

# ELSIE'S BIRTHDAY GIFT.

A STORY OF WOMAN'S DEVOTION.

"It is Elsie's birthday, Mary; had you forgotten?"

Mrs. Langton looked up from her plate, with tender, sorrowful eyes.

"No, dear Elsie, how could I forget! But I have no present for her; it is so long since I have been out of the house."

She said this not murmuringly, though Mrs. Langton's life had been one of long suffering, and the summer, with its flowers and fruits, had left her as it had found her, a patient invalid. But Elsie, with her sweet, girlish laughter, and sunny eyes, made summer everywhere, and gave Mrs. Langton, through the keenness of her sympathy, a portion of her own pleasure.

Mr. Langton took a small morocco case out of his pocket, and showed it to his wife. "My gift is to be a locket," he said.

"Elsie was admiring Cecilia Maberly's the other day, and it gave me the idea of getting her one as much like it as possible. Look, my dear; for a novice in such things, the imitation is not bad. I sketched the design myself, and Benson has carried it out very skillfully." Mrs. Langton took it in her hand, and examined it with approving interest; but though a faint smile hovered across her lips, when she gave it back, a tear glistened among the pearls.

"Well, Mary, you say nothing. Have I chosen badly?"

"No, indeed, Walter; it could not be prettier."

"Then, why do you look so sad, my love?"

Before Mrs. Langton could have answered, even if she had intended to do so, the door opened quickly, and Elsie, her cheeks reddened with exercise, her eyes glowing, darted in, and came smiling to her mother's side.

"Dear mamma, why did you get up so early? You will be so tired before the night comes!"

"I wanted to give you a pleasant surprise on your birthday."

"Then it was decidedly wrong," answered Elsie, with a pretty pout; and then softly, as she kissed her. "You know I should love to have you, if it were right, darling; but you will feel so weary all day."

"Then I can lie down."

Mr. Langton called Elsie's attention to the locket at this juncture, and so her remonstrances terminated suddenly.

"I have nothing for you," his wife said; "but papa's present must do for both."

"Oh, mamma, as if I wanted anything beyond the feeling that you both loved me!"

And then, seeing that Mr. Langton looked a little disappointed, she flung herself into his arms, and thanked him brightly and gaily for his thoughtful present, and declared she had never seen such a pretty locket in all her life.

"And you really admire it, Elsie?"

"Why, you know, papa, it has been my secret ambition to have one like Cecilia Maberly's."

"If your ambition had been secret how could I have known it?" he asked with indulgent irony.

"Only that I never said so."

"Not exactly in words; but my little Elsie is a very transparent person, and makes her moderate desires quite clear without putting them into phrases."

"Am I too transparent, papa?"

"Not for your present circumstances, assuredly."

"For what circumstances, then?"

"Supposing you were alone in the world, you would need more caution."

"But I never shall be," said the girl, with a light shudder. "I shall always have you and mamma to take care of me."

"Always! Ah! so it is with those who have not known the sorrow of a great loss. The wolf may enter every other fold; but he dare not invade theirs, because it is theirs. Others are deprived of parents and friends, but their blind security never fails them until the destroyer comes into their midst, and takes out of their very arms the beloved one, whom they would have shed their blood gladly to save."

Mrs. Langton opened her lips to reprove Elsie for her unreasoning confidence, and then closed them as suddenly. After all, it might be as well to let the girl hope whilst she could. There was a minute's silence, and then Mr. Langton said gaily enough, although with effort, "You will wear my gift to-night, Elsie?"

"To-night, yes, papa. But why?"

"You are going to spend the evening at Mrs. Maberly's, are you not?"

"I have refused, papa. I thought I would not leave mamma, as she is not strong."

Mrs. Langton looked at her with very loving eyes.

"You are a good girl, Elsie, but I can't have you shut yourself up in this way, and on your birthday, too. At eighteen I liked gaiety myself."

"I shall be quite happy at home, mamma. I sent Cecilia word last night that I should not be able to come."

