"AND THE HELIOTROPES WERE FADED."

BY SALLIE M. BRYAN.

And the heliotropes were faded,
And the wild dove's song was still,
And the wind and haze were braided
With the dark around the hill,
And the moon looked white and chilly,
Like the ghost of some sea-lily
Gone to drift about the sky,
Larged with immortality!

But, I thought of young moss-roses,
With their green spray 'round their breasts,
Sitting in its shadowy closes
Just like red birds in their nests:
But, I thought of stars that quivered
(Where the cliffs were silver-rivered)
Like great drops of golden wine
Scattered down from the divine.

But, I thought of mist-blooms dropping
In some lonesome, purple lake;
But, I thought of white swans stopping
There, to listen, half-awake,
To the low, sweet, whisperous wailing
Of the water-music, sailing,
With the blue flags o'er its breast,
Toward the shore in search of rest.

But, I thought of painted summers,
Flying thro' the Indian woods;
Of delicious, spicy murmurs,
Swimming, airy, amber floods;
But, I thought of angel-kisses,
Full of white, eternal blisses,
Waiting past the night for me—
But, I thought of thee—*of thee.*

THE STEPMOTHER;

OR,

WHO'S TO WIN.

BY J. F. SMITH,

AUTHOR OF "RICHARD HOFFMAN," "STANFIELD HALL," "MINNIEGREY," ETC. ETC. ETC.

CHAPTER XXI.

Why, I can smile, and murder while I smile,
And cry content to that which grieves my heart;
And wet my cheek with artificial tears. SHAKSPEARE.

Sir Barnard Gaston was one of those men who are never more dangerous than when defeated in their projects. A very few moments' mental reflection convinced him that opposition and anger alike were useless; the irrevocable knot was tied—his daughter, Countess Cheverly. He could neither dissolve the marriage, nor justify the plea of her insanity. Penswick must be given up, and he resolved to resign it with grace.

Had his favorite Laura made such a brilliant match, the satisfaction of the baronet would have been great and unfeigned; but Maude! the hitherto neglected Maude! it was a sad trial to his patience; wormwood and honey were equally mingled in the draught which prudence advised him to swallow.

After all, the affair might have proved much worse. The family name was not dishonored by the alliance; his son-in-law descended from a stock as old as his own; was a peer, and, moreover, a minister; his influence in the Cabinet might gratify the long-cherished ambition of his heart—the dormant barony of Tranmore.

Smoothing his ruffled countenance, he advanced towards the bride and gravely saluted her by pressing his lips to her cheek.

"Let this kiss be the seal of oblivion for the past," he said; "perhaps we have mutually misjudged each other."

Lady Cheverly was so completely surprised and overcome by his unexpected kindness, that she could only answer him by her tears.

"Had you honored me, my lord," continued her father, addressing the earl, "by expressing a wish to be allied to my family, this unseemly precipitation would have been unnecessary. Pardon the word unseemly," he added, with an effort, "I have not forgotton that I am a parent, and accept my congratulations."

"And forgiveness," exclaimed Maude, timidly taking his hand. "Only say that you forgive me."

"Freely," said Sir Barnard, "freely."

Lord Cheverly was not the man to leave even the shadow of an imputation upon his conduct unanswered.

"Retire with Lady Florence, my love," he said, addressing his bride; "a few minutes' conversation will enable us to understand each other. Fear not," he added, in a whisper; "nothing shall tempt me to forget that he is your father."

"Sir Barnard Gaston," continued the speaker, as soon as his wife and Lady Herbert had quitted the room, "in our position there is nothing like frankness. Those who know me best will tell you that it has been my rule of conduct through life, and most certainly I shall not swerve from it on an occasion like the present.

"At the residence of my sister I became acquainted with Miss Gaston, was struck by the graces of her person, and still more so by those of her mind. An accident—which, probably, you are unacquainted with—rendered it, if not dangerous, at least unadvisable, that she should leave the Manor House. This gave me an opportunity of studying her character; and what at first was admiration merely, soon became love. I proposed, and was accepted."

