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The Wedding Eve;

Or, Married to a Fairy.

CHAPTER V.—(Continued).

"Haven't you any settled home?" I asked.

Lilith shook her head.

"Not what you would call a settled home," she said. "There's a shop in Rye kept by a cousin of father's, where we go and stay sometimes when father has put by a pound or two, but that doesn't happen often. My! doesn't the moon look lovely shimmering over the sea? And the marsh looks so peaceful and quiet all stretched out with just a little speck of light from the alehouses here and there. I wish we were on the sands. Walking there at night is just beautiful when they are firm and crisp as the sea has left them. I've run along them in my bare feet by the hour at night sometimes, when we've been very badly off and haven't known where to go, and father's been cross because I enjoyed it so. I've screamed with delight sometimes to feel the cool waves crawling round my feet in the moonlight, while he's been swearing because the public houses were closed, and the night wind put his pipe out! I've said then I shouldn't like to be a man, always thirsty and wanting pipes or beer. It seems so much cheaper and simpler to be a girl."

She had seated herself on a mound of turf not far from where I sat. The unconventionality of her proceeding did not seem to trouble her for a moment, and, indeed, what could social laws mean to this light-hearted little wayside wildflower? I had not the heart to explain them to her, in any case, and together we listened for some seconds in silence to the wind rustling through the fringe of pine-trees that bordered the churchyard, and stared in silence across the marshes to the moon-flooded sea.

At last Lilith drew a long, sighing breath.

"When I die," she said, "I want to lie here. I've seen graveyards in towns—dreadful places, all railings, and boards saying you mustn't pick the flowers, and all that. But think how quietly one could sleep here, with only the sheep-bells or the church-bells to bother one, and long, long grass to keep one warm in winter, and cool in summer. I had a little sister older than me. She died three years after mother, and they buried her in a pauper's grave in a London cemetery. From a flower-girl I begged some roses that were a bit faded, and put them, in an old jam-pot I got off our landlady, on the earth over my sister's head. I wonder if she knew. She was very fond of flowers. A cold carried her off, just as it did mother. Father was getting a living teaching elocution during the day, then—most to servants who wanted to go on the stage—and Bessie and he used to go out together at night and play and sing in the streets when it was quite dark. She used to sing beautiful, high and sweet like a bird. But one winter she got a cough, and in the spring she couldn't shake it off. The roof in the room where we slept let the rain in; we owed the landlady something, and she wanted to get rid of us, and wouldn't have it mended. Bessie was fond of father, and wouldn't worry him, she said, though he must have seen how thin she got and big her eyes came to look. People gave her more money at first when they heard her cough, but coughing took away her voice at last, and then father had to go out alone, and didn't make nearly as much money. She called me to her one night—I remember it so well—and told me to be a good girl, and to try my best to take care of father, and never to forget her and mother if I was ever tempted to do anything wrong. And while I was listening and crying, and not understanding her, she stopped talking, and her hands grew cold, and I knew she was dead.

"It did seem so strange to have her there, and to call her and never get an answer. She'd always been so kind to me, and so ready to kiss and pet me, it seemed awful to have her lying so still and cold, and never taking notice of me. Father went on dreadful at first when I told him Bessie was dead. He raved and stamped and acted and quoted a lot of Shakespeare. Then he went out, and didn't come back for hours. He had been drinking all the time and had spent all our money. After Bessie was buried in that horrid cemetery, we left London, and then father found out I could dance, and was always making me practise. I had to make up to him for his lost ones, he said. You see, mother used to give lessons in French and music, and do needlework for the shops. She is buried in Rye—father's cousin lent the money for that—but I want to be buried here, high up and quiet, where I can hear the sea!"

More than once as she spoke tears had started to my eyes. The sordid, pitiful details of that sad childhood, the picture her simple words conjured up of the lovely, blue-eyed child, watching through the long hours in those dreary lodgings by the dead body of her sister, and of the drooping roses she had begged from a flower-girl to place upon Bessie's grave—all these things affected me as no tale of sorrow had ever done before.

A passionate longing filled me to serve this fragile, feminine thing, to protect her from the dangers of her wandering life, and the callous cruelty and greed of her unworthy father. But how could a man of my age interfere in the affairs of a lovely waif and stray many years his junior? I could do nothing. I could not even hint to her of the strength of chivalrous love and pity with which she inspired me; and even while I was seeking for words in which to express the depth of my sympathy, her mood changed, and she was laughing gaily.

"Mrs. Nokes was so shocked and angry when she heard I'd had tea with you. She said you'd complained to her, but I knew that wasn't true, and I told her so."

"Of course it wasn't true, Lilith."

