

The Wedding Eve;

Or, Married to a Fairy.

CHAPTER IV.—(Continued).

With that I put a sovereign in her hand. The thought of giving money to this flower-faced child was painful to me, but I need not have minded it on her account.

She opened her eyes wide as she took the coin, and then, springing to her feet, she danced about the room with glee.

"A pound!" she cried. "Did you know it was a pound, or did you think it was only a shilling? Won't you make Mother Nokes wait up! And when I get to Folkstone I'll buy a new pair of boots. Do tell me what your name is?"

"Adrian Hervey."

"Well, Mr. Adrian Hervey, here's a cursey for you; and here's another right down to the ground! You mustn't think me rude for running away, but you've no idea how hungry I am. I shall see you again, sha'n't I? Good-by!"

And in the twinkling of an eye she was gone. But as I turned and looked out of the window again, I felt something pull my sleeve. She had returned and stood close behind me.

"Stoop down your head," she cried. "I want to whisper!"

I bent my head, and as I did so she kissed my cheek, and then ran away, laughing merrily.

It was the kiss of a grateful child; but no woman's kiss had ever given me so much pleasure as this chance caress from a penniless waif, a little homeless dancer of the streets and taverns.

I wanted to learn more about her, for my heart was full of the deepest sympathy for her hard, unprotected life; and almost as soon as I had returned to the other part of the inn, and let myself to the little passage communicating with the parlor set aside for my use, Mrs. Nokes, as she brought in my ham and eggs and tea, her sole idea of an evening meal, broke unasked into the subject.

"I hope that Saxon's girl wasn't bothering you, sir?" she said. "I had no idea she was in the place at all, and I've told that old vagabond, her father, I wouldn't have him here again. When I heard the piano a few minutes ago, I made no doubt but you were playing to yourself. But in she bounced just now, and told me she had earned some money by dancing to you, and she wanted some thing to eat. I do hope, sir, she hasn't been teasing you? She's an odd, forward little thing, but there's no real harm in her, and she's quite a wonder, as I often say to my husband, considering the way she's been brought up."

"Have you known her long?"

"I've seen her about the marshes, on and off, for four years; since she was a bit of a child in pinafores. It disgraced the old Saxon not sending her properly to school, and taking her about the country in that gipsy fashion. My little boys are as fond of her as can be, and I must say she has a winning way with children. But I say it isn't respectable, a girl that age dancing about in inns and hotels, and her a clergyman's granddaughter, as I've heard say. Excuse me now, sir, but I'm wanted in the bar."

Forthwith Mrs. Nokes bustled out, and almost immediately afterward there was a tapping, or, rather, scratching, at the door, and my little friend's yellow head was thrust in.

"Do let me have my tea with you, Mr. Adrian Hervey," she whispered. "There's only a tiny half between your sitting-room and the one I'm in, and it's so dull all by myself. You will let me bring mine in, won't you?"

Before I could answer she had withdrawn her head, and she reappeared in a very few seconds, bearing a tray upon which her rations of ham, eggs, tea, and bread and butter were laid out.

This she placed opposite to me, and then sat down to her meal in high glee. While she ate she prattled gaily. I have never seen any one enjoy herself as thoroughly as did this child. Lovely as she undoubtedly was, it was the joy of living shining from her eyes which constituted her chief charm. She consumed a hearty meal, but her manners at table, which were quite free from vulgarity, and like those of a well-behaved child, dissociated from her any idea of gipsy ways. Although she had fasted for close on eleven hours.

"Father," as she called him, was apparently pretty strict with her, in spite of their vagabond existence. Once, so she said, he had been an actor, and, among other avocations, which he appeared to have more or less unsuccessfully attempted, were those of second-violin in a country theatre, ring-master in a circus, teacher of deportment and elocution, commercial traveler, and pianist of small dances.

"Father's a very clever man," she confided to me in impressive tones. "He knows such a lot of Shakespeare, and he's tried to teach me some of it; that scene where the little prince doesn't want his eyes put out; he took a deal of trouble to teach me that. But it would all go out of my head the last minute, and he had to be prompting me all the time, which made him mad with me. Sometime, when I learn, I can't remember. Every now and then, when we've been long enough in a town, father sent me to school. But, you see, I've always known I should have to tramp again as soon as he left off paying the bills; and I suppose that unsettled me and made me slower than I'd have been otherwise. And I'm sorry, for my mother was a lady; and although father says I'm one, too, and I'm not to forget it in whatever company I'm in, I don't look much like one, do I?"

