

THE BRIDE OF AN HOUR.

(Continued.)

The old dame furtively dashed the starting tear from her eyes with her ample apron and set to work to help the girls.

Sheila was abstractedly dropping laurel leaves into the fire and watching them burn with a crack like a mimic explosion.

"Bless us and save us what be the child up to!" ejaculated Betsy, raising her hands in horror, snatching a shining wax-like branch out of her hand.

"Why, what is the matter," Sheila asked in amazement.

"Matter enough, missy, it is a dreadful unlucky omen. It means sorrow—death even."

"You superstitious old thing," pouted Essy. "You make one turn cold, just look how you have frightened poor Sheila."

And the child was right, for Sheila stood riveted to the spot as if spell-bound, her beautiful face set, her teeth compressed into speechless silence.

Betsy touched the girl gently on the shoulder.

"I am so sorry, missy, my foolish old tongue went a wagging and scared you," she observed humbly.

A convulsive quiver ran through her, then, with an effort she gasped out:

"Oh, my heart, my heart!"

"What is the matter!" cried poor alarmed Essy, seizing the girl round the waist.

"I felt the stab of an icy knife, here, from some hand that leaped out of the fire," she sobbed in a half stifled groan, pressing her hand to her heart.

"Nonsense, dear Sheila, there is no knife, no hand, it is your imagination; you are nervous, Betsy will have to take you to the housekeeper, some of her medicine will soon put you right," Wally said calmly.

"What a simoleon you must all think me," Sheila stammered, the stony glare fading from her pretty eyes, the rich color mounting into her pallid cheeks once more.

"It's all through that senseless old fool with her rubbish," exclaimed Wally fiercely.

"Oh no, the horrid feeling began before Betsy mentioned a word, I was lost in a kind of dream, weaving all kinds of shapes and weird forms in the fire; please don't tell Sir John, he would perhaps be angry."

"Papa couldn't be angry with you for long," assured Essy. "But I wouldn't tell him for a hundredweight of Christmas goodies if you forbid it."

When Sheila, accompanied by Essy, took their places at the dinner table that evening a visitor was already seated, a refined, aristocratic looking man, with fine eyes of a dark hazel, and a rich brown beard which half concealed a resolute though sweet mouth.

"Ah little coz," he said with a bright smile. "I declare you are getting quite a woman."

"Ivon, oh, I am so immensely glad," cried the kitten running up to him and hugging him, to the detriment of his satiny shirt front, which brought down a rebuke from her father.

"Madcap will require a deal of fining down before she can act with becoming dignity, dear boy," put in the baronet, as he introduced Sheila to his kinsman, "but there, you will pardon her, I am sure, knowing what a spoilt child she is."

"Ivon Russel only laughed, and begged her to take her seat next to him, while he piled her plate with all the daintiest morsels. It was self-evident to Sheila that she was likely to get more spoilt than ever, now that her cousin had arrived on the scene.

"What a winning girl that is—I mean Miss Hamlyn," observed Ivon over the claret, when the girls had retired.

"Yes, she is a great acquisition to us all, so cheerful and sweet-tempered. I am in hopes Essy may take pattern by her. She is very good to my poor boy too, so kind and patient, however trying he may be."

As time fled on Sir John found himself seized with an uncontrollable desire to invade the apartment of his afflicted son, where a slender figure was always to be found reading or helping him to paint or sketch some pretty bit of scenery from the oriel window, which pleased him the most.

When she left Wally's side, he would growl out:

"What a girl you are to flit off, just as a fellow is getting on, too, so nicely."

Fatigued with so much confinement, Sheila would perhaps try to escape for a few minutes' breath of air, but without a murmur return to her duties with a sweet smile, notwithstanding his sullen complainings.

"You are very cruel and thoughtless to one so unselfish and kind," the baronet said almost sternly, happening to enter the room one evening and overhear the conversation.

"Perhaps you wouldn't be so gentle and courteous," retorted Wally, "if you were caged up as I am, besides Sheila belongs to me, and only me, she was engaged to amuse and entertain me."

A sigh of pity escaped Sir John as he gazed with almost aversion on the dark visage of the lad, later as it was with selfish, querulous impetuosity.

"We must try to quell a feeling of tyranny, not indulge it," reproved his father gravely.

"It's no use preaching, I am what I am, I am not over satisfied with myself, I can assure you," he returned ironically.

"You are pale, Sheila, come tell me, are you happy," asked Sir John, catching up to her on the following morning, as she was about to dart out into the grounds, believing he was safe upstairs with Wally.