"So far, my lord, your conduct was unexceptionable, and I have nothing to complain of," observed the baronet, uneasily, for he guessed the nature of his justification about to follow.

"Political events," said the peer, "rendered my presence in London necessary, and it was arranged between Maude and myself that all communication with her family upon the subject of our attachment should be postponed till my return to the country. Judge of my astonishment when, a very few days afterwards, Lady Florence and her husband arrived in town, accompanied by your daughter, whom they had rescued from The Grange, where her relative, Miss Mendal, kept her a close prisoner in a strongly-barred, grated chamber, with no other attendance than the keeper of a mad-house."

"Infamous!" ejaculated Sir Barnard, with well-affected surprise and indignation.

"Rescued her," added Lord Cheverly, "at the very moment the lady and her accomplices were in the act of drugging her."

"Impossible!"

"Miss Mendal pleaded that she acted upon your authority," observed his lordship, gravely. "There were two ways of protecting Maude from further outrage—an application to the Chancellor, which must have caused a painful publicity and scandal, or making her my wife. Such were my reasons for the unseemly haste you complain of."

"Say, rather, the justification," said the baronet; "I recall the word. Miss Mendal has abused—most infamously abused—my confidence. Family disagreements rendered it advisable my eldest child should quit Moultree till after the marriage of her sister, and I selected The Grange as a fitting residence. That your lordship may judge how cruelly I have been deceived by its mistress, her falsehood and treachery, read this communication, in which she announces what she is pleased to term my daughter's disgraceful flight, and speaks of you as a scheming adventurer."

Lord Cheverly glanced over the letter, which admirably served the purpose of the speaker, by enabling him to represent his own conduct in a less odious light.

"As for Penswick," he observed——

"I have nothing to do with Penswick," interrupted the peer. "What rights my marriage may give me I know not; but my solicitors have already received instructions to draw up a settlement, which leaves Lady Cheverly sole mistress of her fortune."

"Nothing can be more fair and honorable," observed his father-in-law, extending his hand. "Has the marriage been announced?"

"Not yet."

"I will see to that, my lord," said the baronet.

Sir Barnard Gaston wrote the notices himself, which were duly inserted in the morning paper:—

"MARRIAGE IN HIGH LIFE.—On Thursday last, at the residence of Sir Clifford Herbert, the Right Honorable the Earl of Cheverly, his Majesty's Secretary of State for ——, to Maude, eldest daughter of Sir Barnard Gaston, of Moultree Park. In consequence of the critical state of public affairs, which prevent his lordship from leaving London, the ceremony was strictly private. The father of the bride and a select family circle alone were present.

"The Bishop of Bristol, formerly tutor to the noble earl, performed the ceremony."

"Very clever, very clever indeed," observed Lady Florence, laughingly, when she read it. "You must contrive to get Sir Barnard into the ministry. He has a natural talent for diplomatic affairs."

Maude sighed. She was a great lover of truthfulness.

"*Mais cet un bonheur insolent!*" exclaimed Lady Alicia Gaston, as she read the letter from her husband—which announced the marriage of her step-daughter—at the breakfast-table.

"May I ask whose happiness has so provoked you?" inquired her son, assisting himself, at the same time, to the second wing of a pheasant.

"Hers! that girl's!" faltered her ladyship, pale with rage and mortification. "What will Laura say? She will go distracted at such a triumph over her."

RANSACKING THE CABINET.

"You are speaking in hieroglyphics, mamma."

"Read! read! Married to Lord Cheverly—the best match in England! Maude—the artful creature!" said the evil-minded woman, tossing the letter to him across the table.

"Humph! Lucky hit! A peer and a minister, too! I shall get my majority easily."

"Not if Maude can prevent it," observed her mother, bitterly; "you don't know her as well as I do—she has never forgotten the——"

Conscience arrested the allusion to the death of Albert upon her lips.