She shook out her tangle of soft, fair hair, laughing at me across the table. I wish I could convey in words the charm about everything she said and did. Even trivial, commonplace remarks, spoken in defective English, sounded sweet from those soft, red lips, and when she laughed, two rows of little, glistening teeth, white and even as a

child's, lent to her face an irresistible fascination.

Her movements, too, were free, unrestrained, and graceful as those of a young colt; and in spite of her gipsy life I have never seen any home-bred or convent-bred young gentleman who breathed such an air of absolute purity and innocence of evil as Lillith Saxon.

For her name was Lillith, a name which suited her fairylike beauty.

"Not a drop of her blood was human. But she was made like a fair, sweet woman."

So sings Rossetti of the legendary Lillith, "snake-wife of Adam"; and the lines came into my head involuntarily when I heard this child's name and gazed upon her soulless beauty.

For it was soulless, I suppose, as that of Undine in the German story. She was "Joy made a living thing"; and the troubles of her adventurous, hand-to-mouth existence seemed to press but lightly upon her.

"If father only wouldn't drink it would be a lovely life," she said. "I don't like school, and wherever I've been to school the girls looked down upon me because I was shabby and knew so little, though I am so tall. Oh, it was so lovely when father's money gave out, and we were out on the tramp under the sky again! Then I felt as if I could breathe, and wasn't choked up any more. And I love dancing, and father won't let any one tease me, or be rude to me, you know. Of course I get tired, and my feet ache sometimes, and I get coughs and colds in the winter, though I love the snow, and snowflakes in the wind teach me how to dance. But every thing teaches me that—birds as they fly, the smoke up the chimney, and clouds in a storm. And then it's beautiful on a tramp over frozen roads to see across the snow at night the lights of a village, the nice red patch from the forge, and then the rush of warm air and light when the inn door opens and we go in—oh, I've had icicles on my eyelashes before now—they're very long, you see, and they catch them. But a nice hot cup of tea in the bar-parlor, if the landlady's at all kind, is worth waiting for, and, although it's a bit tiring sometimes to dance after a long tramp, it warms one's feet and keeps off chilblains, doesn't it?"

"Are you very fond of your father?"

She stared across the table at me, looking a little puzzled. She was resting her chin on her hands again now, as she had done by the window, and her large blue eyes began to look languid and sleepy. A long day in the wind and rain, followed by a considerable meal, had tired her.

"Oh, I like father when he is kind," she answered. "I can't like him when he locks me in my room, or when he beats my hands. I was deaf for three months last autumn after he had boxed my ears, so he doesn't do that now."

"Do you mean to say that he actually strikes you?" I asked in horror.

She flushed for the first time.

"Yes, I oughtn't to have told you, I suppose. It is only when he has been drinking. You won't let on I told you, will you?" she asked anxiously.

"I promise I will say nothing about it."

"I am so sleepy," she said, yawning. "I can hardly keep my eyes open. I should like to go to bed."

"Why don't you?"

"I daren't. Father might come home any moment and might want to play the piano and make me dance if there's anybody about to make a collection from him. And if I go to bed he'd be dreadfully angry. I wonder if I might curl myself up on this sofa and get a bit of a doze?"

"By all means if you like. I'll ring first to have the tea things cleared away, and to put you in Mrs. Nokes's charge until your father's return. I'm going out myself for a stroll and a smoke. Good night, Miss Lillith."

She broke into a hearty laugh.

"Doesn't that sound grand?" she cried. "Miss Lillith! I wonder you didn't say Miss Saxon; that would be grander still. But you'll be coming back from your walk soon, won't you? You'd like to see me dance?"

I hesitated.

"Not again to-night!" I said "before all those laborers and people. I should know you were tired and pitying you," I added hastily, noticing her troubled look that flashed into her eyes; "and I like to remember your happy dancing this evening, when I first found you. Good night, little Lillith, and I hope you will do nothing to-night but go to bed and sleep off your fatigue."

