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The Wedding Eve;

Or, Married to a Fairy.

CHAPTER VI.—(Continued).

A light touch on my shoulder made me start violently. I turned and saw Lilith, whom, in the new dread that was creeping over me, I had altogether forgotten, peering over my shoulder into Horatio Saxon's face.

"Father is dead!" she said, in an awe-struck whisper, speaking what I hardly dared to think.

I laid him down as I had found him, and, taking Lilith by the hand, I led her, crying silently, back to the inn. Then I summoned Nokes from the bar as quietly as I could, and immediately outside his doors I told him briefly what had happened, and took him with me to where Lilith's father lay.

Saxon was really dead. I had judged him to be past mortal aid when I had left him a few minutes before. Death, indeed, must have been almost instantaneous, for he had not even uttered a groan. He lay there, a dark patch upon the shining white roadway, with a narrow red stream trickling from under the wound in his head.

By Mr. Noke's advice I borrowed a horse from the farm by the churchyard and rode off as fast as the animal's sturdy legs could carry me to summon a doctor from Sandhythe, since doctors were unknown in Lythinge, with the exception of the local "vet." That clattering journey over the moonlit roads will linger long in my memory. I always associate it now with the scent of hay, stacks of which, fragrant after the heavy rains, bordered the lonely highway.

My mind throughout that ten-mile ride to and from Sandhythe was in a turmoil of excitement. On one point I was resolved—Lilith's future should be as free from toil and poverty as I could make it. Under the clear-eyed stars, in the sweet-scented summer-night stillness, I took myself to task about my motives, and did not try to deceive myself. I loved the child, not yet with a man's love for a woman, but with a protective, pitying tenderness. I had never yet met a human creature who interested me so deeply, and had it been possible, so strong was the romantic passion with which she inspired me, I would have dedicated my whole life to her service.

As to the wisdom or folly of harboring such sentiments in my heart for the lovely, neglected, little vagrant whom fate had cast in my way, I could not go into that question. A man loves where he must, not where he should, and already this child of sixteen, whom I had that day encountered for the first time, was more, infinitely more, to me than any other living thing.

As to forming any definite plan for her future, that I certainly had not done. In some measure her father's death lay at my door, and I was bound to see that she was not a loser by it. At the same time, I knew quite well that not duty, but personal inclination, moved me to provide for her future. All that I had really decided upon was to seek out her relatives, and ascertain whether they were willing, for a consideration, to provide Lilith with a home while she attended a school to amend her deficiencies in the matter of education.

As to what would be her subsequent career I would not trouble myself to think. She would never want a home, or friendship, or advice, or money, while I lived; but even while I thought thus, in a glow of protective affection, I realized with a pang that my life was not my own to offer her. Had I been free, I felt I could have taught her to love me, and could have so molded her sweet, pliable nature that in a year or two she might have felt for me some slight measure at least of the affection which I could find it in me to lavish upon her. But Lady Madge's image interposed between me and this realization of all my dreams, and I fancied I could see the scornful curl of the lip and hear the fine sarcasm in her tone as she alluded to "Adrian's philanthropic interest in a girl of sixteen he found dancing for pence in a country tavern."

The words and tone, even in imagination, stung me. I whipped the fat sides of the farm horse so that in rapid motion I might forget their sting, and, galloping heavily, found myself at a little past eleven in the sleeping town of Sandhythe, not far from the address of the doctor which Mr. Nokes had given me. Returning alongside of the doctor in his gig, after a great deal of time had been wasted in his stable in slow and sleepy preparation, he informed me that he was acquainted with the dead man, having attended him once in Sandhythe for an apoplectic seizure brought on by heavy drinking.

"A man of some education and intelligence, Saxon seemed, but of hopeless Bohemian habits. I remember he had a very pretty little girl with a lot of fair hair. About fourteen, I should say, she was then. Do you know whether she was with him at Lythinge?"

"She is at the Rose and Crown under Mrs. Nokes' care, at this moment."

"Poor child! It will be a bad business for her, as I think the man told me he had neither money nor friends. I know I didn't charge him anything—didn't think I should get it if I had. Shocking training for a girl tramping about the country with him in all sorts of weather, and all sorts of company. My wife was interested in the child's pretty face. She is a very kind-hearted woman, and may be able to do something for her, to get her a nursemaid's or scullery-maid's place somewhere. But it isn't everybody who would have her with such antecedents."

"Surely," said I, with difficulty restraining my feelings, "having a drunken and disreputable father, and no money and no friends, is her misfortune and not her fault. And, from what I have heard, her mother was a lady."

