

## A CHRISTMAS BRIDE.

(Written for the True Witness.)

The great stock crisis of February, '98, spread panic from the Atlantic to the Pacific; a nation's heart stood still. Each hour brought tidings of the downfall of some civic magnate bereft of a colossal fortune and penniless. Amongst the early victims of the financial crash was the owner of Witheby, Virginia. When his great wealth vanished from him at one stroke, small wonder that he sickened and died. Then into the world his only child went, to join in the struggle for gold which is the struggle for life.

In the following September, on a bright, cool morning, she entered on her duties as teacher of the sixth form in the Carleton High School for boys. A few days before the little, sandy-haired, blue-eyed principal had snapped some curt questions at her, looked long and keenly at her from under his heavy lashes, and said: "You will suit, I think." Then she had feared him a little; but his kindness and attention to her during the first awful days showed her a different man from the one who scowled and almost shrieked at the trembling little law-breakers, which was his way of controlling them, though it struck Edith Warton as somewhat primitive management.

There were many tiring days to this girl unused to fatigue or worry. Hours, when her whole nature revolted against the drudgery of the life. Sometimes there was a moment of satisfaction, but more often the realization that her throat was sore, her head heavy and the children wilful and stupid. However, youth is truly dauntless, and she had already the hearts of half the class.

The only woman on a large teaching staff, and a very youthful and uncommonly handsome woman, needless to say attracted no small amount of interest from her conferees, who lost no opportunity of meeting and speaking with her. From the first moment he saw her, she was to the young professor of literature a source of serious distraction. Into many a day-dream her little black figure entered, while his class puzzled over the intricacies of old English or Spenserian stanzas. Always awaiting to lure his youthful fancy was the same tall, supple form, the same hazel eyes and heavy brown hair, the same expression—sweet, wistful, intelligent, fascinating—a variation of everything bright and lovable that lurks in the feminine face.

He was a man of ideals, and one of those fortunate mortals whose thoughts are not necessarily weighted by the pressing needs of everyday life. An only son of a wealthy widow, where roses could be bought, roses strewed his path. He loved the beautiful in life, and it was with a longing to develop this priceless gift in others that he chose his profession. Humanity was to him an open book in which he read with avidity; the mediocrity he found therein did not discourage him; he believed in the highest and the hope of ultimately finding the ideal spurred him on. In Edith Warton the physical perfection he dreamed of was realized, and it gave him unending pain to notice the change in her girlish bloom after the first few weeks were over.

Till Xmas there were few words exchanged between them, and when an uncle appeared and carried her home for the holidays she only remarked him more than the other teachers on account of his handsome appearance, gentlemanly bearing and his reputation for cleverness. She little thought that the Professor of Literature walked the streets incessantly during those days in the hope of seeing her; indeed she had an idea that if he did meet her he might not care to recognize her. Edith came of an aristocratic society and had penetrated some of its common secrets without in the least sympathizing with them.

January seemed unending. The children were more ungovernable, the work harder, the boarding house more distasteful and her solitary room more lonely than before. But there was one brighter strain in her life now, though at first she was not the one who appreciated it most. The 6th Form was taking up composition, and consequently Clifford Hutchison appeared at the class room door three times a week.

There were necessarily a few words before the lesson and as 3 o'clock was a short recreation period, the report he gave her of conduct, etc.,

was easily prolonged. They met on an equally advantageous footing, and the strikingly original thought which had been encouraged by her father in the Wetheby library was sufficient to arouse his interest if it had not already been won. Often there was a recommendation to peruse some delectable pen-sketch, or poetic tale, the result of which reading would require an exchange of ideas after the following lesson. Both grew to centre great thought in these inter-views, but the eagerness with which the man awaited their occurrence was the more remarkable as his life was filled with so many pleasures, while Edith lived the life of a recluse, neither striving nor caring to make friends among the people with whom she came in contact.

The girl who had greeted Mr. Lifton one morning in September had since lost much of her buoyancy and color. A quiet had fallen on her. Fate was cruel all at once to this child nursed in the lap of luxury and ease, surrounded by friends and companions. The stately Virginian house, splendid with the spoils which riches bring, where a devoted father lived only for his child, was not more different from the bare walls which loomed on her nightly than was the dancing butterfly of girlhood who thought life spelt pleasure, to the lonely woman bravely struggling through a killing existence.

