The Wedding Eve;

Or, Married to a Fairy.

CHAPTER VII.—(Continued).

"I would do anything to please you. What do you want me to do?"

"You told me," I said, trying to speak with a fine blending of the judicial and the paternal, and to forget the blood of seven-and-twenty rioting in my veins, "that your mother was a lady, and that you would like to be one, too."

I stopped to consider how I should make my plan sound attractive to her. Lilith clasped both her small hands on my shoulder and watched my face, a gawning delight clearly shown in her shining eyes and parted, smiling lips.

"Go on," she whispered softly.

"Well, dear," I said "you would not like, when you are older, to feel at a disadvantage before other ladies. You would like to speak correct English, and to play those dance tunes you like so much, and to sing the songs you admire, and understand something of the people who wrote them, and perhaps to speak a little French and German, and understand how to manage a house, and to see after cookery and needlework."

Her face fell, and she shook her head emphatically.

"I shouldn't like that!" she murmured. "But, of course, I'd do it for you. Anything else?"

"Well," I said, racking my brains to remember what the girls of my own class really did know how to do, "then there would be spelling and history and geography, and perhaps a little drawing and painting, and some poetry, reading, and—and lawn- tennis, and riding, and all those things as well. And, of course, ballroom dancing."

"That is the only part I like the sound of," she said gravely. "And are you going to teach me all these things yourself?"

I own I was considerably startled by the suggestion. But before I could speak she had broken into a torrent of words.

"Because, though I'm not good at learning, I will try so hard to please you. I know you will like me better when you have made me a lady—and I'd learn anything so as you would like me better, dear, dear Mr. Hervey."

She slipped her arm round my neck and gave me a half-childish hug of affection. Then she sprang to her feet, and executed a little pas seul of sheer joyousness on the firm sand just in front of me. In the middle she stopped, and hung her head in sudden ultent remembrance.

"Poor father!" she faltered. "I'd clean forgotten all about him. But when I heard you tell Mrs. Nokes yesterday as I should always have a friend in you, and you would look after me in future, I was so delighted I could have screamed for joy. First, I thought you'd make a dancer of me, and so I'd earn my living; but now you say I'm to be educated and made a lady of, and that I'm not to go on the stage, why, I'm so happ-- I can't pretend to be sorry about father. Because, you see, if he hadn't died, you wouldn't have offered to do all these things for me."

She knelt down in front of me in the sand. The sea air and rapid movement had brought a bright carmine to her cheeks. She had taken off her black-straw hat, and her yellow curls were blowing loosely out around her face and shoulders. It was difficult to look at her without kissing that little curved rose-red mouth which smiled up at me so invitingly. But I had schooled myself to a certain line of conduct with regard to my little ward, and I was resolved not to be tempted out of it.

"One thing I can't promise you," I said, with matter-of-fact cheerfulness, "and that is to instruct you myself. But I will certainly come and see you while you are at school."

"At school!"

Her face fell, and her under-lip trembled in undisguised dismay.

"Some nice finishing school I will find for you," I went on persuasively, "where every one will be most kind to you, and no one will scold you; where you will have girls of your own age to make friends with."

"I don't want them," she cried, suddenly bursting into tears. "I only want you!"

A pang shot through my heart as I saw her evident grief.

"Lilith, dear," I was beginning, when she slipped forward toward me, still on her knees, and caught my hand.

"Don't send me to school, Mr. Hervey; please don't send me," she pleaded passionately. "I know what school is, and I hate it. Keep me with you! I know you have a studio in London. Well, it must want dusting and cleaning, and your clothes must want mending, too, sometimes, and you must have a servant to do it. I don't want to be a lady any more, because if I am made a lady, I see it will mean being put away into one of those dreadful schools, and sneered at and looked down upon, and bothered and worried to learn things, and kept in so I can't see the sea and sky—or you. That's the worst part. Oh! Mr. Hervey, don't send me away from you! I'd rather be your servant, to wait on you, than be the finest lady in England! I can look a lot older in a long print frock with my hair twisted up. Let me just sweep out your studio and watch you paint; only let me be with you, and I don't care how hard I work. For I love you, Mr. Hervey, and I shall be miserable if you send me away. You are so kind and so handsome, and you have been so good to me. And think how I shall amuse you, learning new dances to please you while you play the piano. And when you're busy and don't want to be bothered, you don't know how quiet I can keep. I'll never give you a bit of trouble if only you let me stay with you!"

