The Wedding Eve;

Or, Married to a Fairy.

CHAPTER VIII.—(Continued).

I wish that in my inadequate words I could for a moment picture to your imagination half the natural grace, the daintiness, and charm of this young creature. Her beauty—the smallness and regularity of her features, the delicate softness and fairness of her skin, the absolute symmetry of her figure, slender as any fairy dancing on dew-hung leaves by moonlight, but perfect in shape as a sculptor's model—these attractions were by no means the chief links in the chain that so strongly bound me to her. Something in her ineffable joyousness and sunny lightheartedness, in the frankness of her childlike chatter, and in her affectionate, confiding tricks of manner, fascinated me so absolutely that even now, at this space of time, I can hardly sit and write about her unmoved; and if anything in my conduct strikes a reader as extravagant or absurd, I can only say:

"Had you seen Lilith Saxon as I saw her, and loved her as I loved her, anything and everything done for her sake would appear to you comprehensible and excusable."

Happily, no doubt you who read this will think but most disastrously as I considered it at that moment, the figure of Lady Madge Lorimer stood between me and this lovely child, who might well have posed as the heroine of the old Greek poets' tales of Psyche, the bride of Love.

Her face clouded a little as I laughed away her suggestions. Grown men did not engage themselves to little girls who had not yet left off growing, I assured her; and whenever I did marry, it would be some lady of my own age. That was as near as I went to the absolute truth. Somehow the tale of my engagement to my Cousin Madge stuck in my throat. Besides, how should it concern this child that I was to marry this person or that? Hers was merely a childish fancy for me, which would disappear when she passed to long gowns and grown-up coiffures. So I argued with myself, while aloud I laughed at Lilith's dread of school-life, and at her last and most startling proposition that she should go up to town to serve as a model for my pictures.

"I'm not too young for that!" she had protested. "And, if I am not sent to school and made a young lady of, there'll be no reason why I shouldn't be your model. A girl I knew in Winchelsea became an artist's model when she was yonger than I am. Artists have made pencil-sketches of me sometimes when I've been about with father; and they've all said they'd like to paint a big picture from me. But father, he would never let me sit to anybody."

"Nor would I, Lilith. I shall be vexed if you talk like this any more. For one thing, I only paint the sea."

"But you could paint me as a sea-nymph just sticking my head out of the waves, couldn't you?" she asked eagerly.

"No, dear. I never paint figures. You must be a good girl and do just as I say."

"But what will be the good of my education if it's never to make me good enough for you?" she asked pathetically, and forthwith burst into tears upon my shoulder.

I could do no less than slip my arm round her and soothe and console her, under which treatment her sobs rapidly died away, and in a very few seconds she turned a moist-eyed but radiant face up to mine, with soft lips curved into a kiss.

"Kiss me, Mr. Hervey!" she whispered, "and I'll promise to be obedient and good."

I kissed her cheek softly, but she quickly brushed her face against mine and offered me her lips.

"Otherwise I shall think you are cross with me," she said.

I kissed her, then, as coldly as I could, and led her home to Mrs. Nokes, in whose care I placed her, being resolved to go at once to London in order to discover her lawful guardian. I could see quite plainly I should never have a moment's peace until this most unreasonable little witch was safely under the care of older heads than mine.

I avoided telling Lilith of my departure, lest she might draw me into a protracted and demonstrative leave-taking, for, after all, seven-and-twenty is hardly a patriarchial age, nor could I expect the child to regard me with awe and veneration, at least for some years to come.

I therefore slipped off very quietly while Lilith was in her room, telling Mrs. Nokes I would return in a day or two, and giving her my address and more money than she could possibly require for Lilith's simple wants.

Before even returning to my studio, I sought out the Reverend James Pritchard at the city church where, at the time of his daughter's elopement with Horatio Saxon, he had been officiating as curate. And here a complete disappointment awaited me. The Reverend James Pritchard had been dead for more than four years, and I was shown his headstone in the adjacent cemetery.

Dispirited and troubled in mind, I made the best of my way home in a cab, and upon the door-step of my house I found Nicholas Wray, whom, in my new responsibilities, I had entirely forgotten, with his hand upon the knocker of the door.

He greeted me with some effusion, which I fear I did not reciprocate very heartily, and together we passed up to the studio on the first floor.

Outside the studio my man Wrenshaw stood waiting, having heard my step on the stairs. Indignant protest was written in every line of his hard, pale face, and his tones when he addressed me were such as might be employed by a rigorous judge toward a specially hardened criminal.

"Asking your pardon, sir," he said, "but a young person arrived here about an hour ago, and would not leave. She said she knew you would be pleased to see her, and she has gone to sleep in your armchair. And she told me her name was Lilith."

CHAPTER IX.

I hardly knew with whom to be most annoyed—Wrenshaw, Wray, Lilith, or myself.

