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THE FRIENDS OF OLD.

Ye friends of old, ye olden friends,
Where are ye all to-day?
Come back again this evening hour,
And tell me where ye stay.
I'm tired to-night I alone I dream,
And, sitting in the twilight shade,
Let memory bring ye back once more,
Ere thoughts in sleep are laid.
I'd have ye come in many a throng,
And whisper to me, one by one,
Of days ago, of scenes once viewed,
Of things together we have done.
I see ye all; but scattered far,
Some 'cross the seas now roam,
While many in the churchyard sleep,
And others, blessed at home,
Are musing, as I am to-night,
Of days of "Auld Lang Syne,"
And dreaming of past happy hours,
Of youth's bright summer-time.

ALETHE.

THE CHRISTMAS BRIDE.

CHAPTER I.

"ALETHE, my beloved, I had almost despaired of your coming!" said a manly, rich voice, in tones well adapted to reach a maiden's heart. "What has delayed you?"

And as the speaker uttered the fond reproach, he advanced from within the shadow of a wood, whose thick platanos of firs and cypress afforded a convenient shelter, even in the depth of that December snow and frosts that covered the orbiculous of the forest.

The girl whom he thus addressed was young and lovely enough to detain the most impatient lover within her spells, even though she herself tried their patience more severely than by the short delay of which Cecil Talboyes complained.

Alethe Fordyce was one of those brilliant perfect brunettes who can challenge the power of even wintry winds or wintry wraps to mar their rich beauty.

And as she stood, glowing with exercise and agitation—her dark eyes flashing from beneath her velvet hat, and her lovely face nestling, as it were, in soft rich furs round the slender throat, she was almost more attractive than the most exquisite evening toilette which could have been devised for her adornment.

"Oh, Lord Cecil! I—ought not to be here at all," she faltered. "Indeed this must be for the last time! And—and—I shall not be here—long!"

And her voice fairly shook in her attempt to steady its tones.

"Alethe! what means this? Lord Cecil, and you are only here for the last time?" he said eagerly. "Have I really been deceived in you?—do you not love me—my own—my fair darling?—or is it but some coquetry to test my devotion?"

"Neither—neither!" said the girl—and you know it, Cecil!"

Her self-restraint seemed to vanish now, and tears gushed from beneath the long silken veil of lashes that curtained her eyes.

It was irresistible to a lover to see that betraying emotion; and Lord Cecil Talboyes drew the weeping girl to his breast, and for a brief moment supported her drooping head on his bosom.

But it was for a very brief instant that the girl remained in his caressing arms. She suddenly raised herself from his shoulder and dashed away the tears which stood like frozen diamonds on her cheeks.

"This is very wrong of me, Lord Cecil; I must tell you at once—and—then leave you for—ever! I am to be married on Christmas Day, to Leonard Rawdon; and—and I have promised my father to obey him—at last; though I have pleaded so hard, even now, when all is ready—all—for the wedding! But poor papa—I cannot refuse him now that I am his all!"

"And will you not please him better by becoming my wife and securing such a brilliant future?" returning Cecil, softly. "I have told you, Alethe, I dare not ask you openly from him now, because he would demand more from me than my proud father would sanction; but I will soon get his pardon and favor when I show him my beautiful bride—my sweet Alethe; and then—some day—there shall be a coronation that fair brow and jewels flash in that satin hair! My darling, you shall not—you must not be doomed to drudgery and poverty, as the wife of a country doctor. An unloved husband and an uncongenial home would soon sap away my precious one's very life. You are not formed for such a common-place fate—my Alethe!"

The honeyed words sank in the warm, loving heart, and the brilliant promises dazzled the young ambitious girl; and her gaze was thoughtful, as she listened to the words of the tempter.

"Yes, you know it—yes, I have told Lord Cecil, pursuing his advantage, 'You will not break my heart, you will not sentence me and my father to such lifelong wretchedness!'"