"And I shall send her word this morning that I have no intention of accepting your sacrifice, Elsie. It is paying your papa a poor compliment to suppose that he cannot entertain me."

"Oh! but I didn't mean that."

"Of course you didn't, Elsie. The principle of your whole life has been self-abnegation, and now it has become a habit that really requires checking. You will go to-night to please me; and if I should be taken worse, or anything, I will send for you."

This promise settled the question. In her heart Elsie had longed to go, for her old play-fellow, Lawrence Maberly, had just returned from India, and it would be pleasant to see him again. He had gone away a lad; he would come back a man, to find little Elsie a tall, beautiful girl of eighteen—a noble woman, instead of a sweet child.

from her, and busy herself with the simple details of her toilette for the evening.

Elsie was not a coquette—no true-hearted woman ever was—and yet she lingered awhile, in front of the mirror, holding the splendid masses of her sunny hair in both hands, and wondering how she should wear it to-night. Whilst she still hesitated, Mrs. Langton came in. Elsie dropped the rich tresses, and stepped to hide her quick blush of shame. But Mrs. Langton was a young woman still, kindly and sympathetic besides, and it would not have struck her to reprove her daughter for a little natural vanity.

Married at sixteen, Mrs. Langton had been a mother when she was still almost a child. Elsie was her first born, but year after year other children were given her, who scarcely opened their eyes in this cold world, ere they closed them again, shivering, and Elsie remained the first and only one Mrs. Langton had to love. Her heart was sorely tried by these repeated losses, and yet she never repined; and her perfect faith and resignation were very sweet memories to Elsie in the long future years.

"You must be quick, my love," Mrs. Langton said; "the Maberlys dine at five, and it is already half-past four."

Elsie imprisoned the loose masses of her hair once more, and began to twist and turn them in her deft fingers, until they formed a shining coronet over her low, white brow. A simple white dress, with a blue ribbon at the waist, the locket round her slender neck, and Elsie's toilet was complete. But there was a flush on her cheek, and a light in her eyes which made her sweet loveliness as brilliant as could be desired, and Mrs. Langton gazed at her with as much pride as affection.

Coming out of the gloom of twilight into the sudden light of many candles, Elsie's dazzled glance took in but vaguely the outline of a few confused figures in Mrs. Maberly's drawing room. Cecilia's kiss was the first reality, followed by one a trifle less cordial only from Mrs. Maberly. Then the doctor held out his hand, and began some jesting reference to his son being a perfect stranger, going through the ceremony of introduction in due form.

Elsie glanced up shyly then under the shadow of her long lashes, and there stood a tall, broad-shouldered, bronzed man, bearded like a pard, with smiling blue eyes, and lips as soft and sensitive as a woman's though half hidden by a slight blonde moustache. Lawrence had possession of her hand by that time, and held it in a vice.

"And so this is my little playfellow of years back, grown to woman's estate," he said, regarding her with a contemplative expression that showed anything but disapprobation at the change. "You never promised to be so tall, Elsie."

"I don't remember stipulating anything of the kind."

"Not by word of mouth, but you weren't lank of limb and awkward of gait, as girls generally are who mean to make fine women in the end."

Elsie, entering into the humour of the situation, dropped him a demure little courtesy.

"I have every reason to be grateful to you for so considerably leaving the neighbourhood when I was in that transition state you so much condemn. I feel that I owe your good opinion entirely to this fortunate fact."

"Not at all," he answered, laughing. "I never allowed myself to suppose that my absence was anything but a loss."

"While you two are sparring, the dinner is getting cold," said Dr. Maberly, offering his arm to Elsie; "and my wife tells me that we are to have a little dance to-night in honour of your eighteen years."

"You are very good."

"I mustn't take the credit of it, my dear. The proposition was Cecilia's entirely."

"It was very kind of Cecilia, then."

"She thought of her own pleasure as well as yours, I'll be bound."

"And mine, father, chimed in Lawrence's deep, musical voice; "it is so long since I danced with Elsie."