"Couldn't have been much of a lady, to marry old Saxon," laughed the doctor. "No, no, my dear sir. Take the word of an older man—domestic service is the only safeguard for a pretty girl with vagrant instincts and no education. Our early impressions are the strongest, and you don't make a decorous member of society out of a girl whose childhood and early girlhood is spent in tramping about the country as a gypsy."

"I am extremely sorry for the poor child," I said, speaking in as calm and matter-of-fact tones as possible. "The man Saxon was a brute to her, but, to tell the truth, I feel in some measure responsible for his violent death, for, meeting them together on the highroad, I interfered to prevent him from abusing her, and it was in striking out at me that he overbalanced and fell. I have been thinking over what I can do for Lilith, and if I can find out her relatives it will be better, I should say, for her to live with them during the next two years, while she attends a school for her education."

The doctor fixed his eye-glasses on his nose and turned to look at me where I jogged along by the side of his gig in the moonlight.

"Do I understand," he asked dryly, "that you intend to adopt Lilith, and try to make a lady of her?"

The blood rose to my face at something in his tone, but I kept my temper, for the child's sake.

"There is no question of adoption," I answered, "but I can afford to help Lilith, and I intend to do so."

"Ah! To help her by giving two years' finishing polish to an education that has not yet begun! And what is to become of her at the end of the two years. After learning to jabber French and play the piano, you won't find her very willing to take up domestic service; and yet, what else can she do?"

"Two years is a long way ahead," I was beginning, when he cut me short.

"Pardon me for asking you," he said, "but are you a married man?"

"No. But I really cannot see how that affects the question."

"The world would see, Mr. Hervey. The world is apt to misunderstand the motives of a handsome young single gentleman of good family, who takes a philanthropic interest in a lovely little orphan beggar-girl. You take my advice, sir. Leave Lilith to my wife; she is lady superintendent of a home for training young servants in our town, and she will no doubt be willing to get the girl in there. Then, if you really want to do anything for her, you can see my wife about it, and place in her hands any sum you like for Lilith's clothing and expenses. The girl need never know to whom she is indebted for the money, and like that, both you and she will escape being placed in an altogether false position. Now, isn't there some sense in what I say?"

"No doubt there is. But Lilith herself should have some voice in the matter. Here we are at Lythinge. I can see the church over the trees. We will talk over this matter at another time, doctor. Meantime, I respect your motive and thank you for your advice, which I am sure is well meant."

"But which you don't mean to take, eh? Think it over, Mr. Hervey; think it over!"

"I will," I said; and I did.

But not for a moment could I reconcile myself to the thought of my beautiful Lilith washing dishes, scrubbing and scouring, at the mercy of another woman's orders and another woman's tongue from morning till night. It would like betraying her confidence to hand her over to the tender mercies of some unknown mistress, kindly and practical, who would no doubt disapprove of Lilith's beauty, and, finding her "too good-looking for a servant," would cut off or fasten up her beautiful yellow hair, encase those lovely, slender feet in coarse boots, and thrust "blacking-gloves" on those little hands of hers.

That sweet frankness and genuine love for the beauties of nature and the charm of an open-air existence would have to be exchanged for a respectful taciturnity, and such gratification as could be found by an occasional "Sunday afternoon out" with a "young man," probably one of the soldiers stationed at Sandhythe.

And at that last thought a sharp pang of jealousy taught me the hollowness of my philanthropy. I loved the child. There was not the least doubt of that, and the doctor or any one else would have been ready enough to believe it. What they would not have been able to understand was that I also respected her as absolutely as though she had been a lady "of high degree" and I a humble servitor.

It was true that I meant to consult Lilith as to her future. But I knew already what her answer would be, and my mind was made up.

That night, through the thin partition walls, I heard her sobbing, and the sound strengthened my determination. No more tears should she shed, no more sorrow should shadow her happy nature, if I could prevent it. She should have her chance in life; and if the unutterable joy of folding her in my arms and knowing her love to me mine could never come to me, at least she should have a friend to stand between her and the rough buffetings of the world.

And thus, with open eyes, I entered into what has since been called "the greatest mistake of my life."

CHAPTER VII.

The tragic death of Horatio Saxon caused quite a stir in Lythinge.

The veterinary doctor stood by his front door discussing it, the vicar called at the Rose and Crown, the trade in beer went up by at least thirty glasses during the day, and rustics by twos and threes would halt solemnly by the stony patch in the road where the man had met his death, and stare at the spot as though their slowly moving minds were reconstructing the scene.

