

THE BRIDE OF AN HOUR.

CHAPTER I.

"Essy, pile on some more of those logs, I am freezing into an icicle, but there, what do you care? I'm only a poor cripple, a wretched creature you all despise."

"Wally, how can you be so nasty and cross?" remonstrated his small eleven-year old sister, skipping over to heap up the fire.

"I'm not nasty or disagreeable; if you were chained down, a log to this chair, like I, the future master of Ravenscourt, with scarcely the power to move your legs, perhaps you wouldn't feel quite so amiable or gushing as you do now."

The speaker was a youth between sixteen and seventeen. He was reclining on a most luxurious invalid-chair cunningly devised for ease; a crutch of polished box-wood lay by his hand.

He was certainly a contrast to his merry, sunny-faced little sister.

The handsome room looked very cheerful with its warm velvet curtains of deep crimson, and downy couches scattered about to woo rest to the tired or lazy inclined.

A piano stood in a corner piled up with music, a pink be-ribboned guitar lay on a table, while before the blazing fire of huge spluttering logs sat a fluffy, white ball of a kitten blinking wisely at the bright flames; flowers sweet and subtle pervaded the atmosphere.

The only blot on the cheery home-scene was its afflicted owner, with his large, hollow, glassy eyes, and moody irritable manner, and restless, nervous fingers, that never seemed able to be still.

"You will feel happier when Miss Hamlyn comes," Essy observed, by way of comfort.

"Will she get here to-night, I wonder?" he said, querulously.

"I hope so, papa said so, and I heard him order Crouch to take the brougham to meet her at the station."

"I wonder what she will be like," he continued half aloud.

"So do I," that young damsel repeated, half to herself; "I hope she will be nice and young, and companionable, since some of her company will fall to my share."

Essy peered out of the window to watch the soft, white snow descend from the electric-looking sky and fall like gossamer on the shining evergreens, and gaunt outspreading boughs of the sleeping trees.

"There goes old Crouch!" she ejaculated, clapping her hands gleefully, "he's gone to the stables to order the horses. Oh, what fun it will be if she should turn out to be a prim, vinegary old party, with corkscrew curls, and a bald spot on her head, and long mittens," and the pretty, fair-haired maiden gave a kind of war-dance that even evoked a smile from the dark, discontented youth.

"She won't stay here a week," he put in swiftly, "I want no old cats about me."

"Neither do I, and between us I fancy she will have a rather bad time," laughed Essy, screwing up her pretty face comically.

After a while they heard the rumble of a carriage, half muffled though by the carpet of virgin purity which adorned the earth, and somehow the tension on their nerves of anticipation kept their tongues silent.

Essy betook herself to an ottoman beside the fire, and hugged her kitten, while Wally lay listening for the faintest sound of the approach of the brougham.

The turret clock clanged out, sharp and clear, six o'clock, just as the lights of the returning carriage flashed like a pair of ghostly orbs into the half-darkened room.

"What will you bet she has come?" exclaimed Essy, springing up excitedly.

"Bet!" this with a curl of his thin lips, "such a vulgar term does not befit a girl of your age."

"Come, don't lecture, Wally, dear, perhaps our new friend will dose us both with our enormities," running out to the corridor, and craning her head over the carved oaken balusters, to catch a glance of the new-comer.

"I've seen her!" she panted, almost breathless with importance a few minutes after.

"What is she like?" he asked eagerly.

"Oh, she's splendid; a perfect little angel."

"Come, don't make a stupid of yourself," he grumbled, "be serious for once in your life."

"I tell you, Wally, it is the truth, on my word of honor, she is quite young, and sweetly pretty."

"Hooray!" he cried, catching hold of his crutch and flourishing it till it fell with a bang.

How he fretted and fumed with curiosity to behold this *rara avis*, a pretty nurse companion, while the dinner which took place at seven, was being discussed by Sir John Ravenscourt, Essy, and Miss Sheila Hamlyn.

"Here she is," said Essy, "I mean Miss Hamlyn," correcting herself, and leading a dark clad girl up to Wally.

He glanced, half shyly, half furiously into the girl's face—a face so sweet, so perfect, so bewildering in its sunny witchery, and full, pouting dewy lips, and yellow-brown topaz eyes, that she seemed to bring the perfume of summer roses about her.

A black, filmy gown, revealing the soft white arms and neck, just sufficient to lure an impressionable man on to destruction or madness, clung around her in many folds, and a cluster of pure white monthly rosebuds nestled lovingly at her neck, giving forth a sweet odor.

"I trust you are glad to see me, Mr. Ravenscourt, and that we shall become great friends," she said, gently, holding out her hand confidently—entreatingly.