"Never forgotten what?" demanded the captain, surprised at her hesitation.

"The mortification her vanity suffered in not being presented at the same time as her sister," answered Lady Gaston.

"And why was she not presented?"

As her ladyship could give no reason for the slight which her influence over her husband had provoked, she muttered the word "Ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous or not," replied her son, "you must present her now."

"Never!"

"What will the world say?"

"I do not care."

"You must assign some reason."

"Never!" repeated Lady Alicia, still more emphatically. "I detest her!"

"Very natural, but very impolitic to confess it, unless *en famille*," observed the gentleman. "But I suppose you are thinking of precedence, and all that sort of thing, which you women attach so much importance to. For my part," he continued, "I am glad of the marriage."

"Glad!"

"Yes; being a clandestine one, her father will be justified in refusing to give her any fortune."

"She will not require it," muttered her ladyship.

"True; Cheverly is rich—eighty thousand a year."

"And Penswick."

"Penswick!" repeated Egbert, for the first time showing something like animation. "You don't mean that Penswick descends to Maude?"

"Absolutely! In fact, it is hers already; and, what is worse, she has the power of disposing of it by will as she pleases."

"Sir Barnard will be furious!" exclaimed the captain. "I wish she had married Edward," he added, musingly; "something might have been done to——"

"She never cared for her cousin," observed her ladyship.

"Persuade me I am blind," said her son; "you might as easily do so, as convince me that Maude and Edward did not love each other. I have watched them a hundred times at least in the park together. They used to meet every day—at—at the Four Willows," he added, with an effort to pronounce the name of a spot to which such terrible memories were attached.

"And yet she denied it!"

"The meeting?"

"No; being in love with her cousin."

"Pooh!" exclaimed the captain, laughingly. "Girls, when in love, will deny anything."

Lady Alicia leant her head upon her hand, and for several minutes appeared buried in reflection. Gradually, a cold smile overspread her once handsome features.

"Come with me, Egbert," she said, rising, suddenly from her seat. "I may require your assistance."

The gentleman rose and followed her, not to her own boudoir, as he expected, but to the room lately occupied by her step-daughter. The eyes of the evil-minded woman glanced rapidly round the chamber till they rested upon a small, old-fashioned oak cabinet in which Maude had been in the habit of keeping a few trinkets and relics.

"Are you strong?" she inquired.

"For anything you may require," replied the gentleman, who began to surmise her project.

"Lock the door."

He did as she directed him.

"And now break open the cabinet," said her ladyship. "I do not think Lady Cheverly,'" there was a sneer upon her lips as she pronounced the name, "has taken her letters with her."

A very few efforts sufficed to force the lock of the repository; drawer after drawer was ransacked. In one were a few toys, which Lady Gaston recognized as playthings of Albert.

"They are not there," she exclaimed, hastily closing it.

The next one contained the prize she sought—a packet of Edward's letters tied together with a piece of black ribbon.

"The hypocrite!" she ejaculated, after eagerly taking possession of them.

"I cannot see the value of them," observed her son, as they descended to the breakfast-room. "What will you do with them?"

"Crush her!" replied his mother, vindictively; "destroy her domestic happiness; hold them as a terror over her."

"Ah! yes," muttered Egbert Gaston. "I understand how you may make them useful."

On the return of her husband to Moultree, Lady Alicia rejoiced at the prudence she had shown in causing all trace of violence to the cabinet to be removed; for the first act of the baronet was to seal it, order it to be packed, and carefully forwarded to Maude in London.

It was the only request she had made to him.

"Too late!" thought her ladyship, "too late! for once, at least, I have defeated her!"

And, in the evilness of her disposition, she rejoiced in the idea of having, as she supposed, the happiness and domestic peace of her step-daughter in her power.

"It might have been worse, much worse," observed the baronet, when speaking of the marriage; "the headstrong girl has made an alliance the proudest family in the country might envy. Lord Cheverly can materially assist my claims to the long-dormant peerage."

