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The Wife.

BY MRS. ANN S. STEPHENS.

Like ivy, woman's love will cling
Too often round a worthless thing.

It was midnight in London; the theatres were closed, the houseless wanderer sought the dark alley which had sheltered his wretchedness on many a miserable night, and lay crouching to the wall as the watchman paced heavily by, lest he might be dragged forth from his hiding place and deprived of his sole remaining possession, personal liberty—Laboring men and honest trades people had been long asleep, the side walks were deserted, save by the midnight reveller, the abject and the vicious, but through the fashionable thoroughfares carriage after carriage, laden with manly and beautiful life, swept by, their splendor but half revealed by the blaze of the enamelled lamps they carried.

A fashionable house in the West End was thrown open to the distinguished of London that night and, long after the street lamps had burned themselves out, lordly equipages rolled to and fro from the illuminated mansion. The rainbow light that streamed through the drapery of each tall window had fallen on many a beautiful form gliding up those steps, but in no instance had it touched a being more lovely than the fair young girl who paused with modest grace to gather her scarf before she followed her companion, an elderly lady, through the labyrinth of statues that lined the broad stair case.

She reached the drawing room; music was swelling through the glittering crowd assembled there—the strains of a light cheerful waltz. A glow rushed over her cheek, and the folds of azure gauze that covered her bosom rose and fell with its pleasant throbbings, till the sprig of white jasmine that gathered them at the throat trembled as if shaken by the night wind. Lucy Sprague was seventeen, and this was her first ball, the first time that she had ever stood an equal in the gay throng. It seemed like enchantment to her, the glitter of diamonds, the swelling music, and the crowd of breathing life, bathed in that glowing lamp light. It was no marvel that her bosom heaved and her soft eye sparkled as she gazed upon it.

As Lucy Sprague, the orphan heiress, had descended from her carriage, two young men were crossing the street, arm in arm. They had just come from a neighboring club house, and, if the light had been sufficient, an observer might have detected the glow of wine on their cheeks, and a sparkle of the eye which betrayed excitement if not confirmed inebriety. One of them a dark haired young man, with midnight eyes and features such as one dreams of for a reveling poet, uttered an exclamation of delight as his observation was drawn to the young heiress, and springing forward he stood in the shadow, grasping his companion's arm, and with his eyes riveted on the girl till she disappeared from the staircase.

'Come! fortunately I have an invitation,' he said, forcing his companion toward the door.

'Surely you will not attempt it; remember the wine you have taken. You are already half intoxicated.'

'With the beauty of that girl, boy, not with wine,—come!'

'No; if you wish to present yourself to the countess in this condition, I will be no party in the outrage; why, man, that hair is falling over your forehead like an unpruned grape vine'

'Confound such comparison! You can think of nothing but grapes and the blood of grapes. I tell you the sight of that heavenly girl has rendered me as sober as a cardinal,' and as he spoke the young man dashed back the raven curls that had, in truth, almost concealed his forehead, gave them a twist from the temples with his hand, and turned with a laugh to his friend.

'There, will that do? Am I sufficiently presentable?'

'As you will be to-night,' replied the more reasonable companion, smiling in spite of himself, for there was something so spirited in the handsome face turned toward him, so frank and determined, that he saw no hopes in contending against his project of entering the house, and could only resolve not to bear him company.

'So you will not go?'

'Most assuredly I will not!'

'Good night, then—breakfast with me to-morrow, and I will tell you all about her.'

'Good night.'

They shook hands. The next minute young Burke was ascending the staircase of that palace dwelling, composedly as if it had been his own home. He urged his way through the crowd, and reached the dancing room. The object of his search was there, sitting by the tall lady who had entered the house with her. Burke took a position directly opposite the window they occupied. Many a smiling look fell on him from the dancers as they whirled by; eyes brighter than the diamonds that flashed above them were turned upon him from the crowded walls for Burke was the fashion. Though a younger son, wild, impulsive, and prodigal, his great personal beauty, his accomplishments, and the fascination of his address, rendered him a favorite even among the elder ladies, who could not make up their minds to discountenance him altogether, though terrified every day of their lives lest he might persuade some of their aristocratic daughters to throw themselves away and share his extravagance and poverty, or redeem him from the latter.

'Hey, Burke, are you here playing the wall flower?' said a young guardsman, as he turned from escorting his partner to her seat. 'How is it that I have not seen you among the dancers?