"Alas! alas! it is too late! she murmured. 'There are but two days more!

The day after to-morrow is to be my wedding! Oh! what a wretched, wretched Christmas! How unlike the last!"

"Yes, Alethe—yes! Remember where you were, and how we spent that memorable day last year!" pleaded the young man. "What a gay party at the Hall and how I blessed the accident that induced your father to permit your accepting Miss Vernon's invitation for the holidays! Can you forget all that so completely as to permit your standing at the altar and speaking false vows on the very day which is the festival of Christendom? Surely, if you speak truly—if you do love me as you profess—you cannot dare such sacrilege!"

Cecil Talboyes had, at any rate, the wisdom of the serpent, if he did not unite with it the innocence of the dove. The young, inexperienced girl shivered under the low, rich tones, which were doubly impressive from the glowing tenderness in the eyes that looked in hers—the melting softness of the caress that gently imprisoned her slight form.

"Oh, Cecil, do not be so unkind! I am sad enough already, without your making me more miserable!" murmured the poor girl, half inaudibly.

"Alethe, I would not cause you one sigh, one tear, save when I desire to save you from months and years of weeping and repentance!" he pursued, softly. "I only ask you to pause ere you take this terrible, hopeless step!"

"But I have promised—I have said it, and all is ready! Papa will never hear of my drawing back now; he would send me from him—cast me off—crush me to death with his anger!" wailed the poor girl, sadly.

"Alethe, be persuaded! Trust yourself to me, who loves you deeply! Go with me to the altar, and then, when all is irrevocable, your father and mine will be appeased with but little difficulty. Be assured, love, of my heart's worship, my faith, my devotion to your every look to-morrow night all shall be ready, and I will await you here, or else I will come to your father's house, when it all is dark and silent, and guard my treasure to the spot where she shall give herself to me forever!"

Alethe shivered, literally shivered with the struggle within her frame.

She heard the seducing voice; she felt rather than saw the passionate glance; and her feelings wavered and struggled till her very pulse hurried and throbbed even in the chill north wind and driving snow that blinded her with delicate flakes of white.

"Speak, Alethe! Will you bid me farewell forever? Can you so easily give me up? Can you send me from you like a slave, a dog, a cast off jewel, and perhaps hear, in your bridal happiness, that Cecil Talboyes had sought death in despair of life? But Leonard Rawdon will be happy, and you will smile and be content! Alethe, farewell! I have misjudged you! Alas! alas!" he added, turning from the spot.

She flew to him, she seized his arm, she threw her arms round his neck with yearning passion.

"Cecil, Cecil, I will go with you! I cannot part thus; only be true and faithful, for I am sacrificing for you all—all!" she cried, as if it were the voice of an Eolian harp.

"My beloved, my angel, my own," he exclaimed, rapturously. "Yes, forty-eight hours more, and you will be all mine! To-morrow night I will be under your window at midnight, or, perhaps, somewhat later, as circumstances may make prudent. I will have all ready, and my Alethe shall be a Christmas gift to her Cecil. She shall be a bride on that high, joyful day; and in no heart shall be such happiness and gaiety as in mine—no, not in the jolliest gatherings throughout the land!"

It was a doubtful string to touch, for it at once suggested to Alethe the image of her father alone and desolate on this great festival, and also of the deserted and rejected suitor of her father's choice and judgement—of Leonard Rawdon and his mortification and grief.

But her word had been given—the spell was still upon her; and with half fearful hope and fearful joy, she listened to his remaining directions, and hurried away.

She soon reached her father's pretty, though modest home, where he, Dr. Fordyce, had retired on giving up his practice to his favorite former pupil, Leonard Rawdon; and entered the house without being perceived, save by an old servant who acted almost as housekeeper to the young mistress she had nursed in her childhood.

Alethe quickly changed her dress for the pretty demi-toilette that suited the quiet winter's evening, and was in the drawing-room before her father entered.