Then he was just the same as ever. Elsie took in this fact with delighted surprise, and glanced shyly across the table at Lawrence, who was glancing, but not shyly, at her. She cast down her eyes, and coloured; he stroked his blonde beard, and smiled. If he had had any tears on her account, they were gone now. Little Elsie was big Elsie, but in all other ways she was unchanged. There was the same uncompro-mising love of truth, the same modest grace of manner, the same demure smile. Only that when he remembered how he had once fondled her, Lawrence was warned by a true instinct that if he attempted anything of the kind at present he would soon find, to his cost, that she was a different Elsie altogether.

Casterton was not a fashionable town, by any means. The young people dropped in after an early tea, or what was considered a very late dinner, and the business of the evening commenced at once. Elsie, with an abiding flush on her face, looked so beautiful, that the village beaux flocked round her, and were inclined to be irate when they found that Lawrence Maberly had secured so many dances for himself. It was hardly fair of him to make profit out of his advantages as a travelled man. As for his beard—But here words failed Lawrence's detractors. It was hard, of course, when they had been brought up to consider it a virtue to be clean shaven, that Lawrence who had no such respectable prejudice, should carry the day, and turn all the women's heads. For so it was, there was no disguising the fact; Lawrence was pronounced irresistible, and the girls forgot to envy Elsie, in admiring him.

But Lawrence had no eyes or ears for anyone but Elsie. He carried her off to the conservatory ostensibly to show her a beautiful white camellia in full bloom; really because he wanted her all to himself, and felt an odd kind of jealousy of her other admirers.

"Elsie," he said softly, "do you remember what I used to call you in times gone by?"

Elsie's heart began to beat very fast, but she tried to answer carelessly.

"How should I know? I had so many names."

"Had you? I can only think of one—"

His eyes were on her, those deep, searching blue eyes, which, in their eagerness, had

forgotten to smile, and Elsie, trembling, turned away her head.

"It is so long ago, now," she faltered.

"Only six years, Elsie. How fond you used to be of violets," he added presently.

"Have you kept your old fancy?"

"I love all flowers."

"If I pick you one of these camellias, will you honour me by wearing it?"

"I think not."

"Tell me why."

His voice was tender and persuasive, and thrilled Elsie through and through. But she said to herself, with passionate emphasis, "He is a man of the world, and seeing you so simple, he means to fool you to the top of his bent. Have a care."

"It would be cruel to pluck it," she answered, turning coldly away; and, besides, I should hardly dare to face Cecilia—"

"I will take all the responsibility," he interrupted, eagerly.

"She would blame me all the same."

"May I ask her, then?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Maberly; it is not worth while."

"You called me Lawrence just now," he said, in a reproachful tone.

"Did I? Then I beg your pardon."

"You need not—it was a true pleasure to hear my name from your lips."

"I am afraid you are very easily pleased."

"Elsie!"

"Mr. Maberly!"

"Have I done anything to offend you?"

"No; why do you ask?"

"Because a minute ago you seemed to regard me as a friend, and now, suddenly, you treat me as a stranger."

His voice was so plaintive, that Elsie began to relent.

"I don't feel at all as if you were a stranger," she answered with one of her frank, sweet smiles, and she held out her hand. He seized it so vehemently that she repented of the concession, and withdrew it at once.

"I ought to go back. I have promised this dance to Stephen Lane."

"You see, you call him by his Christian name."

"True. I have known him ever since I was a mere child."

"And me?"

"Well," answered Elsie, mischievously, "you have destroyed your identity with that beard, and I feel as if I had to make your acquaintance anew."

"I will cut it off," said Lawrence giving it a fierce, disdainful tug.

"Oh, no!" was Elsie's quick response, rather ruefully uttered, for she was not indifferent to the fact that it became him well. "Only give me time to recognize you in your new character."

"I would rather you remembered me in my old."

"Here comes Stephen. I must really go," Elsie said, blushing divinely; and, gathering her skirts together in her dainty hand, she swept out without raising her shy eyes to Lawrence's face.

