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WEDDING SLIPPERS.
BY MISS MITFORD.

ONE of the shortest and dreariest days in January was drawing to a close. Snow had fallen some days previously, and glared upon the roofs of the houses in the picturesque and irregular old town of Belford Regis, and lay mixed with ice, and trodden into a sort of wintry dust upon the highway; snow, too, was visibly hanging in the grey and gloomy sky, waiting only for milder weather—for the hour when the soft south-west should steal upon the bleak north-east—to come down in a world of white feathery flakes, and cover the earth with its bright, level, uniform beauty. The streets, although not yet lighted, were almost deserted of carriages and passengers—except, indeed, the well-wrapped little boys and girls, tripping rapidly home from school, with cheeks almost as red as their red comforters; and the noisier and merrier troop of happy, ill clad urchins, who came frisking and shouting from the pond at the top of the hill, the great pond opposite the Queen's head, where they had been keeping the cold at bay, by sliding and tumbling upon the ice, and pelting each other with snowballs; making, as it were, a playmate of the frost; and, excepting also careful servant-maids, wending, with cautious speed, over the slippery pavement, laden with smoking dishes from the bake-houses; or hurrying pot-boys, slower milkmen, rattling their jingling commodities against the icy steps of the doors, or the iron railing of the areas.

In a word, it was at the close of a winter's day that, the morning influx of customers having intermitted, the shopmen and apprentices of Mr. Morris, the greatest haberdasher of Belford, had retired to warm their fingers in their own apartment—preferring the bright fire of the open grate to the smoky heat of the stove—after returning to their shelves, nicely folded up, the numerous articles taken down to gratify the fastidiousness or the caprice of lady-purchasers, (for men, to do them justice, seldom do give this sort of trouble,) leaving in the dusky range of show-rooms, rendered tenfold more gloomy by the waving draperies which darkened the windows, and swayed to and fro in the dim twilight, only two individuals—a respectable-looking elderly man, who, mounted upon a high stool, was seated at a very business-looking railed-in desk, employed in writing, by the light of a single taper, in an equally business-like, tall, thick book, bound in calfskin; and a young man, particularly well-looking and gentlemanly, whose likeness to the former sufficiently marked their relationship, and who stood at his side, pretending to be occupied in arranging a drawer of rich satin ribbons, which he was rolling and unrolling, and doing unconsciously his very best to spoil, in the eagerness of his appeal to his father's feelings.

"Yes, sir, it is but too true—and a thousand times has she urged the fact upon me—that poor Elizabeth is only a servant maid in the family of our good rector, Mr. Sumner. A servant she certainly is, but a most honoured and trusted one. Mrs. Sumner was so struck by her intelligence and sweetness, above a dozen years ago, amongst the girls at the Green School, that she took her home to her own house, partly to attend and partly to play with her elder children. She shared their advantages of education—not indeed the accomplishments which were unfitted for her station, but those better and rarer advantages which regard the cultivation of the mind and the formation of the character; and Mr. Sumner's opinion of her has been sufficiently proved, by his having, since the death of his excellent wife, and the marriage of his eldest daughter, committed the direction of his house and of his two young children unreservedly to her charge. A servant she is, but one accustomed to the management of a large family, to the keeping of the most exact and elaborate accounts, to the prudent and careful expenditure of money—to everything, in short, that is most desirable in a tradesman's wife. I speak now merely in a worldly point of view, and say nothing of the beauty, the sweetness, the grace, and the modesty which make her an object of admiration wherever she appears."

"She has no money," replied Mr. Morris, suspending for a moment his pen over the book in which he had been apparently most sedulously engaged in making various entries during his son's harangue. "She has no money."

"Then her taste and skill in female apparel. You know, sir, how often you have said that, if my poor sisters had lived, you would have added millinery and dress-making to your business, and converted some part of our large premises up stairs into show-rooms. How often I have heard you say, that one branch of trade helped the other; and that our opposite neighbour, Mr.