Both my friend and my servant were scanning me with mingled censoriousness and curiosity, Wrenshaw being one of those crabbed old curiosities— a faithful retainer. He had been all his life in the service of the Hervey family, and he therefore felt himself entitled to criticize his master's conduct, and to make himself unpleasant whenever anything happened to displease him.

Formerly, Wrenshaw had been my father's body-servant, and his army training tended to emphasize his notions of discipline and decorum. Wray's incursion into my studio had tried the old soldier sorely, and, as I instantly guessed, the arrival of Lilith had been in the nature of a last straw to his capability of endurance.

It was terribly annoying that the child should have taken it into her head to follow me up to town. It was now a little past six in the evening; the funeral had taken place at ten, and I had left Cranling station by the one-thirty train. So that Lilith had clearly tarried at the Rose and Crown not more than three hours after my departure.

The disagreeable smile which I plainly saw gathering about Nicholas Wray's full lips, and his prompt suggestion that he should at once retire, angered me deeply. Lilith's action, as I could see very well, had placed both her and myself in a false position, obliging me to adopt an explanatory attitude—in itself always a suspicious circumstance—toward my servant and my friend.

"It's a little girl whose father was buried this morning," I said. "I was at the funeral, and did my best to comfort her. So I suppose she got my address from the landlady, and has tracked me down. Since I arrived in town I have been trying to find her relatives, but, unfortunately, they are dead."

"That's very unlucky," sneered Wray, nudging my elbow.

I felt I hated the man at that moment. Until then his bad moral character and cynical views about women had never been brought before me in a repulsive light; but, with the thought of Lilith in my mind, the coarse suggestiveness of the man's tone offended me deeply. There was no end to the mischief he might have it in his power to make between me and Lady Madge, or to the harm he might do to Lilith's name if he were not at least forced to see the baselessness of his objectionable ideas with regard to her; and I resolved at once not to let him go until he had seen and spoken with Lilith.

I therefore passed him, where we all stood in the passage outside the studio, without speaking, and, throwing open the door that he might follow, I entered the room.

And here I may as well own that all my vexation at Lilith's invasion melted when my eyes lighted upon her.

The light from the great sloping north window fell full upon where she lay curled up fast asleep in a carved oak armchair, covered with cushions of Oriental silk. A curtain of blue and gold tapestry was flung across the high back of the chair over the cushions, and against this Lilith's little head shone out, making a radiance of shining, tangled yellow silk over her drooping face. In her lap my gray Persian cat Saladin lay comfortably ensconsed, purring with content. In her scanty black stuff gown, from which one slender black-stockinged foot hung down, minus the well-worn walking shoe she had kicked off before going to sleep, with her long brown lashes resting on her flushed cheeks, and her rose-red mouth half open, my marsh fairy looked no more than a lovely child of twelve. For the moment, though, I forgot even to be glad that she had justified us both by the extreme youthfulness of her appearance. She looked so thoroughly at home, so much part and parcel of my studio, and she supplied so perfectly the one thing that had always been wanting there, that my heart seemed to contract at sight of her, in mingled pleasure and pain.

This was the presence I had dreamed of, longed for: the embodiment of all my ideals of beauty, gentleness, and grace. Of her own accord she had come to me, and she asked for nothing better than to place her life in my keeping. I was her only friend and protector, nor had she any home but that which I should provide for her.

She had slid into my life as suddenly, as unexpectedly, and as irresistibly as a ray of sunlight, and the sight of her here in my studio, in spite of the drawbacks it entailed, filled my heart with a thrill of deep delight, merging quickly into keen regret that I could not retain her forever by my side.

But all this while Nicholas Wray, whom I had half forgotten, was gazing at Lilith over my shoulder, and now, when I advanced to awaken her, he laid his hand on my sleeve.

"Wait!" he whispered. "Don't wake her just yet. Let me sketch her first."

Before I could remonstrate, he had whipped out his sketch-book, and, seating himself at a little distance from Lilith's chair was soon deep in the study of his charming subject.

I was by no means pleased at his proceeding, and yet I knew not quite how to take exception to it. Almost mechanically I crossed to my easel, placed a small canvas on it, and, taking up my brushes and colors, began to jot down a few color notes of the tints in her cheeks and her bright hair.

The minutes flew by as we grew more and more absorbed in our respective tasks. Wrenshaw had left us at the door in disgust, and we had the place to ourselves, the sleeping girl and the sleeping cat serving as models, while their regular breathing, and the noisy ticking of my tall, carved corner-clock alone broke the perfect stillness.

Presently I—crossed to where Wray sat, and looked over his shoulder. I have that selfsame drawing of his, with the date roughly penciled beneath it, hanging on the wall close to the desk at which I am at this moment writing; and of all Wray's brilliant black-and-white work, it is to my mind the cleverest example. Slight as it is, a mere pencilled outline, he has caught to perfection the inimitable girlish grace of Lilith's figure and face. Half child, half woman, sleeping and dreaming as contentedly, and basking as happily in the sunshine and in the comfort of the chair as the cat on her lap, the drawing brings back Lilith to my memory, as she then was, as the most highly finished painting could never do. More than once during the years that have passed since that summer evening, I have resolved to destroy that picture, but, when I have come face to face with it, I could never find it in my heart to lay a finger on it.

