

THE BRIDESMAID'S STORY.

We smoothed the sheeny folds of silk
Down to her little slipped feet;
We fastened on the flimsy veil
With blossoms full of odours sweet,
And buttoned on her trembling hand
The dainty glove and bracelet band.

We kissed the blushes on her cheek;
We praised her beauty warm and rare—
Twisted the clustering ring of gold
Escaping underneath her hair,
So yellow that we laughed, and said
That one would do wherewith to wed.

We saw her stand with downcast eyes;
We heard her simple, sweet "I will;"
And when she raised her timid glance
To him, we saw the blue eyes fill,
But not with pain—so rare the bliss
That made her tremble at his kiss.

Just twice the moon had waxed and waned
(Once for the happy honeymoon);
Again we met to dress the bride
(We did not think to meet so soon);
No bantering words, no smile, no jest
Could find an echo in her breast.

Again we brushed her yellow hair,
And smoothed her garment's silken fold,
And put aside the dainty gloves
Lest they should hide the band of gold;
We made no jokes about the hair
That clustered on her brow so fair.

Again we kissed the dear, young cheeks—
There was no flush, no tear, to tell
The rapture of her present bliss;
Ours were the only tears that fell—
So far her soul had fled away
She thought not of her wedding-day.

So white! so cold! yet lovely still!
A fairer blossom ne'er was hid
Beneath the ugly churchyard mould,
Protected but by coffin lid—
For when we met to dress the bride,
Death was the groom who sought her side.

A Sacrifice of the Scourge.

There was a great excitement in our little household when Robert came home one evening and announced that Cousin Max was coming to visit us. We girls had never seen him, but Robert and he had spent a year together on the Continent, when our father was alive and money was plentiful with us. Since then our German cousin's name had been almost a household word with us.

Max was quite alone in the world, our aunt and her husband both dying when he was quite young. He was almost Robert's age—was tall and fair, and that was all we knew. Robert—never very good at description—had indeed attempted to give us some idea of his appearance, but was silenced by Claire and Birdie, who both exclaimed that they would rather keep their fancy-picture than the caricature they knew he was drawing. We were very happy together and contented generally. We had been able to keep the old house, and Robert's income from his profession—he was a lawyer, like our father supported us very comfortably.

Sometimes I caught myself wishing that Claire (Claire was our beauty) could have the "purple and fine linen" which seemed her right, and that Birdie's exquisite voice might be properly trained; but if I hinted this Claire would kiss me gayly, asking if she wasn't pretty enough to suit me as she was, and Birdie would dash off into a description of the life she would lead as a prima donna, and how every night she would see old Rob and Gracie looking severe propriety from one of the boxes. And so my little trouble always ended with a laugh.

I was the old maid in the family. Robert was the only one that knew why, and kept my secret faithfully. I had got over being unhappy about it, and Robert and I made up our plans very contentedly—how we could live on in the old home when the others had flitted and what a genuine "old maid's castle" it would be. I was to Robert what the others—dearly as he loved them—never quite could be, and we did not think our separation possible.

We had expected Cousin Max for weeks, and yet he came quite unexpectedly at last. We were sitting in the porch—Claire, Birdie, and I—when we saw Robert coming, and with him a stranger, who Birdie declared she was sure was Cousin Max. He was talking and laughing with Robert, but I noticed that, as they came closer, he started violently and passed his hand over his eyes; but, recovering himself imme-

diately, he greeted us with a genuine warmth of affection, which took all our hearts by storm.

A gay evening we passed. "Coming events" do not "cast their shadows before," whatever people may say. I had never known how really beautiful Birdie was till that night, but as she stood by the piano, in her soft white dress, with the passion-flowers in her hair, I saw Cousin Max gazing at her like one entranced. Claire's beauty did not seem to impress him at all, perhaps because she was so like himself, for indeed they might have been brother and sister. Both had the same regular features, blue eyes, and blonde hair. Beside them Birdie looked like some tropical flowers. Max was never tired of watching her quick, graceful motions, and Robert and I had a laugh together over our little pet's conquest.