Burke muttered some vague answer to this address and did not seem inclined to become more sociable. The guardsman was passing on, but that instant he caught a glimpse of Lucy Sprague, where she sat half concealed by her protectress. An expression of pleasant surprise came over his face, and, after convincing himself by a quick glance that it was impossible to cross the room, he bowed. Burke was looking at the young girl; he saw the smile accompanied by a gentle bend of the head with which she acknowledged his friend's recognition, and turned eagerly toward him.

'Do you know the lady?' he said.

'Know her? of course I do: how beautiful she has grown! Shall I present you?

'Certainly.'

The guardsman looked up. It was not usual that the fastidious young man before him permitted an introduction, now he seemed eager for it.

But you must dance, I can see by her face that she is dying for a partner unfortunately I am engaged.'

'With all my heart,' replied Burke; 'but who is she?'

'An orphan of good descent, and heiress to a neat fortune. Stewart, the great banker, is her guardian, and that is his wife, sir How her diamonds light up the beauty of my own sweet friend as she leans over her! There is no fear of losing caste in that quarter, she will set half the town crazy in a month.'

When the next quadrille struck up, Lucy Sprague stood in the circle with young Burke; her small feet trembling to the music as she waited her turn to dance, and her cheek glowing with blushes called forth from the admiring eyes that fell upon her from every direction, now that her beauty was rendered conspicuous by the attention of a partner so distinguished.

The dance was over and Burke still lingered by the side of his partner; the wine which he had drunk, the brilliant beauty that he gazed upon, music and the voluptuous breath of flowers, all served to excite his wondrous powers of pleasing. The warm, wild poetry of his nature was aroused, it burned upon his lips and gave expression to his eyes. The young girl listened, and it was enough. The rich tones of that voice seldom found their way to a heart which was not subdued by their eloquence and earnestness, for though wayward & dissipated, Burke was always sincere. His faults were the more dangerous that there was a dash of chivalry and much that was noble always mingled with them.

'Shall we dance again,' he murmured 'or would you prefer the air of this balcony? It overlooks the garden.'

'The balcony,' she said, with girlish eagerness; then checking herself she added, blushing, 'the heat is oppressive here'

Burke lifted the mass of crimson drapery that fell behind the seat they occupied and, flinging open a sash the young pair stepped forth to a full view of the moonlight garden, its shrubbery and the flowers that greeted them with their gentle breath. The music came softly from within, & all around lay the quiet moonlight. It was a dangerous hour for the heart of that guileless creature—dangerous for them both, for with him love was salvation, or injustice—with her, life or death; she was a woman, and to her love was but the beginning of immortality.

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Lucy Sprague was alone in her chamber, her palm yet warm with the clasp of her partner's hand when he had whispered 'good night' at the carriage door. There was music still hovering about her senses—not that which had made her feet tremble on the chalked floor with child like eagerness for the dance, but the heart thrilling music of a human voice—his voice who had conversed with her in the balcony. When she sank to sleep that night a smile lay upon those lips as she dreamed; it broke over her whole face like sunlight on a magnolia flower. It was all a dream, a wild sweet vision, and, when the sunshine stole through the curtains of her bed chamber, the young girl awoke smiling, and with a blush on her cheek, a blush brought there by the memory of visions that had haunted her slumber—visions of a village church with the strong light shut out by creeping ivy, and two persons kneeling together in the holy calm thus created. She arose and hurried on her dress, for it was late and she was not certain at what hour young Burke would call.

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'Lady, Mr. Stewart desires your presence in the library.'

Lucy bent her head to the footman who had delivered this message, & he turned away without observing the pallor which it brought to her face. She arose, put aside the drawing she had been employed upon and made several other self deluding excuses for remaining in the room, though her hand trembled more & more every object she touched, and her face became absolutely pale with apprehension. At length she made a desperate effort and went down, more nervous and unpleasantly agitated than she had ever been in the whole course of her life.—Mr. Stewart was a grave, gentlemanly person who had outlived every thing like impulsive feeling years before he became guardian of that orphan girl.—She came to him in his spacious library blushing as if she had done something to be ashamed of. The banker received his ward courteously as ever, though an anxious and stern expression lowered on his forehead, and he sat down evidently pondering some unpleasant subject in his mind. She knew what it was & placed herself in the darkest corner of the room, mustering what courage she might for an interview which under any circumstances would have been embarrassing, and was now peculiarly so.

For some moments, the man of business sat in his easy chair looking askance at the changing features of his ward, while he toyed with the pages of a volume which lay on a table where his right hand rested, evidently wishing to seem occupied with it alone.