"Ah, my sweet Christmas rose!" said he tenderly. "There you are, as blooming as if sunshine and flowers were making the earth glad, instead of this gloomy snow and frost. But it matters little to the heart be warm; and this year, at least, there will be joy and gladness in one of the 'proudest houses' of merry

England. Yes, darling, I shall gain a son, not lose a daughter, on the blessed Christmas morn, for Leonard will not take you from me; he will take up his abode in our house, and I can repay him by aiding him in his labors, and give him more time with his little wife."

Alethe tried to smile in return to her father's glad greeting, but in vain.

She was constrained and gloomy at heart; but the good doctor believed it was a maiden's timidity, and spared the motherless girl all painful comments on her sadness and silence.

Alethe was thankful when the evening passed away, and she sought her fevered pillow rather for the comfort of unrestrained than of repose.

She slept but little, and that little in fitful starts, so that the morning found her pale and suffering, if not repentant.

The hours passed wearily, and yet all too swiftly for the troubled girl. She felt that it was her last day of innocent freedom of filial love and peace. Ever and anon the presents and preparations for the morn's ceremony came to torture her heart, and she fervently blessed the custom that prevented her bride-groom from visiting his affianced on the bridal eve.

The bells that rang out at intervals in honor of the approaching festival sounded like knells, and she retired early to her room ere yet the hour of 9 rang out on the chiming.

Once safe from intrusion she hastened the few preparations for her flight. She wrote a brief letter to her father. She collected some few necessities for her journey. She put the trifles that Leonard had given her in a packet, and directed it to her whilom lover.

Then, when all was complete, she placed herself on the little rocking chair that her father had procured for her in one of her girlish sallies, to secure her ease and comfort in her own apartment, in waiting till the signal should be given that had been arranged between herself and Lord Cecil. She fancied that it might be delayed, owing to the unusual excitement that the season occasioned in the quiet town of Fairfield; but still she put on her wraps, and laid the hat and veil and furs beside her, in momentary readiness for the fatal deed.

Her cheeks flushed with the excitement of the hour, and the fatigue and exhaustion consequent on the last few hours of watchful agitation; but still she listened eagerly for every indication of stillness on the part of the household and neighborhood.

It could not be long now. The signal would be given ere many more quarters had been marked on the little time piece.

Now and then a distant sound of musicians or crash of joy-bells disturbed the silence, and then Alethe shrank, as it were into herself, and covered in her chair in very tears and shame.

But then Cecil's words, "Could you bid me farewell?—could you hear of my despairing end?" rang in her ears, and once again she resumed her listening attitude, her head resting on the cushioned chair to still its throbbing temples.

There was an interval of silence—long silence. Now she could distinguish, as she believed, the steps of her lover.

She involuntarily drew on her furs and cap. She clasped in her hand the little bag that contained her necessities for the flight; and then she sat, with beating heart as the moments fled on.

Surely, he was lingering strangely? Yet perhaps, he had some passing traveler to baffle in the night stillness.

But at last it came. There was the signal—the preconcerted signal—and began her flight.

CHAPTER II.

She stood before a temporary altar, did the fair fugitive from a more splendid and social bridal. Unsupported by a father's blessing, or the kindly sympathy of bride-maidens and of loving friends, she spoke her vows.

She knew not the priest who officiated at the ceremony, even by name. And in her fluttering agitation—in the entire helplessness and novelty of her situation she did not even inquire who he was, nor dream of taking any part in the various little legal adjuncts to the religious rite. She knew that she signed her name to some paper; but her eyes were blinded with the tears that were fast overpowering her self-restraint and she scarcely even looked at its purport.

She was thinking of her father at the moment—of his distress, grief, and shame. She thought even of Leonard Rawdon, whom she knew to be good and true, though he had not won her wayward heart.

And the joy bells of Christmas broke out on the air as if in mockery of her sad and lonely bridal, and did but serve to open the sluices of her tears, and to break down the restraints that she—

Lord Cecil gave a somewhat impatient start as he raised the veil and bent down to kiss the bride.