His wife shrugged her shoulders disdainfully; she cared but little for any accession of rank. It was the loss of Penswick she regretted.

"As for the estate," continued the speaker, "it is a misfortune, I confess; but, at one period or the other, it must have passed from my hands. Maude and her husband have both acted well, considering circumstances. No question as to the accumulations of her minority, or since she came of age."

"And you are satisfied with this?" exclaimed the artful woman, contemptuously.

"Satisfied is one thing," replied Sir Barnard Gaston, "accepting is another. Had there been a probability—nay, even a possibility—of success, I would have disputed her claims."

"It is not too late now," observed Lady Alicia.

"And so make an enemy of the Earl and my daughter for life!" ejaculated her husband. "No, Alicia, passion must not blind me."

"This peerage blinds you," answered the lady, tartly. "Fifty witnesses at least could have proved her eccentricity of conduct."

"But not her madness. You hate her."

"I have little cause to love her," observed his wife.

"You must affect to do so," said the baronet. "This yielding to feeling is weak, and unworthy of you. Is it any reason that, because the great prize has escaped us, we should not share the advantages this alliance gives us?"

"Advantages? I cannot see them."

"Because anger and woman's vanity blind you," said Sir Barnard. "You have been for years accustomed to look upon your step-daughter as an insignificant girl, whose good or ill opinion could not affect your position."

"Neither can it now," ejaculated Lady Alicia, angrily.

"You mistake. Lady Cheverly, the wife of the popular minister, is a very different personage from Maude Gaston. Her influence in society will be immense—as many intrigues set on foot to obtain admission to her assembly, as to obtain the *entrée* to the drawing-room: nay, more, for the last is a right—the former a favor. Suppose that you and Laura found yourself excluded?"

"Well," said her ladyship, in a tone somewhat less confident, "suppose it, I do not see the very great misfortune."

"Only that you both descend a step in the social scale, because, if not quite second-class, mere hangers-on upon the first."

"The remark might apply possibly to your wife," exclaimed the haughty woman, passionately, "but not to the daughter of Lord Raymond."

"Ridiculous!" ejaculated her husband. "I positively blush for you. Lord Raymond, a pennyless peer, a man without influence, a nonentity in the political, unheard of in the fashionable world, respectable only for his character and descent. I have no wish to speak unpleasant things, but you force me."

"It needed great violence," observed Lady Alicia, bitterly.

The knitting of the brow and stern compression of the nether lip proved that the patience of the baronet was nearly exhausted, and, in his evil mood, even his wife had learnt to fear him.

"I am a fool to reason with you," he exclaimed; "women listen only to their passions: as your husband, I command you to show every attention to Lady Cheverly. It is necessary, for my views, that you should be on friendly terms with her; you consider it a mortification, no doubt perhaps—it is so—I regard it as an *atonement*. Had Albert lived, I should not have been cursed with an heir I am ashamed of—a son who has disgraced me."

At this terrible reproof the conscience-stricken woman became deadly pale, and trembled, not so much, perhaps, at the recollection of the past, as fears for the present. For some time she had suspected the existence of some secret between Egbert and his father. She was far from divining its nature, but the abject conduct of her son, his looks of terror in the presence of Sir Barnard, assured her that it was a terrible one.

"I shall do my best to obey you," she murmured, faintly; "but I cannot answer for Laura."

"Her vanity will answer for her," replied Sir Barnard Gaston, with a sneer. "Lady Musgrave will submit to any mortification rather than continue on terms of hostility with her sister. We must be in town for the first drawing-room. In eight days we leave Moultree for London."

"Do Egbert and his wife accompany us?" inquired his wife, anxiously.