"Good night, and thank you ever so much."

I rang the bell as I went out, and, meeting Mrs. Nokes in the hall, I told her that the child was tired and wanted to rest on the sofa. Mrs. Nokes was clearly somewhat scandalized by Lillith's incursion into my parlor, and I had to pacify her by assuring her that the child had no money, and he'd be all but that I had been amused and interested by her chatter.

"She's been quite spoiled by people noticing her pretty face, and thinks she can do what she likes when the old man isn't here to keep her in order. My husband and some others think Lillith's pretty, but for my part I can't see it. In our part of the country the men like girls with a bit of flesh on their bones. Maybe she'll fill out when she's a bit older, though she must be fifteen by now, and too old to go about making friends with strangers."

"Is the old man, her father, really cruel to her?" I asked.

"He's a regular brute when he's had a drop too much," Mrs. Nokes answered emphatically. "But he looks after her sharp enough when he's sober—I will say that for him. He'd take on dreadful if he'd know about her bothering you like that this evening. And I must say it's the first time I've seen any flirty ways about her."

Mrs. Nokes was evidently vexed, and I left the inn for my walk, annoyed by her coarsely expressed comment, and thing less like "flirting" than this beautiful child's sudden friendship with me I have never seen, and the expression jarred me.

As I passed by the window of the little parlor, I saw by the lamplight clearly into the room. Lillith was already asleep, her flushed cheeks nestled upon the hard back horsehair sofa through a tangle of yellow hair. White lids and long, brown lashes veiled her eyes; and through her softly parted lips her breath came as regularly and lightly as that of a sleeping child.

And with that picture in my mind and heart, where it will remain engraved until I die, I went down again toward the seashore.

CHAPTER V.

It was nine o'clock when I left the Rose and Crown. The storm and the wind had passed away, and the evening was beautifully fine and clear.

Away in London, Madge would be beginning to dress for Lady Bashford's reception; and had I been in town I should have had to accompany her. One of these entertainments was so like another they were monotonous. The same people in different clothes, the same diamonds on bare necks, every curve of which one had got to know by heart, from seeing them so constantly; the same crush on the wide staircase, at the top of which the hostess, tired already, and smiling mechanically under her rouge, would be standing hour after hour receiving her guests. The same band one had heard night after night—it was the Blue Bohemians that were all the rage that particular season—would be playing the same tunes which had haunted one for weeks past; and from the moment that the names, "Lady Carchester, Lady Margaret Lorimer, Mr. Adrian Hervey!" had been given out, until the time when I wrapped Madge's cloak about her shoulders and squeezed myself into a small space in the carriage we drove on to Mrs. Macclesfield's dance, nothing would happen that was unexpected or that had not taken place dozens of times before.

And in the old churchyard by this time, and pushing the gate open, I entered and sat down on a broken fragment of wall which crowned the grassy cliff, to smoke and think. If I were a woman, I told myself, I would almost rather lead the life of Lillith Saxon than that of Madge Lorimer. The open-air tramping, the constant change of scene, the perfect freedom of the existence led by the little waif and stray seemed infinitely more picturesque and varied than the stupid stereotyped round of so-called pleasures followed by my cousin.

It was true that hunger, fatigue, and the coarse jests of strangers, and hard words, and even blows from her only protector, were the fate of the lovely child I had left curled up asleep on my sofa. But Lady Madge suffered from loss of appetite and sleeplessness, and by her restless craving for fresh excitement and distaste for her own society, proof was given that she found no real happiness in the fashionable dissipation which occupied every moment of her life. Lady Carchester's tongue, too, must be sometimes almost as difficult to bear as old Saxon's fits of drunken brutality. The "Diamond Queen" was fortunately of a taciturn disposition, but she seldom spoke except to utter some scathing and unpleasant criticism of men and things, and, although mother and daughter were constantly seen about together, it was pretty well known that their parting was soon or to momentary tenderness. A brilliant face, but as it occurred to me for the first time, not a happy one. Those unattractive dark eyes of hers looked tired and sad when her high spirits merged, as they often did, into the reaction of picture depression. She lived her life thoroughly, but I began, in those moments of quiet reflection, to doubt whether, after all, she enjoyed it, remembering her accounts of those sleepless nights when she had fallen in its desired effect, and coming home after some entertainment, in the small hours of the morning, she would lie awake until her café au lait was brought to her bedside, the feeling, as she once owned to me, "quite hopeless."

