

The Storyteller.

A WINSOME MAID.

THE bride and bridegroom were driven away, amidst a shower of ice, radiantly happy, and sublimely unconscious of the fact that an ancient white satin slipper nestling snugly upon the top of their carriage announced their blissful condition to the passers-by.

'It's a silly fashion that of throwing an old shoe after the newly married; and it was not fair to send them branded in such a way,' cried one of the wedding-guests, as from the balcony she watched the brougham roll down the street. 'I'm sure they'd be annoyed if they knew.'

'Not they,' replied a middle-aged, handsomely dressed lady with a somewhat haughty manner. 'Annette would be pleased. My niece is proud of her position as a bride.'

The first speaker laughed. Then, glancing along the balcony at the bevy of bridesmaids in their white frocks and wide-brimmed picture hats, she allowed her eyes to rest admiringly upon a tall, graceful girl with soft brown hair and a dazzlingly fair complexion, who stood a little apart from the others.

'I think,' she said, after a pause, 'that Annette had some reason for feeling proud. To have secured the love and affection of Henry Beecham, with such an elder sister as Sheila to compete with, was no small feat.'

'There was no competition. Henry never saw Sheila till after his engagement to Annette; and she would not have looked at him.'

'Probably not. But he might have looked at her, and if ——— However, he didn't, and Annette is happy.'

'Yes; I think she is.'

'And you are to be congratulated on having your pretty, beautiful niece left with you. I quite envy you, having a girl like that to take about. London will rave over her beauty.'

'If London got the chance, perhaps it would. But it doesn't and it won't. To look at her, my dear Mrs Fox, Sheila Burke is winsome and pretty. But if you knew her, you'd find her most obstinate.'

'Indeed! You surprise me. She looks most sweet.'

'Looks!' Mrs Trevor shrugged her shoulders. 'Looks are misleading. And lovely as she is, Sheila will enter a convent or die an old maid.'

'What a dreadful idea! Has she had a love-affair, or is she so hard to please?'

'I cannot say. But she insists on spending her life in Ireland with an invalid mother and an old half-crazy servant, in one corner of a big place belonging to an uncle, who may come home any day any turn them out. When she might live here with me, amuse herself, and ———'

'And leave her mother to the tender mercies of the half-crazy servant!'

'Not at all. I have offered my sister a home here many times since her husband died. But she loves Ireland; it agrees with her, she thinks. And so Sheila refuses to come to me, and for her mother's sake buries herself in that lonely country place.'

'The dear girl!' Mrs Fox looked at Sheila with renewed admiration. 'A really winsome maid.'

'Who might as well be ugly and dowdy. What's the use of being beautiful if one lives in a backwood? And in Ireland, too. Bah! the thought drives me wild.'

'The sleeping beauty found a fairy prince.'

'Stuff and nonsense! Excuse me for speaking so hotly, my dear, but I feel deeply about Sheila. This is not the age for fairy princes or sleeping beauties. We must all be up and doing nowadays. And if a girl shuts herself up she must take the consequences.'

'Your pretty Sheila seems to do so serenely. She is probably happier doing her duty to her mother in that lonely place than ———'

'I declare!' Mrs Trevor opened her eyes very wide in her astonishment. 'You seem to approve of her shutting herself up.'

'I approve of her doing what she thinks right. No one ever really suffered for having done that. Quite the contrary. So I'm not uneasy about pretty Sheila's future. Believe me, her fairy prince will some day discover her. Meanwhile she is happy, and much to be envied. But good-by. I promised to be at the Bathwaits' by five.' And pressing Mrs Trevor's hand she went away.

'A new idea,' cried that lady, as her guest disappeared. 'Mrs Fox upholding the happiness of a virtuous life! I don't believe she troubles much beyond the pleasure of the moment. Sheila is a very different person. These Catholics are very tenacious of doing what they consider their duty. Since Margaret married Leonard Burke and joined his Church she is greatly changed, and Sheila is not like any other girl I know. I never could bear my sister marrying an Irishman—and I like it still less now. Not that I don't admire Sheila extremely. But that a lovely girl like her should be buried as she is, annoys me and fills me with wrath. I wish Miles Burke would come home. They might be glad to come to me then.'

Meanwhile, quite unconscious of the warm manner in which she was being discussed, Sheila Burke chatted pleasantly with the various friends and relatives whom her aunt had invited from far and near to assist at Annette's wedding.

'What a dull life you must lead in Leamont!' said one little pale-faced cousin in a gigantic hat and feathers. 'I really pity you, Sheila.'

'Pray don't. I'm as happy as can be.'

'That's a thing I can't understand. I'd die without the theatres and the park and dances—'

Sheila laughed merrily.