Lawrence stood there in gloomy thought, with the soft, faint perfume of the camellia giving him an odd sense of pain and yearning impossible to describe. And then he stole out of his retreat, back into the room where the dancers were whirling round to the music of a gay waltz. Elsie passed him once; but it struck him, somehow, that, although she danced with spirit, there was a shadow on her face. At this minute he felt a hand on his arm.

"You have quite forgotten me, I perceive," said a voice he recognized as belonging to a maiden lady, whose sharp tongue and cruel gossip had made her for years as much disliked as feared. "It seems the fashion to-night to think of no one but Elsie Langton."

"I beg your pardon," said Lawrence, holding out his hand with a certain inward repugnance; "it must be a question of feeling with new-comers who know nothing of the fashions."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Miss Merridew disdainfully. "I don't see any beauty in the girl myself."

"According to your own account, Miss Merridew, you are singular in this opinion."

"I didn't say that people thought her handsome. She fancies so herself, that is clear."

"I can't see any sign of it."

"Look how she flirts with that Stephen Lane. He has been dangling after her, to my certain knowledge, for more than a year but she won't give him a plain answer because she is in hopes of something better turning up in the meantime."

"Are you quite sure you are not judging Miss Langton by yourself?" said Lawrence, with cold scorn.

"I can answer for one thing," she replied, with deliberate spite; "that never in my giddiest days, could I have danced whilst my mother was dying."

She dared not ask how her mother was, or put into words the terrible fear that was at her heart. She went swiftly and silently down the quiet street, pushed open her own door, and entered. She glanced into the dining-room, but finding it empty and dark, rushed upstairs. There was a light in her mother's chamber, and even on the landing she could hear Dr. Maberly's kind, cheery voice, speaking some words of comfort to the invalid.

"Here she is," he said, and drew back to let Elsie pass.

Mrs. Langton looked up into her daughter's face with very wistful eyes, and there was a gray shadow over her face, which even Elsie, inexperienced as she was, felt must besoken death.

"Elsie," said her mother, solemnly, "I know you have a tender heart and a noble nature, and therefore I make you this birthday gift."

She drew down the covers, and showed Elsie a tiny face on her bosom.

"Elsie, I give this child to you. Promise me that you will guard her faithfully until your life's end."

"Mother, I will!"

"Then I am contented to die."

She called Mr. Langton to her side, and with a glance from one to the other, eloquent of love and faith, she gently expired. Elsie fell forward senseless, and for hours she was unconscious, not only of sorrow, but even of existence. The gray dawn was breaking coldly, and the little birds were twittering in a dreamy fashion under the eaves, when Elsie at last opened her eyes.

She had a sense of infinite languor and weariness, a kind of dull pain at her heart, but at first she could realize nothing. It was only when she saw her father and the nurse bending anxiously above her, and missed one who should have been there, she began to understand her great loss, and to feel that the place which was vacant to-day would be vacant for ever. Elsie turned her face to the wall, and wept convulsively. The old woman tried to soothe her, but Mr. Langton interposed. "Let her cry, Martha," he said gently; "it will ease her heart. I would give a hundred pounds willingly if I could shed a single tear."

But Martha was wiser still. She stole out of the room, and returned with the baby in her arms, which she laid down softly at Elsie's side. Elsie took the little one into her arms, and hushed her wild sobbing. The tears flowed still, but in a healing shower; and when baby opened her bright eyes, Elsie could even find a smile to sweeten her carress.

Elsie found plenty of affectionate sympathy at this trying period of her life. Mr. Langton rejected anything of the kind, with an impatience and irritability quite foreign to his character. Elsie was young, and could find consolation in her duties; he was old and the sun had set on his life for ever. When Elsie would throw her arms about him, and speak some words of comfort, he would push her gently but determinedly away, and it was noticed by the whole household how he shrank from the mere sight of the little one who had cost him the mother's life.