"Of course not. Then she said I ought to be ashamed of myself, and I was too old to be bothering gentlemen to take notice of me."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen next month. How old are you, Mr. Hervey?"

"Twenty-seven next month—nearly old enough to be your father, you see."

"Oh, no; father's nearly fifty. I've never met anybody so easy to talk to as you. Does everybody you meet want to tell you everything, I wonder?"

"Not that I know of. Lilith, the grass you are sitting on is damp, and it is quite time you went to bed. Your father will certainly be angry if he comes to the inn and finds you are out."

"That's true. I suppose I had better go in," she said, rising to her feet. "Oh, I've been sitting on a grave all this time! I wish I had known; I wouldn't have done it. Is it unlucky?"

"You superstitious child! It will be very unlucky if you take a chill from the damp grass."

"I hate leaving here. It grows calmer and prettier every moment now the wind is going down again. You will see me to the inn, won't you? To-morrow we may be on the tramp again, and you are so kind, and I like you so much I can't bear to think of saying good-by to you."

"I shall see you in the morning before you leave. Come, Lilith! The dew is falling heavily and the mists are rising over the marsh. Come!"

She was lingering in the churchyard, but when I stretched out my hand she at once slipped hers into it, a very small, very thin hand, the skin rather rough from constant exposure, but a dear little hand for all that. I clasped my fingers over it, and led her into the highroad, between fields of barley, that led to the inn.

As we turned a corner, walking thus hand in hand, and talking like old friends, a long, dark shadow fell across our path. Lilith trembled and hung back, half hiding herself behind me.

"At last I've found you!" a thick voice exclaimed, as the shambling figure of a tall, broadly build man in shabby, weather-stained clothes, blue-eyed, gray-bearded, and clearly the worse for drink, lurched into full view in the moonlight.

I did not need Lilith's frightened whisper, for I had already divined that this red-faced, stumbling, angry personage who advanced to meet us, muttering strange oaths and brandishing a heavy oaken stick, was her father, Horatio Saxon.

CHAPTER VI.

In Horatio Saxon's manner, accentuated by his half-inebriated condition, was a very evident trace of the footlights, a melodramatic over-emphasis, which, as I afterward learned, had grown to characterize the man's tones and gestures in every situation in life.

At the same time it was clear that he was extremely angry, and the sudden snatch he made at his daughter's arm would have hurt her had I not interposed to ward off his rough grasp.

Then he turned upon me in genuine fury, but still tinged with theatrical exaggeration.

"And who are you, pray, that you should interfere between father and child? Some London cad, fresh from his shop, coming here in his best clothes and palming himself off as a gentleman! How dare you speak to that young lady? Do you know that I am her father? And you, you sly, lazy, undutiful minx, what do you mean by such forward, immodest conduct? Leave that fellow at once and come to me as I bid you."

He lurched and swayed in his walk, so that every moment I feared lest he might overbalance and fall over the heap of loose stones bordering the roadway, which was in course of being mended. The spot was absolutely deserted but for our three selves, and in the vivid moonlight the intense stillness seemed ghostly and unnatural.

Lilith was close behind me, and I felt her tremble as Saxon made another lunge in her direction with his heavy oaken stick. Perhaps it would have been better had she gone to him quietly at once, for her hesitation seemed to work him into a fury.

Roughly thrusting me on one side, he gripped her shoulder, and, dragging the child toward him, shook her violently from side to side. A low cry of pain and fear broke from her lips, followed by the thud of a heavy blow from his clenched fist upon her shoulder. At the sound I lost all self-control, and, hurling myself upon the brute, I compelled him to loose his hold on her.

Sobbing with terror, Lilith ran on a few steps ahead, and old Saxon turned to vent his fury upon me.

With a volley of oaths he sprang toward me, brandishing his stick above his head. I was young and active and easily dodged the heavy blow he directed at my skull. Missing me, he lost his balance, lurched forward, staggered, and tripping against the stones by the wayside fell heavily, face downward on the ground.

For a few seconds I waited for him to rise and renew the attack; but, finding that he did not move, I went to his assistance, and with some difficulty raised him from the ground. Blood was flowing freely from a gaping wound in the temples, made by contact with a sharp flint just where his head had struck it. His eyes were open, and his distorted, purple face still wore the look of rage I had last seen there. But he offered no resistance to my touch, and lay like a log in my arms as I knelt by his side.

(To be continued.)

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Put syrup, sugar, butter, and one cup of the cream over the fire. Stir and boil vigourously a few minutes. Now stir in slowly the other cup of cream that boiling may continue all the while. Continue cooking until a firm ball forms when tried in cold water. Add Vanilla and nuts. Turn into two small buttered bread pans.

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