"Admirable!" I murmured as I watched Wray putting the finishing touches to his sketch.

He looked up and smiled. Then he wrote underneath: "Happy Animals."

I snatched his pencil indignantly from him, and drew a line through the offensive words.

He laughed, took the pencil again, and wrote instead, just below the words effaced: "Soulless Dreams."

And at that moment, with a little sigh, and a stretching out of her arms and rubbing of her eyes, our model awoke and stared about her.

Perceiving me, she sprang up in a great hurry, upsetting Saladin, who, being a lofty-minded cat of Eastern origin, mewed with disgust, and crept under the chair to sulk.

Meantime, Lilith darted across the room to me, and laid her hands on my shoulder, ignoring Wray altogether.

"I couldn't stay at Lythinge without you; I couldn't, indeed!" she said. "You don't know what Mrs. Nokes was like as soon as your back was turned. Going on at me about not being grateful enough to you for all you'd done for me; and then when I told her I loved you very much, she was worse than ever. And that old doctor drove over with his wife from Sandhythe—the doctor as saw poor father, you know. And they all three went on at me, saying how I mustn't be a burden to the nice, kind, young gentleman—that was you—and as how I had no claim upon him—which was true, of course—and that your relations would be angry when they heard how you meant to educate me above my station, like I told them you did, and that I ought to go into some dreadful home Doctor Martin's wife has for training young servants, where they cook and scrub and sew all day. You would soon see, they said, when you got up in town among your own relations and friends, how wrong and how inappropriate it was to try and make a lady of me, or to bother your head about me at all. They made me cry a bit; but when they all went away and left me alone, I said to myself that I would follow you up to London, as I'd got the remains of the pound you gave me, and I'd heard you give Mrs. Nokes your address, and I'd get hold of you before your relations and friends had persuaded you to have nothing to do with me, and I'd beg you not to listen to them. So I slipped out at the back of the inn, and climbed over the fence, and ran all the way to the railway station, and just caught the train, and then found my way here by omnibuses and by asking. That old gentleman who opened the door didn't want to let me in; but I told him you'd be angry if I wasn't allowed to wait for you, for I didn't know where to go, and I was so tired! So at last I ran past him and up-stairs, because he said if I waited anywhere, I must wait up here. And then I was so tired I went to sleep. I knew it would be all right when you came home. And, oh, dear Mr. Hervey, I am so hungry."

What could I say to the child? The unconventionality of her proceedings never for a moment struck her, and I could not see my way to making her appreciate it.

Wray stood a little way behind us while Lilith talked to me thus. His glittering, gray eyes never for one moment left the girl's face; but she seemed to ignore him altogether until, becoming swiftly conscious of his presence, she made a swift dart at his sketch-book and began to eagerly study her own picture.

"You have done it nicely," she exclaimed, "though I thought I was prettier than that. Have you been doing one, too, Mr. Hervey? Do let me see! Oh, that is rather smudgy, isn't it? But, then, I don't understand pictures. I like being painted though. It's so interesting to see how one comes out. My! I wish I could paint.—And isn't this a lovely big room! These polished boards with rugs over them are much nicer than stuffy carpets. And so beautiful for dancing on too. I'd like to dance on them now only I'm that hungry you can't think! I've had nothing to eat since breakfast at eight; and though I've often been as long as that and longer without food, the railway journey and being a bit tired make me worse."

She resumed her seat in the great armchair, curling herself up as before. Clearly, she had come to stay, and I rang for Wrenshaw to help me in this emergency.

When the old soldier appeared in answer to my summons, I ignored the mute protest of his face and appealed to his softer side.

"Wrenshaw," I said, "this is Miss Lilith Saxon, a very young friend of mine and an orphan. Her father was buried this morning, and, having no friends in the world but myself, she has come to ask my advice, and I in turn, appeal to you. You know this neighborhood; do you know of any kind, respectable, motherly soul, who will take Miss Saxon in for the night and make her thoroughly comfortable until I can find a school for her to go to tomorrow or the next day?"

Wrenshaw was mollified by being appealed to thus. He was a man of some common sense, apart from his crotchets, and he stroked his chin reflectively the while he scanned Lilith with a critical eye.

"Mrs. Philips, in Jersey Street, is used to children," he began.

"But I'm not a child," put in Lilith, interrupting him. "I'm sixteen, nearly."

"Is she really as much as that?" Wray asked me in an aside. "She looks about twelve."

"Or there's my married sister over at Battersea," Wrenshaw continued, ignoring the interruption. "She'd do anything in her power to oblige you, sir, and she has, I know, a bedroom to let in her house. So that if Miss Saxon will come with me——"

(To be continued.)

Main Thing.

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