It was, of course, impossible for me to leave the neighborhood until after the inquest, but for many reasons I shifted my quarters to the substantial old coaching inn by the crossroads, half-way between Lythinge and the railway junction, where I had lunched on my first arrival.

Lilith I placed in Mrs. Nokes' care "until the funeral," after relieving that good lady's mind by promising to pay all her expenses; and, save for a fleeting glimpse of her across the room at the inquest, held in the large coach-house of the inn where I was staying, I saw nothing of her until one misty morning, when the tolling of Lythinge church-bells summoned me to the wind-swept graveyard where the body of Horatio Saxon was to be interred.

The inquest had proved a formal and speedily concluded affair. Several witnesses testified to the half-drunken condition in which Saxon had left the inn at West Sandhythe on the evening of his death. Others there were who gave evidence as to his condition when he had entered the bar of the Rose and Crown after ten o'clock and shouted for his daughter. Lilith and I were there to corroborate each other as to his fall, and Nokes, the landlord, proved his summons by me and his discovery of the body where it lay in the roadway.

The dead man's drunken habits had so weakened his constitution that the state of his heart alone might have made any sudden shock fatal to him. It was clearly a "death from misadventure," and was in no way complicated by any testamentary arrangements on the part of the deceased, for an examination of his pockets produced nothing but a torn copy of Shakespeare, twopence halfpenny in bronze, a pipe, and several pawn tickets.

No one mourned for him, no one regretted him. Lilith, when I saw her at the inquest, was dressed in an ill-fitting black stuff gown, which hung all too loosely on her slender form and accentuated the blueness and brightness of her eyes, but I cannot say that she appeared anything more than serious, and Mrs. Nokes informed me privately that she was "scandalized by the girl's want of feeling."

"She cried a bit the first night," the landlady explained, "but she seemed all right next morning. I mean to make her stop inside the house until the funeral as it would seem so disrespectful to the dead for her to go to hanging about the Royal Arms after you, like as she wanted to. 'No,' I says to her, 'until your poor father's decently under ground, here you stop.' And I gave her baby to mind. But yesterday what did I do but find her in the top room in the wing. She'd set baby and Willie down on the floor, and she was actually dancing to them in a most heathen way, with poor Mr. Saxon scarcely cold! Dreadful, I call it, sir, though I don't know how it may strike you, sir."

I did not reciprocate the excellent Mrs. Nokes' sentiments; in fact, I altogether failed to see why an intelligent girl of sixteen should be more than temporarily shocked and pained by the violent death of such a father as Horatio Saxon had been. Possibly, as I admitted to myself, a girl of very strong feelings might have taken such a loss terribly to heart, in spite of the man's neglect and cruelty; but, then, would any girl of very strong feelings have followed and obeyed and worked for such a father in uncomplaining patience for six long years of ill-fed drudgery?

Meanwhile, I had been working in Lilith's behalf. I had visited Rye and discovered the small bootmaker and repairer's shop in a fifteenth-century house, with projecting upper stories, kept by John Saxon, first cousin to the dead man. This John Saxon I had found to be a local character, a Radical, a freethinker, and a most argumentative and quarrelsome little man, whose opinions were as stiff and unyielding as his boots and shoes, and who clearly eyed me with contempt as a "pampered aristocrat" when I bent my head to enter his low-ceilinged, ill-lit shop, smelling of leather and strewn with the implements of his trade.

Mr. John Saxon was dark, short, and ill-favored. He was seated on a wooden bench when I entered, bullying two boys who assisted him in his business. When he learned that my errand was not to purchase boots or to have them repaired, but was connected with his cousin, Horatio Saxon, his ill temper broke out at once.

"An ill weed, that! A spouting, mouthing vagabond, with a lazy, useless chit of a daughter. It's money, I suppose, 'Orace wants. Well, he won't get any from me. I 'ad enough of them last time they were 'ere. Calls 'imself a Conservative, and talks about his wife 'aving been a lady! That was always 'Orace's way. When he was a play-actor, on thirty shillings a week, it was all 'igh and mighty, and too grand for Cousin John. But now he's a tramp, beggins and cadging at beer shops, and making his girl dance like a monkey to an organ, he's glad enough to get put up under Cousin John's roof."

"But I hear you are a Radical," I ventured to observe. "Surely in that case you don't think the worse of a man because, under the economic conditions of his age, your cousin is unable to make a living for himself and his daughter?"

