

CHAPTER II.

Brenda was standing with a book of engravings open before her when Mr. Lisle and his visitors entered the breakfast-room, and she blithely summoned Sir Damer and Mr. Essilton to her aid.

"Mamma has kindly offered me the use of her jewels, so I think I should like to have a mediæval costume of velvet and satin, and old lace and pearls; but the question is, which of the Tudor princesses shall I represent? Shall I be Marguerite or Mary? or shall I travel back to more remote times, and shine as Joan of Kent?"

"What will Miss Menvyn wear?" asked the artist.

Brenda started.

"My cousin! I had forgotten to enquire. I will go and fetch her."

Mousie looked grave when questioned.

"Will not my black silk do? I have not worn it many times."

"For a ball costume? Not unless you propose to appear as a nun. You must have something new."

"But it is impossible, Aunt Ursula only gave me money enough for my fare, she said my wardrobe was sufficient for my requirements."

For a moment her hearer was tempted to say no more, but let Mousie stay quietly at home with the children. She would not complain; she would not miss a pleasure she had never enjoyed. But the natural warmth of Brenda's heart revived, and a kiss was lightly dropped on Mousie's upturned face.

"All the aunts in the world shall not rob you of a peep into fairyland. Reste tranquille mademoiselle, and I will manage it. Send those tiresome children away and let Miss Bond take your pattern. She shall receive her directions from me."

"I have changed my mind," Brenda announced, on returning down stairs. "I have been seized with a new idea. Mousie and I will personate Spring and Summer, and now that the seasons are so variable there will be nothing incongruous in their being escorted by Autumn and Winter if you, Sir Damer, and your friend will garb yourselves in russet and icicles."

The proposal was carried unanimously, Claude Essilton instantly drawing an amusing sketch of the Baronet in the loose but not unbecoming garments of a reaper, whilst he wore the flowing robes and silvery beard of Christmas.

So the dresses for the young ladies were made, and Brenda was repaid for giving up her dream of regal splendour that she might purchase the simpler materials required for her cousin as well as herself.

Never had she looked more charming in the gold coloured gauze and many tinted roses that harmonized with her olive skin and raven hair; while Mousie, in draperies of palest green, looped with primroses and violets, was as fair a vision of May as anyone could wish to see.

"Aunt Ursula would not know me!" she exclaimed, when arrayed for the first time in her pretty costume. "Indeed I hardly know myself, and when I have left you, Brenda, and resumed the old life, these happy days will seem like a dream."

"Then you are not happy with your aunt?"

A shadow fell on the youthful face.

"I try to be. If she would only love me a little I think I could be more content."

"Hope on, hope ever," counselled Brenda, gaily, though her heart swelled the while. You will not always be subject to Miss Ursula's tyranny. The prince will turn up some day and carry you away from her."

Mousie blushed as she shook her head despondently. How could she expect that anyone here would remember her when she had gone away!—unless it were Tom and Trot—still her most zealous adherents.

The evening fixed for the ball had arrived, and Brenda, who had been detained to write a letter for her father, bounded upstairs to commence her toilette.

But first she opened her cousin's door to toss to her one of the exquisite bouquets Sir Damer's groom had just brought.

To her astonishment, Mousie, the ball dress lying beside her, was sitting on the floor, her face in her hands, her shoulders heaving with sobs, and an open letter in her lap.

"It's all over," she said, when she heard Brenda's exclamation. "Aunt Ursula has learned that I am invited to the ball, and writes to forbid. She is very angry, and I am to go back to her to-morrow morning!"

Brenda grew pale as marble; an evil spirit was whispering in her ear. When this girl has gone away he will return to his allegiance. He loved you first, he will love you again when she is no longer here to bewitch him with her baby ways and soft brown eyes.

But the color flushed into her cheeks, and with a proud, passionate gesture, the temper was defied.

"Don't cry so, Mousie, I will go and hear what papa advises."