She was holding my hand tight between both hers and looking up at me with big tears gathering in her great blue eyes, like a sea-nymph in distress, with the incoming tide, from which the mist had lifted, making a background for her flushed face and floating hair. I am proud of my self-control, as a rule, but I own I had to look out to sea, and not into her pleading eyes, as I answered her.

"Silly child!" I said. "Of what possible use would you be as a servant at your age, and with your small experience of household work? If you really want to please me, you will stay here like a good girl, with Mrs. Nokes, while I go up to town and try to find out your grandfather, Mr. Pritchard, the clergyman."

"My grandfather! Why do you want to find him?"

"I want to find you a home with him, dear, while you are finishing your education."

"But he has hardly ever heard of me, and I have never seen him. And he was very, very angry with mother for running away with father. Suppose he won't have me?"

"Then I must find you some other home for your holidays."

"Won't you even have me with you, then?"

"Of course not," I answered, laughing. "I am a bachelor, Lilith, living all by myself. I don't keep a boarding-school of young ladies under my roof."

She was silent for a few minutes, as if reflecting. Then she asked suddenly:

"How long will it take to what you call finish my education?"

"By the time you are eighteen," I said, still in the same half-bantering tone, "I shall expect to find you a highly accomplished young lady."

"Eighteen! Two whole years! And will you come and take me away from school when I am eighteen?"

"I suppose so."

"And what will become of me then?"

This was just the question which that kindly, well-meaning old gossip, the doctor from Sandhythe, had asked me, and which I had not been able to answer. There would be, of course, certain overstocked and underpaid so-called "genteel" occupations open to a half-educated woman of vagabond parentage, ward to a man eleven years her senior. But I could not find it in my heart to mention any of these, and so I only stared at Lilith in affected surprise, and asked her what she meant.

Her answer was only too explicit.

"I mean," she said wistfully, "shall I see you every day after that? If I work very, very hard, and put up with the hateful life, and learn the horrid books, and grow all stiff and prim and young ladylike—shall I be always with you after that?"

I threw away the cigarette I was lighting, and, rising to my feet, I helped her to rise, too, from where she knelt staring at me in that altogether bewildering way. Then I took her little hands in one of mine, and, laying the other on it, tried to be more fatherly than ever.

"You don't understand, dear," I said, "that in the world I come from young gentlemen do not ask young ladies to stay in the house and sweep out the studio, or do anything absurd of that sort. They just see them sometimes at tea or dinner at other people's houses, or they meet them at balls or parties, or at the theatre, or in the park. It is only married people who see each other every day."

She suddenly disengaged her hands, and stretched them up round my neck.

"You are very fond of me, aren't you?" she asked, very seriously. "Of course, you'd have never done so much for me if you hadn't been. But you are, aren't you?"

"Of course I am fond of you, dear."

"Well, then," she asked triumphantly, her face radiant with smiles again, "when I am educated, why don't you marry me?"

CHAPTER VIII.

The question she had asked me was again one I could not answer.

Why would I not marry her, as she put it, when she was educated?

I could not frame so obvious a lie as that I did not sufficiently care for her. Already I cherished for this little untaught creature a passion which, although still to some extent ideal and romantic, partook already of the character of that love which comes to a man once in his life and once only—the love which by some is called folly and infatuation, but which makes of our lives on earth a heaven or a hell.

As to her humble birth and vagabond training, her obvious lack of all higher morality, her unconventional ideas, and the difference between our relative social positions—for all these things I cared nothing at all. At that moment, as I looked into her liquid blue eyes, and as I beheld my soul's ideal standing there before me, constraining me with gentle caresses to accept the frank and innocent offering of her love and life, I would have given my soul to be able to accept her offer and to say: "Yes; stay at school until you have gained the surface polish the world esteems so highly; I will see you constantly to encourage you to work hard for my sake. And remember always that you are mine, and that in a very short time I shall take you away and make you my adored wife."

That was the impulse, passionately strong, which surged up within me at her words and touch, and no man but a villain, loving her, could have felt otherwise.

(To be continued.)

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