His little, fierce, light eyes glared at me savagely under his overhanging black eyebrows.

"I'm not a Radical," he snapped out. "I'm a Socialist. The state should provide for those who can't 'elp themselves; but 'Orace and his daughter can 'elp themselves. He might do porter's work, and she's old enough for domestic service. If she'd 'ad any sense, I'd 'ave sent the old woman who chars and mends for me away and taken her on, and I'd 'ave put 'Orace into the business. He'd work more and eat less than those greedy boys," he added, with a malevolent look in the direction of his two apprentices. "But 'Orace's girl's no good, nor him, either. He's at the Red Boar, and, as for her, she's throwing her heels about dancing in the attics upstairs all day instead of washing and cleaning, and she can't cook worth a cent. No, I 'elp those that 'elp themselves, and I haven't any sympathy with a man without a penny in his pocket who goes about calling himself a Conservative because he thinks it's a swell thing to do."

Long before this I had given up all hope of finding a shelter for Lilith under the roof of her father's cousin, and was ready to take my leave. I thought it my duty to inform Mr. Saxon, before doing so, that Horatio was dead. But my news only produced an angry disclaimer against being made liable for his funeral expenses or being considered in any way responsible for his daughter's future, and I speedily quitted the shop, convinced that no home existed there for my little orphan protege.

Her grandfather, the clergyman, next occurred to me as a possible protector. His name was Pritchard, and some few years ago he had been a curate in London. Thus much I knew already, and I resolved to question Lilith further on the subject after her father's funeral, when Mrs. Nokes' vigilant guard over her would be to some extent relaxed.

My opportunity came after the short service at the church on the cliff. Only Mrs. Nokes and I and Lilith and a few village boys and girls were present. The marshes were veiled in clouds of rolling white mist, so that we in the churchyard above seemed to float in an island over a moving sea of vapor. Lilith stood by my side during the service, and as they lowered the coffin into the ground she clung to my arm, dry-eyed, but trembling. I put my hand upon her two hands clasped tightly over my arm, and as I did so I silently registered a vow to guard and protect her throughout my life.

It seemed as though by some magnetic thought transmission she divined this, for her trembling ceased, and she presently looked up at me with so much tenderness, gratitude, and affection shining in her eyes that tears sprang to my own.

The scene remains now as a strangely vivid picture on my mind. The gray stone walls of the square embattled church tower, streaked here and there with yellow lichen and brown velvety moss; the low, rank grass, and weather-beaten gravestones of the neglected churchyard into which the sheep wandered at will; the still branches of the dark pine-trees showing black against the mist that rolled up from the marsh; the bent, white-haired clergyman reading those infinitely pathetic words, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust;" stout, handsome Mrs. Nokes in tears—as she deemed it only right to weep at any funeral—and the slim, yellow-haired girl in black, clinging to my arm with that touch which even now I seem to feel vibrating through my whole body, and looking into my eyes with those blue ones of hers, surely the bluest and most beautiful ever seen away from a princess in a fairy-tale.

After the service I turned to Mrs. Nokes, who was wiping her eyes with an elaborately embroidered pocket-handkerchief.

"I want to speak to Lilith about the future," I said, and without waiting for any comment I led the girl out of the churchyard toward the Sandhythe road. The fact that I had paid the late Mr. Saxon's funeral expenses clearly gave me, in the opinion of the few person's present, a prescriptive right to arrange with his daughter about the future. As for Lilith, she seemed instinctively to turn to me for guidance and protection with a docility and gentleness which touched me deeply.

"But please, Mr. Hervey," she whispered eagerly, "let us get off the highroad, and go down toward the sea. I haven't been near the sea since last Saturday, and I do want to hear the sound of it. Mayn't we take the lane toward West Sandhythe?"

"The marshes are thick with mist," I demurred.

"But soon the mists will clear," she urged. "The sun is trying to shine through them. Please, Mr. Hervey!"

"I have so much to say to you. And down in the valley we shall not be able to see each other's faces," I said.

"But you can hold my hand, which is just as good."

She held it out to me as she spoke, and hand in hand we began the steep descent down a narrow lane, with here and there a little tiled or open-timbered cottage perched high on the steep banks which bordered the way. We could only see a few feet in front of us into the white nebulous mass that seemed to roll away at our approach. The air was strangely still, the very song-birds twittered nervously as though weighed down in spirit by the clammy mist, and, with the exception of a group of gipsy hawkers, haggling in their peculiar jargon by the wayside, a dusky, ill-kempt, raggedly picturesque group, we met no human creature until we reached the level of the marsh.

