The Wedding Eve;

Or, Married to a Fairy.

CHAPTER IV.—(Continued).

With that I put a sovereign in her hands. 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 I make old Mother Nokes sit 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 curtsy 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 into 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 something 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's a disgrace 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 hall 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 greediness, 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 at 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. Somehow, 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 collie dog; and in spite of her gypsy life I have never seen any home-bred or convent-bred young gentlewoman who breathed such an air of absolute purity and innocence of evil as Lilith Saxon.

For her name was Lilith, 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 Lilith, "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 everything 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 added 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. And if I'd gone 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' charge until your father's return. I'm going out myself for a stroll and a smoke. Good night Miss Lilith."

She broke into a hearty laugh.

"Doesn't that sound grand?" she cried. "Miss Lilith! 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 be pitying you," I added hastily, noticing the 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 Lilith, 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 Lilith's incursion into my parlor, and I had to pacify her by assuring her that the child had not bothered me at 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. At least, my husband and some others think Lilith'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 known 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 comments. Anything 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. Lilith was already asleep, her flushed cheeks nestled upon the hard black 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 squeezes 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.

I had reached 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 Lilith 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 stereoptyped round of so-called pleasures followed by my cousin.

It was true that hunger, fatigue, 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 in her restless craving for fresh excitement and distaste for her own society, proof was given that she found no real hapiness in the fashionable dissipations which occupied every moment of her time. 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 relations were by no means too cordial, for both ladies had "nerves," and both had tongues and tempers, as my uncle sometimes found to his cost.

As I sat smoking my pipe on the ruined wall, under the swaying pine-trees, the picture of a woman rose up suddenly before my mind's eye, and seemed painted on the air before me. Madge's face, intensely sad in repose, brilliant and changeful in talk, a mocking smile on her mobile lips, varying swiftly to scorn or to momentary tenderness. A brilliant face, but, as it occurred to me for the first time, not a happy one. Those unfathomable dark eyes of hers looked tired and sad when her high spirits merged, as they often did, into the reaction of deep 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 sleeeless nights when chloral failed in its desired effect, and, coming home after some entertainment, in the small hours of the morning, she would lie awake until her cafe au lait was brought to her bedside, feeling, as she once owned to me, "quite hopeless."

Nicholas Wray, who admired her more than any man I had ever met, once made a sketch of her while she talked to another artist in his studio. Nicholas had the faculty of bringing out, in those outline "impressions" of his, just the qualities in his sitters which they would wish to conceal from the outer world, and in this sketch of Madge the restless sadness underlying the surface brilliancy of her nature was strongly emphasized. She hated that sketch, I knew, although she pretended to be charmed with it. It was put away somewhere as soon as it came into her possession, and no one had had a chance of seeing it since. But now, as I sat in Lythinge churchyard by moonlight, and looked upon her face by the light of memory, its inherent sadness became for the first time clear to me, contrasted with the happiest face I had ever seen.

Lady Margaret's image faded in rings of tobacco-smoke, and in its place I recalled that of Lilith Saxon, iridescent as she danced in the golden sunset rays. I could feel the light touch of her lips upon my cheek yet, and the ripple of her laughter seemed to fill the air about me. Poor little half-starved marsh-fairy! Every nerve in my body tingled with hot indignation as I thought of her father's cowardly cruelty toward her.

"Mother was a lady, and I'm sorry I'm not one, too."

In her simplicity and frankness, and her entire absence of shyness and self-consciousness, she was already, although she knew it not, far better bred in manner than many a slangy little schoolgirl of my acquaintance, upon whose education hundreds of pounds had been spent by her parents. The saving qualities of patience and content, of gaiety and gratitude, and a sweet sunniness of temper were hers, together with a lithe grace of movement which distinguished her from the anemic, corseted, stooping-shouldered, tightly shod girls of her age in my own rank of life, whom I occasionally met, but whom I invariably shunned. As a rule, young girls from twelve to seventeen are all self-consciousness, awkwardness, empty-headedness, vanity, and giggles; too old to be treated as children, too young to be talked to as women, and at their worst as regards looks, pinching their waists and stealing their elder sisters' face-powder, prone to pimples, red elbows, and red hands, and given to over-ornament in the matter of crude-colored bows and ribbons.

To fall in love with one of these half-fledged things could scarcely occur to a sane man; but were Lilith Saxon a year or two older, I could well imagine a man in any rank of life making an utter fool of himself for such as she.

My vision had become a reality, for there before me, as though evolved out of tobacco-clouds, she stood, a tall, slender, childlike form in shadowy gray garments, with the moonlight falling upon her bare head and silvering her yellow hair.

She laughed as I remained motionless for a moment, staring at her in silence.

"Did you think I was a ghost?" she asked, in that weak, sweet voice of hers. "I woke up a few minutes ago, and found it was ten o'clock and father hadn't come home. There were some laboring men making a noise in the bar, and Mrs. Nokes was cross, and told me to go off to bed. But I felt worried about father, and I thought I would like to speak to you about it, as there wasn't anybody else as would listen to me. I do hope no harm has come to him. I always get frightened when he's late like this, because when he takes a glass too much he loses his temper easily, and the least thing that's said will make him quarrel. I do hope he's all right, and won't be very cross when he comes home—comes here, I mean."

(To be continued.)

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Chief among the Amoy fruits is the pomelo, a citrus fruit somewhat larger than the grape fruit, with a thick, yellow, bitter skin. There are oranges, too, and bananas, pineapples, mangoes and other fruits. The cultivation of tea in this district has almost ceased, but that of the opium poppy is again on the increase. Almost all of the cultivation of the soil is done by hand. The rice plants are transplanted by hand and the fields frequently weeded in the same way. If a farmer has some surplus plants he throws them in an unused corner near a well, and those who lack enough for their planting may have them for the asking.

Such implements as are in use are extremely crude. The native plough does little more than scratch th surface, and the simple and inexpensive harrow is usually drawn by an Indian cow or bullock or sometimes by the water buffalo. Horses and donkeys are rarely used.

At Amoykong the junks come in from the sea and at high tide go well up on the beach. There is a rise and fall of eighteen feet here, and when the tide goes out the junks are beached and repaired. Here are built the three-master sailing junks with square sails, familiar in Chinese pictures, made of bamboo woven into a pattern something like that of a cane seat in a chair, with a layer of "ti" leaves between two such meshes of cane sewn together with other small strips of bamboos. In Amoykong also are made the fish nets used by the junks which bring into Amoy large quantities of fish, some of which are salted and dried.

The emigration from the district has been very heavy, and the male population of whole villages is largely limited to old men and boys. Women are to be found whose husbands left for the south soon after marriage and have hardly been heard of since. Occasionally they return after years of absence and purchase or adopt a son for their Chinese wife, so that their ancestors may be revered and they themselves have some one to look after their graves.

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