

THE BRIDE OF AN HOUR.

(Continued.)

"Oh, how late you are," exclaimed Essy, rushing up to her in hysterical joy when her sharp eyes espied her, "and oh, where did you get those snowdrops?"

"I am quite unable to tell you; I found them on my table."

"I know," nodding her head sagely, "Ivon sent them. Come, don't look so innocent; I believe you like him a lot."

"I will ask him if you like," Sheila said, unmoved by the elf's bandiage, seeing Ivon Russel approaching them.

"Were you the kind giver of these?" asked Sheila boldly pointing to the snowdrops.

"Me! no; I could not find enough to make a button-hole, much less such fine posies as those," he said, with an amused smile at Essy, who was tugging him violently by the coat-tail to carry him off for a dance.

"I wonder who did give them to me," she queried, as she watched the little maid go off triumphantly with her handsome partner, her white lace frock flying in hazy clouds about her as she skimmed round the room as light as a featherweight in the strong arms of Russel.

"My dear child, why are you here?" said a voice that sent a rich color surging in her face and neck, and even ears.

Sheila had stolen into the picture gallery, where she could escape notice, feeling too shy to court attention by remaining alone in the merry throng.

"I like coming here," she urged, in confusion, studying hard the carpet at her feet.

"And to hide yourself like some hedge-violet; but to-night Essy is queen of the revels, while you are her vice-queen, therefore I claim you for the next waltz."

She shot a glance of amazement which he construed to mean he was too far advanced in life for any such gayety.

"I am not quite a Methuselah," he said in strained tones of vexation.

"I did not mean you were, Sir John, only—only—"

"Had it been my nephew who asked you—"

"Indeed, no," she urged, earnestly, placing her hand on his arm deprecatingly; "it was the honor you paid me in my position."

"When will you cease to put this keen-edged sword between us," he broke forth, almost passionately. "What do you lack as a true gentlewoman? You have the riches of youth, beauty, and refinement of no ordinary type."

"But I am poor, insignificant, yet I am proud," she said, pointedly, withdrawing herself from him, "and, indeed, I must not stay."

Before she could fly from him he had caught her hands, and looking down into the piteous little face, said tenderly:—"I am resolved not to let you go till you explain yourself, so look upon yourself as my prisoner."

"I cannot tell you," she murmured, hanging down her head, abashed with shame. "Oh, do please let me go."

Suddenly one of those intuitive flashes of light darted upon his mind—that she recoiled from him because she believed she should lose his and her own esteem to listen to him, that, in fact, he was trifling with her innocent affections and friendless position.

The blood mounted to his cheek as the thought struck him, and yet, painful as it was, it gave him renewed courage and hope, for her visible shrinking from him did not, perhaps, mean indifference.

"Listen, sweet little snowdrop," he pleaded, softly. "Do not flinch from me, I love you."

"Love me," she repeated; "don't mock me, but let me go."

"For God's sake do not refuse to hear me, child," he urged, huskily. "You are laboring under some terrible error; all I covet, all I desire is for you to share my life, to be my own darling little wife; come, tell me, sweet, haven't you thought all kinds of naughty things of me for daring to aspire to you at my age, eh?"

"Aspire," she said, dreamily, as he caught her to him in the rapture of the moment, for he saw in those sunny brown eyes something which filled his soul with great joy.

"Sheila, my love, you can never know what you are to me, or how bitterly I have suffered since you avoided me. It seemed you shunned me because I was getting in the sere and yellow leaf, though my heart is as young as a boy's to you."

"It was not that, and you know it," she declared earnestly. "I feared myself, it seemed impossible you could wish a simple girl like me to be your wife."

"It is the one hope and dream of my life, child, to snatch you to myself with the greed a miser feels to clutch a hoard of treasure."

"And you really think I am worthy," she pursued, a great rapture filling every sense and fibre in her sensitive frame.

"Worthy," he repeated, patting with caressing lingering fingers her silky head; "if I could only feel it possible to be worthy of you, darling child."

"To me you are a king," she said, hiding her blushing face on his breast.

Sir John ravished no end of sweet kisses from her dewy quivering lips till she felt almost faint with ecstasy, and begged him shyly to release her.

This simple innocent girl had kindled a love as deep and unquenchable in the baronet's heart as death itself.

"Come with me; I am going to place on this dear hand our betrothal ring, one belonging to my mother," leading her to the library, where a splendid carved ebony cabinet stood in a recess.

Taking a small key from his chain, he unlocked it, and disclosed a dazzling collection of magnificent jewels, principally heirlooms of the family.

"How lovely," she ejaculated in amazement.

"They shall all be yours, darling," he said fondly, selecting a superb sapphire and brilliant ring of great value, and trying it on her finger.