One particularly trying day in the beginning of February she remembered for a long time. The snow fell steadily and heavily from morning, and the stillness without only increased the noise within. The hot, stuffy room was none the better of open windows, and the flakes that drifted in gave increasing distraction to the boys. Her throat was sore, her head ached, her face burned, and her spirits were at their lowest. She had scolded and coaxed, threatened and ignored from sheer habit, and as the file of children wound round the room and out the door with the lazy "Good night," she thought it had been a lost day to them and to herself. On the desk before her were books innumerable of scribbled exercises to be corrected for the morning; but instead of at once setting to her task she folded her arms and let her weary head fall on them for a moment. Darkness was not far off, and stillness reigned within and without. Presently the exhausted woman was breathing in a deep sleep.

Clifford Hutchison had mislaid a text book and remembered late in the afternoon of having left it in the 6th Form. When his last lecture was over he rushed up stairs and more from habit than forethought, rapped at the door, though he knew class was over an hour before. Not waiting an answer, he entered.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Warton," he said, surprised at the sight before him.

Edith awoke, startled.

"When I what! Oh, I fell asleep!" The darkness hid the color that surged over her face. She felt suddenly angry at him for being there.

"I am very sorry to intrude like this, Miss Warton," he ventured, in a genuine tone of regret.

"I was simply exhausted, Mr. Hutchison; and before correcting these, I thought to give my head a minute's rest and instead fell asleep." Her tone was not sharp, but it left no doubt in his mind as to her feelings.

"You will think me very rude to come in without permission. I forgot this book yesterday and needed it absolutely to-night. I hope you will excuse my oversight." His gentleness overcame her momentary anger.

"Consider it forgotten, Mr. Hutchison. If Mr. Lifton had come in I might have been dismissed by now." She was making an attempt at gaiety.

"If there is more work than time to do it in, he is to blame himself, I think." He took his volume and Edith gathered up her books in one pile and turned the key in her desk.

"What was there to do, Miss Warton?" he asked, almost indifferently, as he held the door for her.

"To-day's dictation and last night's arithmetic."

"Would you care for more light in the dressing-room?"

"No, thank you," she said, as he bowed and walked away.

"He is usually more friendly. He forgot to say 'Good evening.' What a foolish girl I am!" she said to

herself in the little mirror, as she gave her hat a little extra touch. Before she reached the corner of the street she heard, "May I join you, Miss Warton?" He fell in step with her and quietly drew her music roll from under her arm.

"There is no danger of my going to sleep again if I have company, Mr. Hutchison," she said, and she could not help an admiring glance at the handsome man beside her. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and the upturned collar of his fur-lined coat framed as young and manly a face as Edith had ever seen on any man.

"Now, now, Miss Warton, you are too hard on yourself. What a snow-fall we are having! Makes me wish I were a boy again. Do you see that snow bank? That is the one I would climb if old age and dignity of position did not interfere." He gave a jolly laugh at his misfortune. He had a way of making the most commonplace subject attractive by his voice and look, but more from the real healthy interest he took in everything around him. He acted like a tonic on most people, and decidedly so on the girl beside him.

"I hope you will not give another thought to this afternoon, Miss Warton. I have forgotten it already," he said earnestly, as he was bidding her good night at her professor's door. "It was all my fault for intruding, believe me." Then he raised his hat and was gone.

"How thoughtful to put it in that light!" she mused. She felt rested and happy that night, and rose early with a song on her lips. Her intention was to attend to yesterday's task before class began; but on opening her books she found each one neatly and rightly corrected in a clever imitation of her own writing. She was fairly jubilant at heart when the day's work commenced. Though she could not tell why, she knew by whom her day's burden had been lessened.

After that everything went easily till the monthly examinations and semi-annual reports came in one week, and there was nothing to do but plod through them after hours, especially as the days were growing longer and she could write till after 5 o'clock. The third evening she had an impossible amount of work before her, and she was feeling blue, lonesome, homesick, everything that makes steady thought intolerable.