But Mr. Lisle declared he had no other advice to give than that the little girl should obey her natural guardian. As long as Miss Ursula Menvyn supported her niece, she had a right to dictate to her.

"Then let us keep Mousie here, papa. She would be happier with us."

"Possibly, but I cannot afford it. You look incredulous, and I like the child so much that it will grieve me to part with her; but I could not have Agatha's daughter here in the role of a dependant. I should have to adopt her, to treat her in every respect as I do you; and living up to our income as we do, how could I take upon my shoulders such an onerous charge!"

"We would retrench."

"You might, Brenda, but your stepmother would not; so pray say no more about it."

Mousie had risen from her lowly seat, and was bathing her eyes when her cousin returned to her.

"That's my brave coz. Call back your smiles, dress as quickly as you

can, and banish all thoughts of slavery and taskmistress till to-morrow. I'll send Morris to help you as soon as I can spare her."

"Dear Brenda," and she was clasped in an affectionate embrace, "I thank you, but I must not go to this ball. Do you forget that Aunt Ursula has forbidden it?"

"She need not know—"

Mousie drew herself up with a scornful gesture.

"As if I would stoop to deceive her!"

And in silence her cousin went away.

"No, Mousie is not going with us," she told Claude Essilton when he sprang to meet her at the foot of the stairs. "And she leaves us to-morrow."

"Is it kind for us to go and enjoy ourselves while she stays home and weeps?" he queried.

"Ah! you propose to console her! Do so then, I will call her; and—and you have my best wishes for your success!"

But Brenda's hand was too firmly clasped to withdraw it.

"Are you in earnest? Do you not know that my heart was yours before I saw your cousin, and it is only my poverty that has kept me from telling you how dear you are to me?"

There was no time to say more, for Sir Damer came up to inquire why Miss Menvyn was not with her cousin, and Mrs. Lisle was begging them not to keep the horses waiting.

"I am sorry Mousie could not stay with us a few weeks longer!" she confided to the Baronet, in the course of the evening. "for I really think an attachment was springing up between her and Mr. Essilton. It would have been such a suitable marriage for both of them, don't you think so?"

But Sir Damer made no reply, neither did he appear at the breakfast table on the morrow to bid Mousie farewell ere she started on her journey. The children wept and clung round her till the last moment; Mrs. Lisle, in spite of a naturally selfish nature, shed a tear when Mousie kissed her, and slipped a pretty turquoise ring on her finger; while Claude Essilton was quite brotherly in his attentions. Only Brenda and her father were somewhat constrained in their adieux; not because they did not regret losing her, but because they felt somewhat remorseful and uneasy, lest, by giving the lonely orphan this peep into a happier life, they had but unsettled her, and made her present one harder to bear.

Mousie went back to her Aunt Ursula, and Claude Essilton, after an interview with Mr. Lisle, returned to London to work hard for the bride who was not to be given to him till he had won fame and prosperity.

Brenda was sighing over his first letter, and the lengthy separation that lay before them, when Sir Damer Wentbury came to her.

She felt considerably embarrassed, for her stepmother was incessantly bemoaning her folly in losing the chance of securing the wealthy Baronet, whose many excellent qualities would have rendered him such an acceptable son in law.

"Forgive me for disturbing you?" Sir Damer said, with a glance at the letter; "but have you any messages for your cousin?"

"For Mousie? Oh, Sir Damer! But her aunt will not let you see her!"

"I think she will," was the smiling reply. "I have been in correspondence with that lady, and she seems inclined to accept my offer to relieve her of the care of her niece. It will enable her to devote a larger portion of her income to good works, she tells me."

"And Mousie herself?"

Sir Damer squeezed Brenda's hand agitatedly.

"Give me your good wishes. If I do not win her I will leave England."

But the Baronet did not have to expatriate himself; and the winsome little lady who presides over his household, and whose portrait brought Claude Essilton commissions enough to warrant his marrying, is still, by those who love her, called MOUSIE.

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