But Elsie made up for this neglect in true and tender care. Baby was her one absorbing thought; and if another dared to intrude, she banished it as if it were a treason. All this while she had not once seen Lawrence Maberly. Cecilia came every day, and often she spoke of her brother's probable return to India in the course of a couple of months; but Elsie, though she felt herself quiver and flush, would try to speak indifferently of this prospect, as if it did not concern her.

Nor did it now, she thought. It was not for her to dream of marriage, who had a sacred charge to keep. She felt that Lawrence loved her, and in her secret soul she reciprocated his love. But how could she leave the child? And to take her to India, where her little, enfeebled life would soon be poisoned, was a notion that Elsie treated with utter scorn.

Better to sacrifice herself a hundred times over, than try to escape any of the unspoken conditions which had accompanied Mrs. Langton's birthday gift.

Mrs. Langton had been dead nearly two months, when Cecilia Maberly came in one day to ask Elsie to pass the evening with them.

"We shall be quite alone," she urged; and papa says you are looking so sadly, from want of exercise, &c., and that it is really necessary you should come. Besides this, Lawrence leaves in a fortnight now, and he is most anxious to see you before he goes. We are such very old friends, Elsie, that you ought not really to object."

"Dear Cecilia, I wish you wouldn't ask me. I do not like to seem ungrateful, and yet I really could not come."

"Why not?"

This question made Elsie tremble almost convulsively. How could she tell Cecilia that she dreaded to meet Lawrence, without explaining the reason? And, after all, it was just possible that she had misconstrued his intentions, and he might not think of asking her at all; so that she would look very vain in her friend's eyes if she acknowledged that she had alarmed herself unnecessarily.

Consequently she tried to evade a direct answer, but Cecilia would not be denied.

"Papa says it is right, and therefore you must come, whether you like it or no," Cecilia said, finally, as she kissed Elsie, and departed.

"Baby can quite well spare you for one evening; and, after all, it is as much to her interest as yours for you to preserve your health, and unless you take a little relaxation sometimes, I can't see how you are to do that."

"I wish you would excuse me, Cecilia."

"But I won't, you see; so it is no use saying anything more about it."

And so Elsie went. She meant to be very cold, a little haughty, and visibly repellant, so that nothing in her manner might teach Lawrence to hope. Instead of that, when she got to the door, and saw Lawrence standing there awaiting her, his kind, pleasant face in a glow of welcome, she did what many other women would have done in her place—she held out her hand frankly, and burst into tears.

"My dear Elsie," said Lawrence, truly distressed, "you pain me beyond measure."

And then his arm stole round her waist, and drawing her head back against his breast, he said, tenderly, "My darling, you are not taking care of yourself, I can see. You must give me the right to watch over you and your health. I must leave Casterton in a fortnight, but I may return for you in a year, may I not, and claim you for my very own?"

"Oh, Lawrence!"

"Well, my love?"

"You must not speak in this way to me."

"Where is the impediment?" he asked,

with a slight smile, and a tighter measure of his arm on her waist.

"Don't you know that mamma left me a sacred charge?"

"True; but she did not mean that, on this account, you were not to marry, and share this charge with another. I do not ask you to forsake your little sister, but I think you might reconcile your two duties easily."

"Impossible, Lawrence! Baby is so delicate, naturally, that to take her to India would be certain death."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

## The Royal Show at Windsor.

The fiftieth annual show of the Royal Agricultural Society, at Windsor, which closed last Saturday, was the grandest exhibition of agricultural progress ever held in Great Britain. All the circumstances contributed to make it such. It was the jubilee show of the Society of which Her Majesty the Queen is the President and his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales is the Acting President. It was held in the Great Park, at Windsor, almost in the shadow of the grand castle which has long been the chosen home of the British sovereigns. The state apartments were thrown open to the public, and visitors to the show were thus allowed also to inspect the treasures of royalty. The weather was uncommonly favorable, and no incident was wanting for the triumphant success of the show. The show-yard comprised about one hundred and twenty-five acres inclosed in a fence. The avenues spread out in fan-shape from the central group of buildings, of which the principal one was the Queen's pavilion. This beautiful edifice had a frontage of sixty-four feet, and a depth of fifty-four feet. It was in the late Tudor style of architecture; the interior decorations were rich and appropriate, and the whole was a centre of attraction. The entrance to the show-yard and all the structures on the grounds were in excellent good taste. The shedding for live stock, implements, machinery and other purposes, measured 50,079 lineal feet, and as most of it was furnished with a double front, there were nearly twenty miles of frontage.