"I can remain no later than five, whether the reports are finished or not," she said at ten minutes to five, "I am sick of work. Work! Work! Work! I have not one moment to myself." She dropped her pen and rested her cheek on her hand "Daddy! Daddy! If you can see your darling now, how sad you must be. How I am paying for the dear old days of love and care." A hot tear fell on her hand, another and another. She was pondering, the question, Is life worth living, worth the pain and the loneliness? The father and mother she loved were at rest; the friends she had known were of a world to which a school teacher could never belong, a world of ease and luxury, where women know what money buys but not what buys it.

Clifford Hutchison knocked thrice at the half open door and then entered.

"Working again over time, Miss Warton," he said, as he sauntered up to her desk. "I thought you had reformed." Though he knew at what hour she had left every evening since the one on which he had seen her asleep. He knew she had been very late for two nights.

Again a little angry wave swept over her. Was it not as bad to be caught crying as sleeping? What a child he must think her?

"Oh, my work is behind again, and I must have those reports ready for to-morrow evening."

He was particularly boyish looking somehow to-night, she thought, as she tried to stifle the tears from her eyes; but there were tears in her voice too.

"Miss Warton," he said, leaning one arm on the desk. "I wish you would not do this. You do not know, perhaps, how injurious it is to your health. Speak to Mr. Lifton about giving you some help. Won't you?"

"I realize perfectly well how the year is telling on me, but beggars cannot be choosers. I am engaged to do this work and I must do it or go. Better wear out existence like this than for twice the reward and half the labor to go down town and live a man's life in some public office. Is it not?" He agreed. Her head was still on her hand, for she wished to avoid his gaze. The hint in her tone was not lost to him.

"You think I am intruding, Miss Warton, but I hardly feel guilty of that again. If a well wisher may offer a suggestion or word of ad-

vice, surely one may who has all the qualities of a friend but the formal recognition as such." She ignored his words, though they thrilled her. "Do you not think that I might be of some help to you? I have a good deal of time to spare, and it would be a pleasure if I might assist you sometimes."

She answered nothing for a moment; it was such a temptation to agree to anything which could promote intercourse between them. Her better judgment prompted otherwise. She met his gaze for the first time.

"You have been very kind to me, Mr. Hutchison. Only one in my position can appreciate your kindness to its full extent. You evidently can do the work, but I will not allow you to do so again." He smiled, a little disappointedly.

"As you say, Miss Warton. By the way, would you care to look over that new edition of the poets we spoke of yesterday?"

"I would very much. Have you bought them? Are they in the school?" she asked.

"No, they are still at Lambert's, and seeing that this is perhaps our last wintry day, I thought we might have a little sleigh drive first if you have no objection."

Edith agreed, half through a dread she had of Mr. Lifton appearing suddenly at the door; so gathering up her things she hurriedly went out, leaving Mr. Hutchison to lock the door.

She was surprised at being handed into a little cutter and more so when her companion stepped in beside her with a call to the smart brown horse. Snugly tucked in between the robes, with her jolly driver brandishing his whip over the flying steed, she forgot her day's cares, and the traces of tears soon left her eyes. There seemed no thought of the new edition in either mind as they chatted away.

"Since we left the school I have been wondering about this sleigh. How did you get it?" she asked, as they whirled around a wide corner and ahead of them was a long road with scarcely a house in view. He laughed.

"Well, well, Miss Warton, you should have asked before; it is my own, of course. The coachman had been waiting since four, so I sent him home. When Chum stands an hour it is hard to restrain her. He there, old girl! Slow up! Whoa-a!"

As their progress slackened Clifford Hutchison drew the robes closer about them, and fell into a more serious strain than he had ever before. It was a rare treat for him to meet a woman who could discourse easily his favorite themes, and evince such genuine sympathy with them. Edith never had opportunities of conversing with any one as well read, and relished a well thought discussion as only intelligent minds can.

She forgot that she had pondered on the uselessness of existence, forgot that beside her was an almost stranger forgot everything but the twilight with its crisp cold, the exhilarating motion of the sleigh, the merry jingling bells and the fascinating voice that colored all. The tears were gone from her eyes and voice. The roses were once more in her cheeks, and the everyday drudgery faded from her memory for a while.

"May I hope for the formal recognition some day, Miss Warton?" he asked, as, her hand on his arm, she crossed the sidewalk to her door.