"It fits to a nicety," he observed, with evident gratification, as she held up her hand with childish delight to catch the darting rays from the flashing gems.

"Now you must let me clasp this bracelet on your arm."

"It was an opal one, full of fire, each stone as large as a pea."

"I shall look like some eastern princess," she exclaimed gleefully; "what will Essy say when she sees my grandeur, I wonder?"

"Say you look divine, of course, as I do. Madcap loves you dearly, and will love you more when you become her little mamma."

"Is that you Sheila," called out Wally from the end of the corridor.

"Yes, dear," she responded, "do you want me?"

"Yes, of course I do," he grumbled; "that old ape, Betsy, has made my negus cold as ice, it is enough to poison one."

"Let him wait, he is too exacting," Sir John observed, loth to lose her for a moment from his sight.

"Here I am," she chirped, flitting into the room like a sunbeam, "you shall soon have some nice and hot."

The sparkling jewels, on her arm and finger, caught his glance, and he looked at her with a ghastly face and eyes fierce as a wild animal's.

"What is the matter?" she asked in terror, shrinking from him; are you ill, do tell me?"

"Who gave you those?" he demanded, hoarsely, pointing to her arm and hand.

His tone, so harsh, so utterly different to his usual querulous feeble one, sends the warm blood rushing madly from her heart, leaving the sweet face as white as her gown.

"I—I—at least Sir John gave them to me," she stammered, twisting the costly bauble nervously round and round her delicate wrist.

"My father!" he gasped incredulously, his eyes blazing with lurid light terrible to look upon. "My father, is he mad?" breaking out into a wild mirthless laugh, that thrilled her soul with an awful fear.

"Wally, you terrify me," she said, with a shudder, putting out her hands as if to ward off a blow. "Sir John has asked me to stay here for ever, to, in fact, take the place of your dear mother. I thought you would have been pleased if you really cared for me."

"You a mother!" he cried, in a high-pitched voice. "God forbid, the very heavens would condemn such a wrong, and hurl its curse—"

"For pity's sake, Wally, say no more," she urged; "you are distraught, put out, and know not what cruel words you are saying," trying to take his thin restless hand to soothe the turbulent nature into calmness.

"Go!" he said, morosely; "go to your 'youthful' lover, the despised cripple can turn his face to the wall and die."

"You make me very miserable," she said, tearfully; "I thought the news would have given you pleasure."

"Think, keep thinking, only go," was his sullen reply, hiding his face in the silken coverlet.

"Won't you let me make you some fresh negus?"

"No, I say!" this in a very frenzy of wild passion that sent her flying out of the room with a pallid, scared face, and a tumult of keen bitter pain at his brutal, inexplicable conduct.

"I thought he liked me, even admired me," she mused with a shiver as she made her way to the library to collect her dazed faculties, and stirred the red, fast dying embers into renewed life. "But that was only the dependent, the hired menial, whose business it is to wait and minister to his comforts, I see it all," clasping her small hands together in deep wretchedness, and taking off the offending bracelet.

"Sheila, where are you?" called the shrill treble voice of the little queen of the revels.

Wiping her tear-stained face hastily, Sheila went to meet the dainty lace-clad maiden, to receive a running fire of rebuke for her absence.

When the happy tidings were told to Essy by the baronet, she danced and capered about like a wild Indian in excess of joy.

"Oh! how lovely," she exclaimed, throwing her arms in childish affection around Sheila's neck, and kissing the pretty blushing face again and again, "you will never go away now. Oh, what fun we shall have together, mamma! Sheila, you shall have a fine swing (this was the elf's acme of real bliss, to be perpetual swinging) next to mine, and we'll get Dibble the gardener to swing us all day."

"A most dignified amusement, I must say," put in her father with a kind smile, "for the future Lady Ravenscourt."

"I am sure Sheila would like it," persisted Madcap; "if she's going to be my new mamma, I don't see why she shouldn't play with me. She isn't going to get old and stately all at once, papa."

He patted the saucy little head, and said, with a wealth of tenderness: "Sheila will always be your guide, friend, and playfellow, child, and now to tell our happy tidings to Wally, he will be overjoyed, for he is deeply attached to you, dearest."

The rosy mouth quivers and her eyes droop at the mention of Wally, as the baronet tucked her hand under his arm, for she dreaded lest father and son in the coming interview would have words, for, loyal girl that she was, not a sentence had she breathed of his strange conduct the night before.

When they entered the invalid's room, they found him lying back on his pillows in a listless, lifeless way, his face rigid in its set death-like stillness, while his eyes gleamed like living coals of fire.

"Why, my son, you cannot be well!" the baronet said in great concern, "I shall summon advice instantly."

"Not well," the youth repeated, catching his crutch and raising himself up with alacrity, "you are mistaken, sir, I am neither better nor worse than

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