Cousin Max was soon thoroughly at home with us all, though Birdie still kept her place as chief favorite. They were much together, for Claire was soon to leave the old home, and our new brother, Alfred, spent most of his time with us. I was very closely occupied with my housekeeping, and with preparations for the wedding, which was to be in September. Robert was away all day, so that Birdie and Max were left to amuse each other. He was quite an artist, and greatly to Birdie's delight had offered to paint her picture. The rest of us were excluded from the studio; for, as it was his first attempt at portrait painting, we were not to be allowed to judge of his success or failure until the picture was finished.

Blind—blind! Did no one of us ever see that the child smile had passed away from our darling's face? Did no one ever think that the soft shining in her dark eyes might be the light of a woman's love?

The picture was finished on my birthday, and was the gift of Max to me. We were all taken in to see it, and never since have I beheld so beautiful a picture. Birdie's very self stood before us, dressed as Max had first seen her. But the face—the exquisite dewy softness of her eyes—the lips, just parted in a happy smile! The others were congratulating Max. I could only clasp Birdie in my arms and hide my foolish tears on her shoulder.

That evening we were all sitting in the moonlight. Max was smoking by the window, and Birdie in her usual place on a foot-stool at his side. He was unusually silent, and unless by an occasional word to Birdie took no part in the conversation. The room was flooded with the clear brilliance of the moonlight, and every one protested against lamps. Robert and Alfred were arguing as to the reality of supernatural manifestations. The possibility of a second self appearing to warn one of approaching death was mentioned, and Claire turned suddenly to Max:

"Max you are a German, and should know about such things—you tell us." His face was clearly defined by the light streaming through the open window, and I saw his lips compress suddenly, but when he spoke it was in his usual even tone.

"I certainly believe such a thing possible, Claire. Indeed, I may say I know it to be so?"

"Oh, a story, Cousin Max, a story! Tell us how you know," said Claire, eagerly.

He smiled slightly. "It is strange, but I have been thinking of this very subject. If I tell you, however, you must expect me to be egotistical, for it is a leaf out of my own life I must show you."

Something in his tone impressed us all, and we sat very silent, waiting for him to commence. Birdie's eyes were lifted wistfully to his face, but his were fixed on the stars beyond.

"About four years ago, I was visiting a very intimate friend in the south of Germany. I had never before seen his family, though we had known each other for some time. His father was a strange fanciful man, knowing every ghost legend and old superstition by heart. My friend laughed at all such, but his sister, Gretta, was a firm believer in all her father's theories. I remained there for some months, and before I left Gretta had promised to be my wife."

His voice fell, and it was some moments before he continued.

"Four years ago to-night I was sitting by an open window, as I am now, when suddenly I was surrounded by an overpowering scent of violets. This was Gretta's favorite flower, and I immediately thought of her. Presently I heard a step and a rustle of drapery. Right under my window I saw—I could swear to it—Gretta's face and figure. I sprang to my feet, ran down the stairs and out into the street, but she was gone, nor was there any other person in sight. I returned to my room baffled and wondering."

"A few days after, I heard from Gretta; she asked me to come to her at once. I found her suffering from great nervous excitement, which she bravely attempted to control in the presence of her father and brother; but the evening of my arrival, as we were all sitting together, she left the room, making a sign to me to follow her. I found her on the terrace. She was standing with her hands clasped loosely before her, her eyes fixed on something in the distance, and such a weird, unearthly look upon her face that I hastened to arouse her. I spoke her name. She started, then clung to me, trembling violently. When I attempted to soothe her she burst into tears. When she could speak, she told me that one evening she was standing where we then stood when she saw a figure coming up the steps from the lower terrace. Thinking it some visitor,

she went slowly forward. As they came face to face, the figure raised its head, and she saw—herself!

"I stood quite still!" Gretta said to me, "and the thing came nearer, looking at me with awful yes. I tried to speak—to move—but I was held as if by chains. Then something—whether it was my double or not, I cannot tell, but I heard the words—said 'A year!' The tower clock struck seven, and then I fainted."

"That was the day on which I, too, had seen the apparition. Gretta had spoken of this to no one, but the impression that her coming death had been foretold was firmly seated in her mind. In vain I argued against this idea; she would only shake her head and smile."