Here, strange to say, our path lay clearer before us. A slight wind from the sea was driving the vapors inland and upward. Almost in silence we crossed the bridge over the military canal, and made our way to the coast by the winding road through the level land where once the sea had flowed. Over our heads a sea-bird was wheeling round, uttering a short, wailing note, the one touch wanting to complete the mysterious loneliness of the scene.

At last a martello tower loomed vaguely before us through the lightening haze, and to the left a long line of sand-dunes immediately facing a glimmering thread of white, incoming tide. Lilith seated herself on the dry sand, dotted here and there by stunted reeds and gray thistles, and sheltered inland by the dunes. She made room for me beside her, and when I took the proffered seat she nestled to my side and slipped her hand trustfully in mine.

"Now, dear," I began, "I have to talk about your future. Have you thought of it at all?"

"Yes, a little. But I knew you would look after me. And I shall be no expense to you or anybody, because, you see, now that father is dead, I can dance on the stage in pantomimes and make some money."

"Your mother did not wish you to do that."

"No, I know. She made father promise. But now that they are both dead, what does that matter?"

She stared up into my face inquiringly. Clearly sentimental considerations had no weight with Lilith Saxon.

"And supposing I do not want you to dance on the stage, either?" I suggested.

She was silent a moment. Then she said humbly.

(To be continued.)

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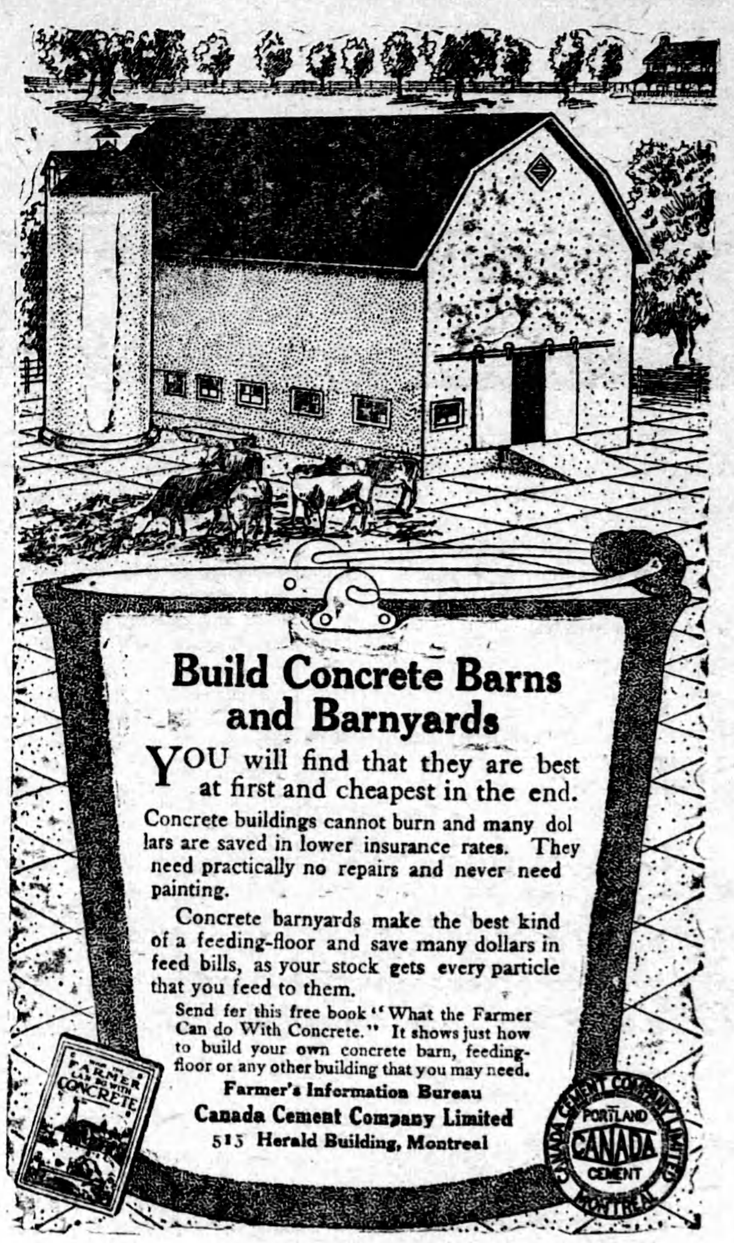

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