(To be continued.)

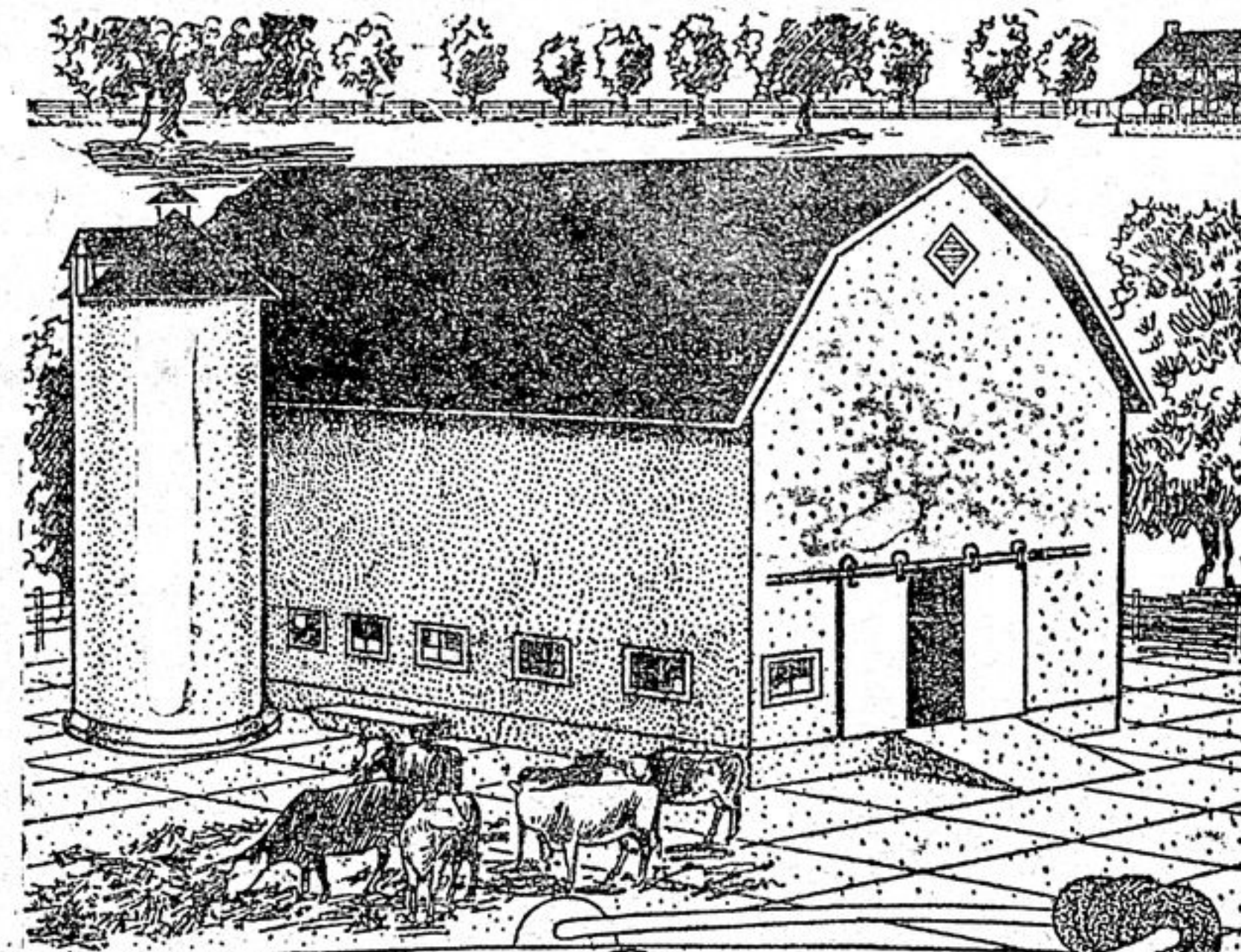
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