"The day on which the apparition first manifested itself was Gretta's birthday, and that day in the coming year was fixed upon for our marriage. Thinking that change of scene would restore my Gretta's failing health, I argued that an earlier day might be fixed, but her father was obstinate. 'The stars had told him that day would be a fateful one in her life,' and nothing would induce him to change it. When I told Gretta of my failure, she said gently, 'You must not be vexed about it, Max. If I cannot be your wife on earth, I will in heaven.'"

Our cousin paused as he uttered these words, and sat leaning his head back against the curtain. He had used no word of endearment in speaking of his promised wife, but the tone of suppressed passion told us how dearly he had loved her.

Claire broke the silence: "Was she very beautiful, Cousin Max?"

"You have her living image there before you," he said, looking down at Birdie's averted face.

I saw my pet change color, and presently she arose and moved quietly away to one of the windows opening on the garden. Max did not seem to notice the movement, and soon went on with his story:

"The time for our marriage was very near when I again saw Gretta. Business had kept me from her much longer than I had intended. I had almost forgotten the occurrence of the preceding year, and I hoped Gretta had also. I cannot speak of those few weeks of happiness, all too short as they were. The day came. We were to have been married early in the day, but the pastor suddenly fell down in strong convulsions, and one at some distance was sent for. When Gretta was told of the delay she said quietly, 'I knew it would be evening.' The wedding was to be as quiet as possible, on account of Gretta's health, which, shut our eyes as we would, we could not avoid seeing was failing rapidly."

"The pastor arrived, and the hour approached. The air was very heavy, and opening one of the windows, I went out upon the terrace. Walking slowly forward, I saw a figure in white cross the lower terrace and come slowly up the steps, near which I was standing. The form and carriage assured me that it was Gretta, and, calling her name, I went to meet her, but the figure passed quickly on and vanished in the shrubbery. Turning saw Gretta at my side."

"You have seen it, Max!" she said, in answer to my look of amazed inquiry. "The time has come, Max. They do not know that I am here," she said with a glance towards the house, "but I wanted to see you again. Don't forget me, Max. I will wait for you."

"We entered the house by different ways and in a few minutes her brother came to call me. The service was commenced. My eyes were fixed on Gretta, who was growing paler and paler at every moment. Suddenly the tower clock struck seven; she raised her eyes to mine. I caught her in my arms, but she never breathed again. And that is the reason," said cousin Max, quietly, "why I shall never marry."

The silence was oppressive. Presently Claire and Alfred left the room, and soon we heard the piano. Max looked round with a smile. "Claire is calling us—where is Birdie?" I pointed to the window. He crossed over to her, and laying his hand on her hair, said coaxingly, "Come, songbird, they want us." But Birdie drew back from his caressing hand with a quiet dignity that sat strangely on her, and, excusing herself, ran up to her own room.

Max rejoined us with a sorely puzzled face; but though he watched the door all the evening, Birdie did not reappear. I always went to her room at night, and while Claire, Alfred, and Robert were still chatting in the hall, I went up stairs. Hearing no sound from Birdie's room, I opened the door softly and went in. She was kneeling by the open window, gazing out upon the winding river just visible through the trees, and the gleaming of the white stones in the little churchyard on its banks. I called her, but she made no answer. Sitting down beside her, I lifted her on my lap. Her hands were cold, and she was shaking from head to foot.

"My poor little pet, what is it?" I asked, anxiously. Never shall I forget the piteous eyes she turned on me.

"Gracie—Gracie, he only liked me because I resembled her!"

O my darling! a mother's eyes might have seen the truth and saved you, but I left you drift into this bitter love without one word of warning.

The next day Birdie never left my side, refusing, greatly to the astonishment of Max, all his invitations to walk or read with him. To do him justice, I do not think he guessed the mischief he had done. Birdie had seemed to us

such a child, we never thought of the strength and depth of her character. Her sunny, happy nature had been enough for us, and we looked no further.