"Alethe, dear, do you, then, repent already?" he said almost sternly; or at least, it seemed so to her tender and

clinging heart.

"No, no!" she murmured. "Only it is so strange, and you would not think I loved you, Cecil, if I could forget poor papa so soon! If you were not all, all to me, I could not have left him thus!"

"You shall return to him ere long—you shall not be very long tried," replied he, gently, and clasping her to his bosom with all a lover husband's tenderness—

"My own Alethe—my bride—you must smile on me, or I shall doubt your love, and that would break my heart, my darling!"

She could not resist the appeal.

She did smile; but a wintry and touching look was in the sweet face that Cecil had only seen in its brightness and love.

"It will soon be over, dear Cecil. You are so good and kind; and besides, it will not be for long, will it? You will take me back soon?"

"Of course—of course!" said the bride-groom, with a too evident impatience in his manner, that well nigh brought back again the tell-tale moisture to Alethe's eyes.

But there was that in her heart that told her it was the wisest to restrain and to endure.

They left the small edifice, and in a few moments were driving as rapidly as the still falling snow would permit from the neighborhood of the young bride's home.

There were cheerful faces and merry laughing in the groups they passed; and the sound of the Christmas carols, and the deeper melody of the chanting psalms, came from time to time on Alethe's ear, from church, cottage, and hall, and homestead.

But she was deprecating the high festival, the joyous Christmas tide, by the disobedience and deception of her midnight flight.

London was their destination. It was the most effectual hiding place for the fugitives; so Cecil had told her in the fatal interview in the wood.

Thus it was late ere they arrived at the distant metropolis, and again the desolate Christmas bride felt bitterly the contrast of her unlawful and clandestine position to the joyous festivity that displayed itself in their transit to the lodgings Lord Cecil had taken. The lighted houses, whose music and dance and peals of youthful laughter could be discerned even through the thick winter curtains that sheltered the windows; the groups hurrying along the streets; the occasional crime of the joy-bells, and the indescribable air of social, loveable feelings that pervaded the whole city, was a bitter gloom and sorrow to the fugitive daughter from a loving father's home.

"Cecil, have you been—have you heard anything? Is my father very angry?"

The question was gasped rather than uttered; and the bridegroom of a week looked half impatiently at the fair young creature who had been awaiting his coming so anxiously.

"My dear Alethe, you must have patience. Your father is very unreasonable, and mine is not much better. Only he has more cause for anger than Mr. Fordyce; he went on, with a touch of haughtiness that was not unnoticed by the young wife—the doctor's daughter—the runaway bride of the noble son of the Lord Talboyes.

"The Earl will not be more displeased than my father, Cecil," she said, with a touch of pride in her voice. "I was his all, and he wished for nothing more than to wed me to the man he loved as a son. Did he refuse to see—to listen—to read my letter, Cecil?"

"Oh, don't be so silly and weak about it all Alethe!" he exclaimed. "Of course the old boys will make a fuss at first; but I'll promise you one thing, and that is, that your father will soon come round if mine does. It will be a proud thing enough for you to be Lady Cecil Talboyes and a Countess some day. I think I really may claim some consideration and patience, when I have sacrificed so much for you, and may have a great deal of annoyance besides."

Alethe shrank back on her husband's entrance. It was the first absolute reproach she had heard—though more than once a look or a hint had cut her sensitive heart—during the brief octave of married life.

"Cecil," she said, suddenly, as if to divert the source of her own thoughts, and avoid any dangerous recriminations, "do you know this is New Year's Day, and my birthday? I am 18 to-day."

"Is it, love?" he said, more tenderly. "And I have no offering to give save this!"

And he kissed her tenderly as he slipped a chain round her neck, with a little cross suspended from its delicate links.

"I thought I had not yet given you a bridal present; and now it can be a birthday one also," he added, smiling.