She only smiled in answer, but he was satisfied. A woman's smile is truly the indicative mood to one who can read it.

Within the dinginess and bareness were less perceptible; her appetite was keen and her spirits light. But when she was alone in her room she saw too plainly that she should never have allowed herself to be induced to take the drive. They were pleasant companions for a short conversation, but could never rise one step higher despite his request. Judging by the remarks he had himself let fall, and the rumors she had heard elsewhere, the Hutchison family would hardly recognize as a friend one in her present position. What worried her most was that though Clifford Hutchison had made some effort to win her friendship he might not afterwards approve of her having so readily accepted them. In a word, she did not quite appreciate his thorough manliness. Sometimes it happens in this world that our ideals become real and for a time we cannot realize all that is contained in them.

"I will be distinctly polite and nothing more in return," she said to herself in the depths of a low rocker. "I will never accept another favor from him in any form, and tell him to-morrow never to

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come to my class again after hours."

Alas! for Edith Warton's resolutions. The light that shone in her eyes that night was not a beam that time or space can quench.

She turned up the gas, exchanged her black dress for a loose dressing gown, and spread her books before her on the table with a fresh interest in them. But distractions were rife. Through the literature danced a hundred sleighs with silvery bells, and into the melodies of the fugue was woven a merry, boyish laugh. Over the piano and in the dim corners of the room lurked the smiling grey eyes with their strangely fascinating look that lingered so in her memory. No use to try; she could not keep her thoughts from the day's pleasure and soon scrambled into bed to live it again in dreams.

Winter melted into spring and summer was peeping in bud and branch. There had been no other drive, and only at intervals did Clifford Hutchison venture to meet the 6th Form teacher leaving the school. Something in her manner forbade approach, though she was friendly to him as before.

Toward the end of April she lost her inexplicable reserve somewhat, and there were a few lagging walks home in the bright afternoons. There was another drive and a little supper after, and on Saturday afternoon they went together to hear Melba. Her room was often gay with his flowers and her shelves heavy with the books he lent or gave her. They grew to be very dear companions in these early summer days. Clifford vaguely felt that he loved her; he knew he was supremely happy with her, and day and night her presence haunted him. The girls whom he had once thought good company were avoided if not entirely forgotten. Society said, "That clever Hutchison boy is writing a book or making a discovery, no one ever sees him nowadays." The "Hutchison boy" smiled when he heard it, but said nothing. He was wondering if he might not tell Edith that he loved her. He was pondering on the pros and cons of her reciprocating his affection, of her consenting to be his wife. To a man these are momentous questions, and take time and deep thought to solve. His musings were suddenly disturbed by a little note lying on his desk one afternoon:

"My uncle arrived this morning. Insists on my returning with him to-night at ten. Mr. Lifton consents."

Edith Warton.

There was an abstracted look on the professor's face as the senior pupils recited their class poem for the last time. Clifford was wonderfully disappointed, he had hoped she would remain in town for a week anyhow.

He was early at the train, but Edith and her uncle were late, and as the latter remained beside her all the time there was no opportunity to say a word in private, and their farewell was very formal though as he dropped from the step in the station yard there was a look exchanged whose memory lasted for the summer, and almost made up for the absence of words.

It was when the dance was swift and in the fashionable seaside hotel

that Clifford realized his love; when the twittering of the society birds was sweetest on the velvet lawns, then he longed most for the quiet walks with Edith Warton.

During the long vacation days Edith grew bright and rosy again. She was back with her friends, and too full of her own thoughts to concern herself much as to whether they approved of her society or not. Her happiness was a little dampened as time to return drew near and she had to face the fact that last year might be nothing but a dream as far as any of its hopes or longings were concerned. She might never meet Mr. Hutchison again. In all probability he would not be lecturing at the Carleton this year.

With expectant longing she passed the first day of her second term in the 5th Form, for by the withdrawing of some higher teacher she was agreeably surprised to find herself promoted with her class. Her duties were no sooner over for the day and her boys scurrying noisily downstairs than Clifford Hutchison's genial voice sounded at the door.

"May I come in?"