The show of stock and implements was fully worthy of the occasion. Of stock the number of entries was as follows: Horses, 972; asses, 17; cattle, 1,637; sheep, 1,069; goats, 37; pigs, 265; poultry, 862. As nearly every one of the entries included several animals, the total number was over 15,000. In some of the classes the show was the largest and finest ever seen in England. This was notably true of many classes of cattle.

But the great improvements which mark the last fifty years were most emphatically shown in the departments of implements and machinery. It is mechanical invention, rather than the improvements of herds and flocks that has advanced British agriculture so greatly the half century, and of this fact the Royal show was in every way a worthy exposition. In extent and variety the display was truly bewildering. Machinery and implements, from the ponderous road engines, steam-plows, threshers, grinding-mills, hay and straw-presses, and other steam-driven devices; plows, harrows, reapers and other machines operated by horses, to the most delicate appliances for the dairy, were in full force. Among them were many of American origin, especially chilled plows, reapers, mowers and grain-drills. The greatest novelty was the Srawsonizer, which it virtually an improved broadcast distributor by pneumatic power. It distributes either solids in the form of fine dust, or liquids in a minute spray or mist. It is used for spreading artificial fertilizers or insecticides in liquid or solid form, upon fruit trees, shrubs or vegetables, disinfectants in solution, etc. It was shown in various sizes for horse or hand-power.

Of farm and dairy produce there were 4, 203 entries, embracing products of the field, the dairy, the orchard, and the apiary. In hives and honey there were 276 entries in 22 classes. A notable feature of the show was the model dairy in which lectures and demonstrations of butter and cheese-making, apiary management, etc., were given from time to time during the week. There were also competitive exhibitions of horse-shoeing.

Of agricultural, vegetable and flower-seeds, there was an imposing show. The beautiful decorations of the grounds around the Queen's pavilion were furnished gratuitously by one firm of seedsmen, and all showed commendable enterprise not only in the tasteful manner in which they displayed their seeds, but also by attractive shows of fully-grown, fresh vegetables, mounted specimens of dried grasses and forage-plants, and other features which gave this department high value as a popular educator. The show was in every way a marvelous success.

Among the thousands of spectators were a few veterans who could remember the first show. It was held at Oxford in 1839, the year before the royal charter was obtained; it was then known as the English Agricultural Society; £800 were offered for competition, and 251 head of stock were exhibited, with 54 articles of husbandry, displayed on 32 stands. A banquet was served in the quadrangle of Worcester College, at which Daniel Webster, the Minister from the United States, was one of the orators. The royal charter incorporating the Society under its present name was obtained in 1840. The contrast between the diminutive dimensions of that first show and the magnitude of the Jubilee Show just closed, was a most impressive indication of the agricultural progress which has marked the reign of our present gracious sovereign. The numerous Americans who have been enthusiastic over the great show, are struck with admiration when they reflect that it is an exhibit of the "depressed agriculturists" of a nation with so limited an area. It is doubtless true that our methods of farming are more cumbersome than yours in America, but where do you grow better crops than we have in good old England? And with all due regard for American genius, it will be many a year before the United States will have an exhibit to equal this fiftieth Royal Show.

The marriage of a royal prince or princess to a subject is not such an uncommon event in English history as many people imagine. From the time of William the Conqueror, whose daughter was wedded to Stephen, Count of Blois, down to the middle of the last century, such alliances were by no means unusual. No fewer than six of Edward III's children married subjects, the Black Prince being the first. Two brothers of George III. did the same, and numerous other instances could be mentioned. As our readers are aware, however, the members of her Majesty's family have hitherto, with one exception, gone abroad for husbands and wives.