"Of course I am," he answered; "but I am, as you see, compelled to talk to you on my back, I hope I shan't tire you soon with my ailments, Miss Hamlyn."

"Tire me, oh dear no," she said, a sincere ring of sympathy in her voice. "I could never feel anything except deep sympathy for your infirmities."

He looked at the speaker, at the yellow-brown eyes and small classic head with its braids of golden hair, coiled like a crown around it, and thought life would be far happier now, with such a companion to play and read to him, and minister to his comfort.

"Have you got any friends?" asked Essy. "I mean any mother, father, or sisters and brothers?"

"None," she answered, gravely.

"And a good thing, too," mentally ejaculated Wally, selfishly, "as you can devote yourself to me entirely."

"How lonely you must feel," sighed Essy; "poor dear, I'm sure I should mope and fret all the days of my life if I were like you."

"Life is too serious for grieving, Miss Ravenscourt," she returned, "at least to the needy ones like me."

"You don't look poor," put in that irrepressible little inquisitor.

"No; we do not all appear what we are, you know, in case the world would reject us."

"How you do chatter," Wally exclaimed, querulously to his sister; "I am sure Miss Hamlyn doesn't want to be catechised like some school girl."

"Don't please call me Miss Hamlyn," she said, trying to pour oil on the troubled waters and change the subject, "call me Sheila."

"I'm agreeable, and you call me Wally, I detest formality."

"And me Essy," chimed in his sister, determined not to be out of it.

The three made a striking picture in the soft light of the wax candles, and the fitful glare of the splendid fire as it flared up in yellow and red jets, and hissed when the flames reached a green spot.

Essy's small form was arrayed in a brown plush frock, her waist confined by a pink watered sash, her tawney hair around her shoulders in a wavy cloud, her blue eyes raised admiringly to the vision of beauty seated beside the by no means prepossessing invalid.

"Play us something please," entreated Essy, and Sheila complied, going to the piano and running her fingers over the keys in a dreamy abstracted way as thoughts crowded upon her of the time when a voice, which was now still, had pleaded for a tune or a song—the voice of a now dead father.

And this was the first time she had touched an instrument since his death.

No wonder her fingers awoke a wailing sound like sobbing to her hearers, causing them to feel a thrill of weird sadness.

"I cannot bear melancholy tunes," broke out Wally, peevishly, "is that a dirge you are playing?"

"Really, I beg your pardon," she said, realizing, for the first time, that her hands had unwittingly been producing a kind of requiem in memory of her father.

In a moment the lively strains of a vocal waltz filled the room accompanied by her voice, a sweet, joyous, melodious one, that set Essy whirling around in very gladness.

After a feast of music Essy suggested a quiet chat around the fire.

"It will soon be Christmas, you see, the very time for nice ghost stories. Do you know any?"

"No, do you?" questioned Sheila.

"Oh, yes, we have a ghost story belonging to Ravenscourt," replied Essy, looking very important and clever. "Would you like to hear it?"

"It is only a kind of legend that every old house generally gets," snubbed Wally.

"Nevertheless, I should dearly like to hear it," spoke up Sheila.

"It's rather awful," said Essy, by way of preface. "It's about a murder, and it took place in the south wing, so they say, on a harvest moon night. It appears that one of our ancestors married a lovely creature who cared very much for some other gentleman who was poorer than him, but of course he didn't know it, you know; well, after the wedding, which took place in the peach-blossom drawing room—but there, you haven't seen it," she rattled on—"she went upstairs to her room, and then her poor lover got in the window and begged her on his knees not to go away and leave him. And just as she was trying to comfort him her husband rushed into the room, and in his mad fury caught up a foreign dagger that lay on a table and went to stab the poor fellow, when the bride ran between them and received the blow meant for her lover, and fell down dead at their feet; in revenge, the lover, in an awful rage, sprang at the throat of the wicked husband to throttle him, I suppose, but he, too, got killed with the same dagger. And the horrid husband went mad, and the bride haunts the south wing ever since; in fact our old nurse says no bride ever survives the first son, or if she does—"

"He's a cripple!" interrupted the silent listener almost fiercely, his forehead knitting into a bitter scowl.

"Oh! what a terrible story," cried the frightened Sheila with a shudder of horror.

"Are you really shocked?" asked little Essy.

"Yes, because I never imagined the story could be so horrible, or that it could have taken place here."

"It's all nonsense, silly ridiculous nonsense of Essy's," Wally exclaimed, seeing the pallor on the girl's face, and her evident agitation. "She is never so happy as when she is relating some blood-curdling tale to amuse you, as she styles it."

"Isn't it really true, then?" Sheila asked, trembling like a young aspen.

"Certainly not, you goose!" that little person said, seeing the displeased

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