There he was, just as handsome as ever, just as happy and agreeable as in his welcome than her wildest dreams had hoped. He caught her proffered hand in his larger ones. "At last," he said. "Of all the long days of a long summer this was the longest, Miss Warton." She smilingly ignored the insinuation.

"They say that the days are growing shorter, just the same, Mr. Hutchison," she laughed, to hide the joy she felt at heart. He was still the friend she had parted with three months before.

The second year was incomparably less trying than the first, whether her personal feelings had anything to do with the improvement or not, I cannot say. By the end of September the class was in full swing, and the brightness of the teacher was commented on by the pupils.

One day she sat at her desk after the file had wound away with its string of 'good-nights,' and with her cheek on her hand she fell to musing. The flush of the declining autumn sun was on her face and caught and played with the strands of her dark hair. The maples in the grounds were gay with scarlet hues and rustled at the open windows.

There was a pause in the happy course of her thoughts. A painful question was before her mind. Whether was she drifting. To the glory and joy of loving was added an irresistible longing for some assurance of return. She knew it was love, and called it love, and all the misgiving and fears that love knows were creeping into her heart with their insidious unrest. She did not ponder whether or not life was worth the living; she knew it was, but at one price only. When a day without a word or look from him was unbearable, what would the years be to her.

Her thoughts were so buried in him that when a hand was laid on hers she recognized the touch. The silence was unbroken for a moment.

"Could I share your thoughts?" he asked, in a low tone.

"You could, you do," she replied dreamily. "You are in them." Without turning she withdrew her hand.

She did not realize that she was speaking recklessly. "Can I judge of your thoughts?" she asked.

"Perhaps," she answered, away voice.

They had never spoken. There was always a friend and some lightsome words came. There was another Clifford Hutchison leaning desk and studied her face, the glory of the dying day, him lit with a more beautiful "Tell me I may," he who "I cannot. I do not know," she answered, after a moment. "Then let me tell you," he broke from him.

Her hand fell heavily and met his in a momentary quiver. "No," she said emphatically, the color left her cheeks, "must not." She might have needed not; for from that moment though no word was each understood.

After that night he no longer walked with her, but every noon as she turned the corner he would join her. She knew she could no longer attend to her duties, and felt that nothing else. The autumn days were on, and by the twilight rambles the quiet streets. The corner always partook of the winter literature affords, and in the daily saw new depths of other's character and nature, subject, not even music, advantage ground for self-portrait.

On Sundays there were walks, but never a word on the subject nearest to each. Edith, however, ranged to remain in town and the holidays, which was consideration for both.

Mrs. Hutchison, usually so concerned, proved obdurate, her most paving of the way, long heard his proposition, vowing his "dear friend" to dinner.

"A woman Retta or I have heard of! Preposterous! Forgetten cut each syllable. "How can you let those people so on your good nature?" Just then Retta came in in apple-green silk for Mrs. Dresser's dinner-party.

"Why, mother, I do believe the identical woman we saw for six weeks last year. her to our Xmas dinner! I Then she broke into a laugh, was not unpleasant in its which grated horribly on the in the room.

A few days later he made attempt, but found his not fortified with the pros and of a dozen or more intimates. The cons were decidedly in majority. Only relatives could dinner on Xmas day. Clifford a little hurt, but not at all he was man enough to be tired without resources or kind.

"Only relatives can be invited. Very well, we will be inevitable. Only relatives present," he said, with a tinge of his grey eyes.

The last Sunday before a beautiful winter day, pleasantly cold and white with tending mantle of last night. Edith and Clifford early in noon strolled out into the their usual Sunday walk. banks of spotless snow hid world of their own, a world of happiness and love.

Clifford drew her arm close to his and bent over her as he had something to her.

"Clifford, dear, what are you doing?" she gasped in surprise. He repeated his request, he put another light. He pleaded purpose. Edith would not consider it at all till they had her own door, and in light she could see the dimness on his face.

"Why should you care if I do?" something kept whispering. Suddenly she put hands into his: "Since you say so, I will."

Late on Xmas Eve a sleigh up to the same door and couple were again standing door-step. Edith was in suit, but there was something usually happy and festive about them both. Clifford protective air about him as the heavy door for her. long box into her hand.

"Look as pretty as you all will be well," he laughed dreamily. "You are in them." Without turning she withdrew her hand.