Welsh, would not be able to keep his shop open against us if it were not for his wife's caps and bonnets. Now, Elizabeth's taste, and Mr. Sumner's connexion"—

"She has no money, Edward—she has no money."
"Neither had she, sir, two years ago, when, in consequence of Master Arthur's rashly venturing upon ice too weak to bear his weight, I had first the happiness of being of use to her and her young charge. Mine is no love of yesterday; no concealed or clandestine attachment. We have met openly at the institution lectures; have walked together on summer evenings. Mr. Sumner, without any verbal recognition of our engagement, has yet often, after church on a Sunday, virtually sanctioned it, by smiling and significant invitations to accompany Elizabeth and the children to his house; nay, even you yourself, by your manner of speaking to her and of her, have led me to believe that you considered her as a daughter. You are too keen an observer, too kind and careful a father, not to have seen the state of my affections; and I had thought you too wise and too liberal, to set a little paltry money in competition with the happiness of a whole life, or to wish me to break my plighted troth to one whom I dearly love—to one who loves me—and marry I know not whom, for the sake of adding needless pelf to our already flourishing fortunes. I had thought your only son was dearer to you than money. But I was mistaken—you hold my honour and my happiness at no higher price than this gaud." And he threw from him in bitterness of spirit the roll of ribbon which he had been so busily folding and unfolding.

The pen dropped from the father's hand.
"You are mistaken, Edward," said he, in a low voice, which was interrupted for a moment by a sound well known to the inhabitants of Belford—the deep hoarse cry of "Shoes! old shoes!—shoes! old shoes!" from beneath the window.

"You are mistaken, my dear son, not in my feelings, but in my circumstances. The fortunes of the poor half-starved wretch who is calling 'shoes' though the wintry snow, are more flourishing than mine. Without your aid I am a bankrupt."
Another hoarse deep cry of "Shoes! old shoes!—shoes to buy! shoes to sell!—shoes! old shoes!" gave to the agitated father the pause which his feelings required. His son was too much absorbed in astonishment and horror for speech; he could only listen in silent agony to a story which seemed to him rather like a frightful dream than a stern and waking reality. Mr. Morris continued:—

"You were too young when your blessed mother died, to remember her distinctly; and your poor sisters, gentle and amiable as they were, inherited rather her delicacy of constitution than her vigour of mind. Far above me in birth, in education, and in cultivation, she was yet left destitute at the age of seventeen, by the improvidence and the sudden death of her father, a dignified clergyman; and I owed the blessing of her hand chiefly to her desire to procure for her twin brother a home and a protector. Before our marriage, she made me promise to treat William Arnot as my own younger brother, as my own eldest son; to be to him as a friend, a guardian, a father; and of this most solemn promise she requested the renewal upon her death-bed. Heaven and you, my son, pardon me if I have kept it but too faithfully! Let me make short work of this wretched matter. I placed him as clerk in a banking house in the city, where, as you know, he rose to be cashier. I and another friend of my family were his securities, and all seemed fair and prosperous. Three months ago, he came to me in an agony of guilt and despair. He had been speculating in the share-market. He had embezzled a large sum belonging to the firm, and, unless it were replaced by a certain day, his liberty, his character, his life—for never, he swore, would he survive the loss of reputation—were destroyed. Could I hesitate? Even had I abandoned him to his fate, I was equally ruined, since the house would have come upon me and upon the friend who, at my pressing instance, had joined me as his bondsman, to indemnify them for their loss. The sum was, to a man in my station, enormous, exceeding, by some thousands, the earnings and savings of the five-and-twenty years that I have passed in business. The deficiency was, however, raised for me, within the stipulated time, by our friendly solicitor, Mr. Byrne, who happened to have, at the moment, a client, willing to lend the money upon my personal security, and this house, with the stock and furniture. I gave him a bill of sale on all my effects; and was considering whether or not to break the matter to you, or to go on upon credit, and leave the result to time, when Mr. Byrne made me two days ago, a most unexpected overture, from the

friends of a young person with a portion of £5,000, who, although informed of my difficulties, was yet willing to marry her to you—willing to pay off the debt—requiring nothing but a settlement of the rest of the money, and such an arrangement as to partnership, as I should have been, under any circumstances, but too happy to enter into. I have not seen her—I do not even know her name; but she is, they tell me, young, well-educated, and amiable—a thoroughly good and exemplary girl."