'Then it's fortunate you are not obliged to live in our part of the world.'

Her cousin shivered.

'Fortunate! Nothing would induce me to leave London. And Annette hated that dull Irish place.'

'Yes. I'm afraid she did. Like you, she was fond of excitement.'

'Well, it's natural when one is young. And there's no place like London for meeting people. If Annette had stayed over there she'd never have met Major Beecham. And if you—'

'I don't wish to meet people, Vera.' Sheila's color deepened.

'Mother and I are quiet folk.'

'So it appears. But you require shaking up a bit. Annette had a pleasant life here, and see how well it has ended. She wasn't what I'd call handsome, and yet she has made a brilliant marriage. You ought to take her place and give yourself a chance. Good-by. Love to your mother.' And she touched Sheila's burning cheek with her lips and ran down stairs.

'Don't mind Vera, dear,' said a plain-faced elderly woman in gray silk. 'She's a worldly little creature, and inclined to be somewhat fast. No matter what any of them say, do not leave your mother. Go on leading your peaceful, devoted life, and God will take care of and bless you. The future is in His hands. Do your duty, even if it is irksome at times. A fashionable, worldly existence is not, I assure you, a bed of roses.'

Sheila smiled.

'I am sure it is not. And my quiet life is a happy one. I have no wish to change it, Aunt Carry.'

'But you are very poor.'

'Yes—and that only lends a little excitement to our lives. I have no ambition to be rich.'

'And should your uncle return, and you were forced to leave Leamont, where would you go?'

Sheila smiled. 'Uncle will not return or disturb us; he has promised that. But if he did, we'd go somewhere near. The air of Cavan suits my mother.'

'Where is your uncle now?'

'We don't know. He never writes.'

'And he has willed Leamont away to a stranger?'

'Yes—his adopted son, of whom we know nothing.'

'Not even the young man's name?'

'Not even his name. But we fancy he will take that of Burke.'

'Perhaps. I trust he'll prove worthy to bear it. It was a strange freak to adopt a child and leave him his family estate. It ought to have gone to you.'

'Uncle had a right to do as he pleased.'

'Of course—of course. Well, good-by, dear. Tell your mother I'll perhaps run over to see her in the autumn.'

'Oh, do. Both she and I would be overjoyed, and Molly delighted.'

'Good old soul. I hope she's well?'

'Quite, and as devoted as ever. I don't know what we should do without her.'

'Faithful creature. Tell her I was asking for her. And give my love to your mother. And now, dear, I must be off. You shall have the cheque for the school treat very soon. Good-by.' And kissing Sheila very tenderly, Mrs. Walker hurried away.

About half-past six the next evening Sheila left London, and after a fatiguing journey to Holyhead, and a long, rough crossing to Greenore, she at last reached the little village of Cootie-hill. Here, as there were no cabs to be had she chartered an outside car, and leaving her trunk to follow on a donkey-cart, she drove away from the station down a pretty, picturesque road.

As the girl reached Leamont she sprang quickly from the car, and entering the wide, low-ceilinged hall, called out 'Molly! Molly!'

At the sound of her voice a white-haired woman in a lilac cotton jacket, brown stuff skirt, and big Holland apron came running to meet her with a glad cry of welcome.

'Good morning, Molly. How's my mother?' cried Sheila quickly. 'She's well, I trust?'

'Deed she's just middlin', miss. But sure she'll be better the minute she claps her eyes on you. It's only hungerin' for a sight of you she was.'

'Has she been ill? Oh, Molly, what was wrong?'

'A little bit out of sorts, honey. But sure I sent off for the doctor, an' glory be to God, there wasn't much wrong at all.'

'What did the doctor say?'

'Troth, not much. He wrote a description in Latin, an' Tom went in wid it to the chemist's in Cootie-hill, an' brought back a bottle of stuff. She took it, an' it did her a power of good. But it's pinin' to know how Miss Annette's weddin' wint off, she is. An' sure there was always a fear in the back of her mind that you might be stayin' over there yourself, Miss Sheila.'

'She knows me too well for that, Molly.'

'Deed an' it's hard to know people; an' sure thim English-men's mighty beguillin'.'

'Not to me, Molly—not to me,' laughed the girl, and she hurried away to her mother's room.

Seventeen years before this story begins Sheila's grandfather had bequeathed Leamont to his eldest son, to pass on, in the event of his dying without a male heir, to his brother Miles, who was to have the right to dispose of it as he wished if he had no son to leave it to.

'You'll have enough and to spare out of your savings and your wife's money, Leonard, for the wee girls,' the dying man said. 'And I'd like to make up to Miles for all he's suffered. He and I didn't get on too well, and he's had a hard life in Australia. And all you may survive him—and then if he had no son it would belong to Sheila.'