"Happy? yes, Sir John," she replied, casting down her eyes in timid reserve, for somehow in the handsome bronzed face and fine dark penetrat-

ing eyes she fancied there lurked more than a passing interest when he spoke to her, and it made her shy, why she could not have explained.

"I wish you would come for a canter over the hills, confinement is making sad ravages with the peaches on those cheeks, little lady," he said, a caress of subtle meaning in his voice, which sent a thrill of nameless joy through her veins.

"I cannot ride," she admitted.

"All the better, I can teach you then."

"I haven't time," she put in swiftly, thinking she had behaved perhaps too boldly for him, her employer, to suggest such a queer thing as scampering over the country with her, a paid dependent in his own household.

"I must run away now, please," she ventured to blurt out rather tremulously.

"Why in such a hurry? I am sure Wally can do for an hour by himself, you over indulge him, I fear."

"He frets if he is left too long, you know," she put in.

"You have not told me when we are to commence our riding lesson," he persisted, his eyes riveted on the pretty graceful figure, one tiny foot half buried in the emerald turf, that was now sparkling like diamonds with frosty tears from heaven.

"What a charming little creature it is," he thought "with a face and form a king's daughter might covet, yet forced by circumstances to earn her own bread."

"Wally will get ever so cross and sulky if I stay away so long," she said firmly.

"It strikes me I am getting an impressionable idiot," he thought, pulling himself together with an effort.

"I will not detain you any longer, if you promise to come by-and-by and choose out of the stables a pony you would like for your own use."

There was such a fervor and depth in his voice, despite the curb he had tried so long to put on himself, that she looked up with startled eyes, and an expression of gravity stole over her face, while her sweet curved lips quivered with pain, for, to her simple nature, it seemed impossible this wealthy baronet could deem her worthy to woo as the future mistress of Ravenscourt.

"He is only mocking me; it is too bad," was her inward comment.

While he tormented himself with the idea that Ivon Russel, who at this juncture sauntered towards them looking rich in youth and manly vigor, had probably dazzled her young senses.

His impression was confirmed when she sprang forward to take the bunch of snowdrops he held out for her.

"Oh, what sweet little darlings," she exclaimed; "where did you find them, Mr. Russel?" in her excitement all shyness had fled, and she was once more the fascinating witching fairy who had stolen away the senses of the grave master of Ravenscourt.

"Down in that hollow by the old mill, covered over with a coat of snow which has kept them snug."

"I will take them to Wally; he will be so pleased," she observed, flitting off with a bright smile and a graceful inclination of her proud little head.

These words, "take them to Wally," cheered Sir John, since it said plainly, she did not value them as an especial gift. But to assure himself that her words were not idle ones; he betook himself to his son's room, and saw her run up to him, and thrust the simple little flowerets into his thin eager fingers.

Essy, who had just escaped from the school-room, cried out:

"Where did you get those snowdrops from, Sheila? do tell me, there's a pet."

"Mr. Russel just gave them to me for—for Wally."

"I shall be jealous, then, if he doesn't serve me alike," she chirped.

"You are not an invalid," put in the baronet.

"Neither is Sheila," that young person retorted with a droll comical twinkle in her eyes that set them all smiling. "I shall have to take Master Ivon to task," she added, trying to look dignified, "and remind him there are two ladies to scatter his favors upon."

This speech sent Wally into a fit of convulsive laughter, for the contrast between the ink stained black-legged Essy, with the dainty silk gowned girl, whose collars and cuffs were with the snowdrops that lay scattered on Wally's rug, was ludicrous. "You are not a little vain, sis," he burst out bluntly, when he could catch his breath.

"Don't you know vanity is the chief blot of our family?" she retorted pertly; "see how fine it is to tread in the shoes of one's illustrious ancestors."

Sir John took his leave, lest he should say something in reproof to his pet child, and so mar the harmony of the trio.

As time wore on Sheila did not find her life quite a bed of roses, for the invalid became more exacting and irritable than ever, when she was out of sight, while the baronet fumed in secret at her avoidance of him.

He positively hangered to gaze into those soft earnest eyes, to arouse the electric current of passion which he instinctively felt dwell in her nature if it could be aroused.

He had watched, with almost jealous anger, the tenderness lavished on his boy.

He had seen her twine her arms around his neck to coax him into a good humor, and even kiss him tenderly, as she would press his poor, weary head close to her bosom.

And all this time Sheila was fretting her innocent heart out with the humiliating belief that this haven of peace would soon be but a dream of brief happiness, that, in fact, she would be forced to fly from the too ardent baronet, whose every look told the admiration she had inspired.

That he could think of wooing her for a wife never entered her mind; she a dowerless, friendless orphan.