The response was a dry negative; and her husband quitted the room, leaving Lady Alicia in anything but an enviable state of mind. Her maternal instincts had taken alarm—she trembled for her son; never before had his father spoken of him in terms of withering contempt. Something more than the knowledge of his debts must have occurred to provoke such feelings. The allusion to Albert alarmed her; never since his death had he named to her his first-born.

Restless—uneasy—not knowing what to fear—she quitted her dressing-room, determined to come to an explanation with the captain.

"I really have nothing to confess to you," replied the coxcomb, coloring deeply. "My father is aware of my difficulties, and naturally got angry."

"He never spoke of you in such terms before," observed his mother; "deal candidly with me."

"Am I not candid?"

"No! I can read falsehood in your eye, which shifts from my gaze—on the words of your denial. Egbert, they are not frank and open!"

"This great match of Maude's has turned his brain, I suppose. Sir Barnard was always crotchety and fond of indulging in strong expletives. He has never forgiven me—or, rather, my wife—for not presenting him with a grandson."

"Were it only that!"

"What else should it be?"

"Something understood, perhaps, but never expressed between you," replied his mother, fixing her eyes searchingly upon him. "I cannot understand why you are to remain at Moultree—the sudden change in your conduct towards your wife—her irritation and petulance—your submission. You had better make a confident of your mother," she added; "her counsels may prove useful."

"No doubt," replied the captain, forcing a laugh; "but, as they can't pay my debts, I don't see the necessity. You are to be in London for the first drawing-room, I hear," he added, anxious to change the subject.

"Yes, to present your sister."

"And Lady Cheverly?"

"If your father insists upon it."

"He will insist upon it," said Egbert, seriously, "and what you must do it will be advisable to do graciously. This craving for a peerage is a perfect mania with him."

"*The* peerage you mean. Sir Barnard would not accept any other title than that of Tranmore."

"Are you certain?"

"I have heard him declare so a hundred times at least. Shortly after the trial the choice, I believe, was offered to him."

"He has changed his mind, then, since," observed Captain Gaston, musingly; "for Stafford writes me word he has been offering his support, and that of Sir William Musgrave, to ministers, provided they consent to create him Baron Moultree. There must be a hitch somewhere, for they refused him. But that was before Maude's marriage. I should like to find out the motive."

"If you are wise you will not interfere," answered his mother, thoughtfully. "There is a secret in your father's life which even I have never penetrated."

"No reason why I should not," exclaimed her son. "I should then be——"

"What?" demanded her ladyship, perceiving his hesitation.

"*Even with him!*" muttered Captain Gaston, as he quitted the room.

A few days afterwards Lady Alicia and her husband started for London.

CHAPTER XXII.

Courts can give nothing to the wise and good
But scorn of pomp, and love of solitude. YOUNG.

As a peeress in her own right, the Dowager Lady Cheverly bore the title of Lady Wensley and Cheverly, which was far from being her only claim to distinction, for in early life she had been one of those leaders in the fashionable world whose notice confers success, courted and admired by all who knew her for her wit, talents and many virtues, as much as for her brilliant position in society.

On the death of her husband, which occurred whilst she was still young, this gifted woman voluntarily abdicated the species of sovereignty she exercised, and retired to her seat in the country, to the great regret of Queen Charlotte, to whom for many years she filled the distinguished office of mistress of the robes.

Once, and once only, after taking this determination, had Lady Wensley—for so we shall continue to designate her, in order to distinguish her from Maude—appeared at court, to present her daughter upon her marriage with Sir Clifford, on which occasion George III., to mark his respect, shook hands with her, and her majesty, for once, forgot her German coldness and pride, and saluted her upon the cheek.

After such an unusual demonstration of attachment, every one supposed that her ladyship would return to society, even if she declined to accept her former office about the person of the sovereign; but, no, the presentation over, and Lady Herbert once fairly launched in the fashionable world, her mother returned to her beloved retreat, with a firm resolution of never again quitting it.

This resolution she kept despite her son's accession to the ministry.