The girl tried to smile, and thank him, and return his caress.

But, somehow, the chain and cross seemed to prick and chafe her delicate skin.

Was it the remembrance of Leonard Rawdon's parting present, when they

were boy and girl lovers in her school days, and he had left his father's house for a time?

That was a cross and chain; but they were once more in his possession now. She had returned them among his other gifts when she had discarded him forever, and, it might be, broke two hearts in the rash deed.

It was six months. The green verdure and the glowing sunshine of June had replaced the snow-paths and the gleaming brightness of the December season.

Yet there was a bleak barrenness in the fair Christmas bride's heart, that only seemed more hopeless and dreary from the contrast with nature's glowing beauty, and the animation all around. Still Alethe and her husband were in London—still divided from her kindred and his—still she remained in the same uncertainty as to the condition of matters, or the real steps taken by Lord Cecil in the business of reconciliation.

"Are you going out again, Cecil?" she said, pleadingly, one summer's day, as he prepared himself for his usual afternoon ramble. "You never take me with you now; and it is so dull."

"It would be impossible to take you where I am going; and it would be very selfish of you to want to keep me at your side, when I have already given up my usual pleasure and comforts for you, and, perhaps, half ruined myself for life. I am only going to the Park," he added, somewhat reluctantly; "but still it would be quite out of the question for me to be seen there with you. Of course I am known to almost every one in the Row, and it would be simple homicide to risk exposure."

She bowed her head in assent, but something within told her that he was not true and sincere in the excuse thus given.

Alethe had never been alone in London streets, but still she was neither helpless nor a fool, and she knew there were many ways of going out in safety.

She wrapped herself in her most disguising cloak and veil, and left the house unnoticed.

There were cabs plying in the roads—which the girl well remembered in her school days—and she soon hailed one, and ordered the driver to drive to the Park.

"You will wait for me," she said when she got out; I shall not be long, and I will pay you for any time I shall remain." She hurried along the right side of the Row, her thick veil down, and her light burnous wrapped closely around her, till her course was suddenly arrested by a well known voice in the tones that had been so dangerously seducing to her own heart.

"I shall meet you to-night, dear Lady Blanche! You will reserve the first waltz for me? I care little for any formal, cold quadrille!" was half whispered as Alethe stole past.

It was to a beautiful girl on a splendid horse which she managed with perfect ease and grace, and which she was affecting to a rook even while really stooping to hear the low spoken words.

Alethe dared scarcely wait to hear the reply. She knew full well it would be what would send the arrow deep into her heart, so she gave one more stealthy glance as the hands were clasped in a farewell greeting, and then glided away like a spell-driven ghost; so swift, so noiseless, and so unconscious was her path.

She reentered her cab; she returned to her now wretched home, in the same dreamlike consciousness that her happiness was wrecked, and her self-respect gone forever.

"I deserve it all!" was in her heart, though her lips were silent; and in the same despairing moods, she took off her wraps, and once more sat down in her accustomed chair.

She knew not how long she remained thus, but she was at length roused by the cheery voice of Lord Cecil, evidently in his happiest mood.

"Well, my queen!" he said, lovingly bending over her. "Is not your hubby good and quick in his return to his darling wife? You see I cannot keep away from you, my little magnet!" he added playfully.

She looked up at him with a cold, mocking smile.

"Then you will remain with me to-night, Cecil?" I shall be so dull if you cannot! Or shall we go to the Opera, as you promised me?"

"Why no; I think not. It is quite out of the question, my love," he replied, softly. "You see I have unluckily promised my father to go to him in secret to-night while my mother is away; and it would be a pity to irritate him just now, you know!"

"On whose account? On mine, or on the Lady Blanche's?" she asked scornfully.

He started for a moment, in evident surprise and confusion. Then his brow darkened like a thunder-cloud.

"What does this mean, Alethe? Have you been eavesdropping—snooping on my [Continued on Eighth Page.]