Robert and Max went away for a few days together, and when they returned Max seemed feverish and excitable. By night he was much worse, and the doctor very soon pronounced that he had the fever. When Birdie heard that he was in danger, she insisted upon seeing him; and after that he would not let her out of his sight. He would call her "Gretta," his "darling," his "wife," and beg her never to leave him again; and Birdie would sit with her hand in his soothing him, humming his fancies, and growing paler and paler at every word he uttered. In the early morning, about two or three o'clock, he would become more quiet, and then, leaving the nurse with him, she would come to me. It was only at such times she rested at all, and often she would not sleep, but would lie watching the color creeping into the eastern sky, with a quiet look of expectation on her face, which filled me with an indefinable sense of dread. In vain we begged her to give up her care of Max; in that she was determined—nothing could shake her resolution. "While he wants me I shall stay," she would say, decidedly.

The time for Claire's marriage approached. We had decided to put it off another month, but, greatly to our astonishment, Birdie argued against this. When the doctor came she saw him alone, and he, too, advised us to have the wedding. Max might be ill a long time, he said, and it was better to have as small a family in the house as possible, for the terrible pestilence was launching its death-shafts all around us. So a week later Claire was married. Birdie was there, pale and still, but with a smile on her face, and with loving words and kisses for our poor beauty, whose wedding had proved so sad after all. Alfred and Claire were to leave immediately; so our good-byes were hurried.

That night Birdie told me the truth. She was taking the fever, and the doctor had said there was no chance of her living through it. He told her a week ago that, by nursing Max, she might save his life, but she would certainly lose her own; and our Birdie had answered, "I will save him if I can."

"I am so glad Claire is married; I was afraid she would have to wait," Birdie said to me, oh! so quietly.

I begged the doctor to forbid her watching Max, but he shook his head: "It would do no good; she wouldn't live any longer for it." So for a little while longer I sat waiting every night for my darling, outside the door of her murderer, as I called him in my wretched heart. One morning she was later than usual. The doctor had been with Max all night; he left about three, telling me as he passed me on the stair that Max was better, was sleeping quietly, and must not be disturbed.

Four struck, and yet Birdie did not come. I was afraid to open the door, so sat leaning my head on my hand, counting the minutes as they passed. The birds were beginning to sing in the chestnut tree outside. I sprang to my feet as the door creaked slightly. The nurse was holding it open, and I fancied I saw tears on her wrinkled cheeks. Birdie was standing in the doorway. "It's come now, Gracie," she said softly, as she clasped her arms about my neck.

The cool October winds were blowing and yet Max had not left his room. He was able to sit up all the morning, and I use to bring my work and sit beside him. One clear, bright day he was sitting by the open window and watching the lazily moving clouds. We did not speak much to each other. He was too weak, and I—what could I say? That morning Max seemed restless; at every sound he would glance towards the door, and then turn away with a look of pained surprise. At last he said abruptly: "Gracie, why does Birdie never come to see me? Has she quite forgotten me?"

I was prepared for this. They had told me I must tell him. I had thought and planned what I should say, and now I could think of nothing. I took the little packet which my darling had given me, and placed it in his hand. "She nursed you through the fever, and she told me to give you this." And so I left him. Had I told him too abruptly? Had I told him all? Dare I go back?

I tried the door when two hours had passed, but it was locked. When Robert came in I begged him to go and speak to Max, but before he could obey me Max entered the room, where we were. He looked ten years older, and his face was inexpressibly sad. Robert held out his hand to him with a few kindly words of congratulation upon his recovery.

"I must be well," Max said, gravely; "I leave to-morrow, and I want to thank you now for all your kindness when you had such reason to hate me. But, believe me, I never dreamed that—" His voice failed him, as Birdie's canary, hanging in the window, just then thrilled forth its joyous song. Covering his face with his hands, he hurried out of the room.

I am glad that while he stayed we were able to be kind to him. Before he left he came to me.

"Gracie, forgive me, if you can. Believe me your angel is avenged."

I kissed his forehead and bade him "God-speed." And so our cousin Max dropped out of our lives forever, leaving no memento of his visit, save the picture that hangs before me as I write—Birdie in her youth and beauty, with the passion flowers in her hair—only that, and a grave in Elmwood Cemetery.