One event, at last, induced her to break it—his marriage. There were circumstances connected with it which alarmed her; it was, to say the least of it, precipitate and unexpected. There was nothing in the bride's birth or position to object to; the Gastons, in point of family, were unexceptionable. It was the mind and principles of her daughter-in-law that she felt anxious about. To have felt satisfied on these points, she would willingly have abated something in blood and fortune.

"Form no opinion till you have seen my wife," said the earl, in the letter which announced to her his marriage with Maude. "See her, and judge for yourself. I feel certain that you will love her."

"My own dear mamma," wrote Lady Florence, "we want your presence to complete our happiness. Cheverly has married one of the sweetest creatures in the world—so good, so quiet, and thoughtful! Pray, pray come to us!"

It was impossible for a mother—and, above all, a mother like Lady Wensley—to resist two such invitations. She did not even wait to have her own house in London made ready for her, but took up her residence with her daughter.

Poor Maude trembled when she heard of her arrival. The reputation of her mother-in-law for wit and talent alarmed her.

"She will find me terribly deficient," she murmured to her husband, as they drove to the Herberts.

A smile from the earl re-assured her.

"You have nothing to fear," he said.

"They tell me she is so very clever."

"True!"

"And has been so beautiful."

"Her heart was always more beautiful than her face," replied her husband.

"Florence has explained to her our meeting, wooing, and every circumstance attending our marriage. My mother is impatient to see you."

"She will be terribly disappointed," observed Maude—"I am so simple—home-bred and ignorant of the world——"

"The very qualities for which she will love you," interrupted Lord Cheverly. "Be collected," he added, seeing they had arrived; "be just to yourself. Surely there ought to be nothing so very terrible in meeting the mother of the man to whom you have given your heart. If I am proud of you—why doubt yourself?"

On entering the drawing-room at the Herberts, his wife trembled so violently that Lord Cheverly had to support her towards the sofa, where Lady Wensley was seated.

In after-life, Maude frequently declared that she never could remember the commencement of the interview. All she recollected was that a tall, venerable-looking woman, dressed in grey satin, rose to receive her, and, perceiving her extreme agitation, took her by the hand and kissed her.

The first question she heard distinctly was—

"Is the thought of a mother-in-law so very terrible to you?"

There was the music of kindness in the tone in which the words were uttered, and she ventured to look in the face of the speaker.

"Only from the fear of not pleasing you," she answered.

"Goodness will always please me," observed the dowager.

"I am not sure that I am good," replied the bride; "but I wish to be, that I may become worthy of my happiness."

"You are happy, then?" said Lady Wensley, bending on her one of those inquiring glances with which a woman reads the heart of those of her own sex.

"I am the wife of your son," murmured Maude, modestly; "can I be otherwise?"

The feelings of the mother were gratified by the reply.

"I begin to think with Florence, that you deseve him," she said. "You must not think me cold," she continued, "if I profess little—that little is sincere. That you possess both talent and understanding I feel convinced, for a mindless woman would never have won the heart of Cheverly."

There was a gentle tap at the drawing-room door, fellowed by the entrance of Lady Herbert and her daughters.

"I am so happy to see you and mamma together," exclaimed the warm-hearted wife of Sir Clifford; "I am certain you will love one another."

Lady Wensley and her daughter-in-law regarded each other and smiled.

"Cheverly is so happy," continued the speaker; "he has been kissing the girls and me in the boudoir. And now, mamma, my own dear, good mamma," she added, seating herself on an ottoman by the side of the sofa, "I have a very great favor to ask of you; you must remain with us, if only for a week or two."

"Yes, grand-mamma," exclaimed both the girls, throwing their arms around her neck. "You will stay till after the drawing-room, won't you?"

"Cheverly is so anxious," said Lady Florence, "that I should not be surprised if he applied for an order in council to prevent you leaving town."

"It is my intention to remain," answered her mother, quietly.

Maude kissed her hand. The dowager felt pleased with her tact as well as gratitude, for it was on her account alone that she had de-