe and swelling with wrath at his pretty niece. Sophie was at the cracked piano, shrieking out "The Captain and his Whiskers," whilst Bell and her lover were audibly giggling at her. So Sep, quickly finishing her work, stole away to bed before the storm burst upon her.

Lying wide awake, but with closed eyes, hours afterwards, she heard Bell and Sophie, after discussing the triumphs of the evening, say one to the other—

"To think of the Major and Sep—eh? Pa's savage! Won't she catch it to-morrow!"

To which Sophie, fastening her locks with a hair-pin, made answer—

"She's an awful dowdy little thing; but perhaps he has taken a fancy to her. Strange things do happen."

And, though that had been a troublous day to little Sep O'Hara, she slept, and her dreams were sweet, the daffodils sending forth their fragrance from beneath her pillow.

Mrs. Damer appeared with the Major's breakfast-tray in the morning, greatly to that gentleman's disappointment. It had come to be a great pleasure to Major Ashton to lie back in his chair by the window and watch the willowy movements of blushing Sep. Now he could see, from aunt Martha's grave face, that such things were over and done with.

Life was a hard battle for Martha Damer. One grief lay at her heart like some great black serpent. It was the firstborn of her little flock who had woven this trouble for the mother who loved him best; and Dick had been so loving and handsome and gay in the old days. Now he was an outcast and a wanderer, and the father had forbidden the lad's name to be uttered in the home-circle. Evil days had fallen on the baby who had lain at aunt Martha's breast; and now here was fresh trouble in the shape of Orphan Sep, whom Mrs. Damer pictured loving, ruined, deserted. Uncle Damer and his better half had held solemn counsel together in the night-season, and decided that immediate steps must be taken for the protection of the foolish little lamb sheltered within their fold.

"A gentleman whose brother is Sir Mayne Ashton and a baronet can't want to marry our Sep," old Damer had growled.

"Well, John, you know her father was an Irish gentleman—Lieutenant O'Hara—and his father General O'Hara of O'Hara; and her mother was not my own sister. My poor father married a curate's widow the second time, and

bitterly they both rued it. Sep's mother was her daughter, and—"

"And, when your poor sister died and young O'Hara was killed in the mutiny, the fine O'Haras would have let the child die if you hadn't taken her," broke in Mr. Damer.

"True, John," replied aunt Martha; "but the child is gentle-born. Sep has true Irish eyes, and her hands are for all the world like her father's. May be the Major can see she is of gentle blood."

"Tut, tut! Rubbish!" the old man had grunted, falling heavily asleep; whilst Mrs. Damer, lying wide awake, thought mournfully of Sep the girl and Dick the boy, till the clocks clanging out six warned her that it was time to rise and gird herself for the daily toil.

The Major felt grieved for the sad-faced woman. He spoke kindly to her; and aunt Martha, bursting into tears presently, let him draw from her some brief words of the erring lad. Roland Ashton speaking a few hopeful sentences, the sore heart of the mother felt easier than it had for many a long day; and Mrs. Damer had not courage to reproach him for his too winning ways towards her niece.

"Rat-tat!" went the postman; and Mrs. Damer, hastening down, sent up Bell with three letters for the Major. One contained a tailor's bill, another was from his widowed mother, the third, in a flowing feminine hand, he read slowly; and, coming to the end, Roland Ashton tore the dainty epistle into tiny bits, flinging them away to the spring breeze, and watching them flutter down in a pink shower on the white lilac-bush, whilst Bell's black kitten darted madly after them.

Lady Adelaide Frere had written, breaking her engagement with him. "She never could have loved you," wrote Lady Ashton. The Major pondered a while, and instinctively thought of tender-eyed, soft-voiced Sep; then he made a goodly breakfast, and, going out, almost unconsciously ascended the stone steps winding up the great green hill that towered above the town. As he paused at the heavy gates leading to some quaint old garden within the walls of a ruined castle, there came towards him a slight figure in cool holland dress and jacket, and from beneath the shawl hat looked forth the deep gray eyes of Persephone, who treasured still at her breast the daffodils he had given her—long years afterwards, when Sep and he were far apart, Roland found the faded blossoms betwixt the leaves of an old Bible. The Major took her hand and led her within the grounds—enchanted land to the happy girl, who, utterly forgetting her basket, which contained her uncle Damer's dinner, wandered hand in hand with her hero amid the beds gay with spring flowers, as one in some dream of wondrous beauty. The girl felt Roland Ashton's arms folded round her, and she did not shrink away. Only a sense of joy unutterable filled her, and it did not seem strange that the blue eyes were looking love into her own.

Dun clouds gathered overhead, and great drops fell fast on leaves and grasses. Roland drew Sep within an ancient crumbling tower, seating himself beside her on the old stone steps.

"Tell me you love me," he urged. "Say, 'Roland, I love you. I will be your wife.'"

Simply and fearlessly looking into the eyes of the one love of her young life, she echoed his words, the pure ring of truth in every syllable.

Roland sealed the compact with burning kisses, and Sep took them without any sense of shame or wrong-doing.

In the life of each mortal, it is said, comes one hour of perfect happiness. The moments may be scattered here and there on life's pathway, but the precious seconds come surely to each and all. These golden atoms of time came to Sep O'Hara as she sat on the stone steps in the rain, with her head pillowed on her lover's breast, whilst the gulls shrieked and thunder trembled in the distance.

Suddenly, the clocks striking out three, Sep started up; and her hero, escorting her to the gates of her enchanted land, stood watching the girl as she sped lightly down the rocky steps.

Old Damer was growling, and Jack swearing at the irregularity of his meals, whilst Sophie was sulkily cutting bread-and-butter, and wondering where, "that little wretch Sep" could be, when Mrs. Damer, breathless and excited, entered the little kitchen and exclaimed faintly—

"John, the Major wants to marry our Sep!"

"Bless my soul!" cried the old gentleman, started out of his usual decorum of speech, and forgetting his carefully-nursed wrath.

"Must be a fool!" grumbled Jack.

"Mercy on me!" screamed Sophie, dropping the butter upon the sanded stones and breaking the plate.

Bell was silent. It was impossible that this thing had befallen Sep, who could not play the piano, or even "do her hair," which was always tumbling in sunny masses on her shoulders—whose sole accomplishment was the singing of old German ditties learned in infancy at her dear father's knee amid the Rhine mountains! She—that "little stupid"—to marry a "gentleman;" and here was Miss Bell Damer, with her wonderful suburn "coil" and musical abilities thinking it a proud matter to become "Mrs. 'Arry Fedder'!"

"It's true," went on aunt Martha; "and he wishes to be married in a month's time; and he said to me, 'Mrs. Damer, I love your niece, and I wish to make her my wife, if you and her uncle have no objection.' He was holding her hand