"Oh, my father, do with me as you like! But, yet, Elizabeth!—dear, dear Elizabeth!"

"You would rather, then, be poor and happy with her whom you love. So be it, my dear son. Go to your Elizabeth. See if she be willing to share your poverty; willing to wait until some prospect may arise, that should, in some sort, authorize your union. The unhappy man whose imprudence has been our ruin, spoke of one whose defalcation had ruined him, and who might, who probably would hereafter make good the sums for which he was engaged. He has repeated this expectation in a letter which I received from him last week. But that hope is too vague to build upon. See Elizabeth. Disclose to her, unreservedly, the position of affairs—I feel that, with her, the confidence will be sacred—and then act as you see good. Put me out of the question. I am still strong and healthy, and capable of earning my bread as a shopman."

"O father! never! never!" interrupted Edward, with a sharp and sudden revulsion of feeling. "Even if I were so ungrateful, so unnatural, she would not consent; I know she would not. Often and often has she said that she felt that our marriage would never take place; that it never ought to take place; that your son, the son of the most respectable tradesman in Belford, ought not to be united to a poor girl from a charity school. And, now that that union can only be accomplished by depriving you of your home, by sending you in your old age to serve as a hireling—oh, she would never hear of it—would never bear the thought!"

"Go to Elizabeth," repeated Mr. Morris, in a smothered voice, pressing his son's hands between his, with an energy that betokened the struggle of his feelings—"Go and consult with your Elizabeth." And, as the shopmen and apprentices came flocking in, and the lighted gas gave a glittering brilliancy to the rich and gaily decorated shop, radiant with shawls, and silks, and ribbons, of a hundred varied hues—and a group of customers, gay country ladies, who wished to choose an evening dress by candlelight, appeared at the door—he escaped into the street, with an instinctive desire for solitude, and, almost unconsciously, took the road to St. Michael's Rectory.

The lamps in the streets and shops were now burning, and shewed, with a most striking effect of light and shadow, the fantastic outline of the picturesque old town—the tops of the houses covered with snow, the icicles hanging from the eaves, and the windows already covered with icy frost-work. The pavement was again alive with passengers—men and women hurrying to the Post-Office; flies and carriages gliding, with a sort of dull, rumbling sound, along the snowy road; a stage-coach emptying itself of its freezing passengers at the Red Lion; a man with periwinkles, and a woman with hot chestnuts, each so muffled, the man in a frieze cloak, and the woman in a dreadnaught coat, that it would have puzzled an *Ædipus* to decide betwixt the he and the she; one little girl lingering longingly in the wake of the periwinkles; two great boys burning their fingers in a bold attempt to flick the burning chestnuts; other children rushing aimlessly along, shouting and bellowing as if to scare the cold. Men were thumping their feet upon the ground, and buffeting their chest with their arms to restore the circulation; women were chattering, dogs barking, beggars begging, fiddles scraping, bells ringing, knockers tat-tat-tat-ing—in short, all the noises of a wintry evening, in a country town, were in full activity.

From the High Bridge, where the broad, bright river, with its double line of wharves and houses, crowded with people, its boats and its barges, forms so gay and pretty a moving picture, so full of bustle, and colour of light and of life—from the High Bridge, the Kennett now showed, like a mirror, reflecting on its icy surface, with a peculiarly broad and bluish shine, the arch of lamps surmounting the graceful airy bridge, and the twinkling lights that glanced, here and there, from boat, or barge, or wharf, or from some uncurtained window that overhung the river. The snow lay in drifts upon either shore, marking the long perspective, and glanced upon the suburban cottages and the distant country, edging into the gentle uplands, hardly deserving the name of hills.