'I wish to converse with you, Miss Sprague, on a subject which is far from a pleasant one to me at least. Mr. Burke has just left me.'

He paused as if expecting some reply but Lucy sat with her eyes fixed upon the carpet, and but for the motions of her cheek might not have seemed conscious of his address.

'Your silence convinces of me what I before suspected,' he said, more quickly, 'that the young spendthrift was not authorized by you to make the assertion which he did make.'

Lucy looked up now, and the color settled to a red crimson on her cheek.

'Mr. Burke had my permission to speak with you,' she said, with gentle firmness; 'my full, free permission; you would not have been trouble else.'

The banker turned in his chair and looked keenly in her face.

'It pains me to hear it,' he said, 'for I can never consent to a union which must bring you to certain poverty, perhaps to a worse fate.'

Lucy turned pale, but met his eyes firmly as one who had made up her mind and was not capable of abandoning a position once resolved on. The banker arose, sat down on the *fauteuil* she occupied, and took her hand with a degree of parental kindness never exhibited to her before.

'Let me entreat you,' he said, 'reconsider this matter, you cannot know the character of this young man

'I know it better than his detractors; he acknowledges his faults, he conceals nothing said the young girl gaining power of voice and confidence with each word; you judge him harshly, sir.'

'I judge him as the world judges, with the experience of sixty years to aid my observation. I *know* that he will never become a good man, or a kind husband to any reasonable woman, much less to one beautiful, warm hearted and gently nurtured as you have been.'

Lucy felt the tears start to her eyes, for some part of the banker's speech had brought to her mind the memory of those who had indeed nurtured her infancy with such affection as young parents sometimes weave about an only child. She felt how beautiful a feeling domestic love was; how much of heaven might be gathered under our roof, and these reflections did not aid the banker in his attempt to dissuade her from the heart-dream that had in truth bewildered her better judgement

'He is poor and extravagant' persisted the banker, mistaking the source of her emotion.

'I have money enough for both; his fine taste need not be thwarted,' was the generous reply.

The banker pressed his lips together, for her firmness disturbed even his philosophy.

'A wine drinker a heartless profligate in every thing.'

Nay, heartless he is *not*—it is unjust, cruel' he does not deserve it—if he were all this, I have one firm defence to make for what I intend to do;' she broke off and her cheek became crimson beneath the tears that flowed over it.

'May I inquire what that reason is?' said the banker.

'I love him.'

'And are doubtless persuaded that he seeks you from love in return, and not for the thousands left by your father.'

There was a touch of sarcasm in the banker's voice, and it fell harshly on the struggling heart of his ward.

'I know that he loves me for myself alone. I am as certain of it as that my pulse beats, or my voice is now filling your ear—I want no better proof than beats in my own bosom—heart answers to heart in this.'

There was something beautiful in the confidence which filled that young heart—beautiful but dangerous; for a moment the cold eye of her guardian lighted up with admiration, but he saw the precipice on which she was standing, and proved how deeply his interest was enlisted in her welfare by the trouble which he took to drag her away.

'I cannot consent to this sacrifice—will not consent.'

'I grieve that this is your 'determination,' said Lucy, with meek dignity, 'but my word—my soul is pledged; I cannot war forever against his pleadings and my own heart. He has faults—I acknowledge he has—no one admits that more frankly than himself; but he will amend them. You do not know how warm and true nature is.'

The banker shook his head.

'Let it be so, then,' she added, smiling through her tears, 'I can love him spite of his faults.

'This is sheer infatuation,' muttered the banker, pacing up and down the library after his ward had left him, 'but if she will fling herself away I am exonerated—there is no legal power by which it can be prevented.

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That dream was accomplished in the church which stood on her own beautiful estate. Lucy Sprague knelt by the side of that dangerous man. The good pastor who had held her at the baptismal font pronounced the words of union, but his voice broke & he looked compassionately on the young creature kneeling at his feet as if the task which he was performing were painful to his good heart. The ivy that crept over the little porch, and the tall windows were filled with a deep like wind, and the tablet set in the wall to her parents seemed like a scroll written over with reproaches.

She stood up with the golden circlet on her finger the veil of Mechlin lace swept to her feet, and the pearls on her neck sympathized in the dim light—But when the bridegroom pressed his lips upon her hand and whispered a few words overheard by the rest—the pearls heaved upon the rosy swell of her throat, a happy blush shone through the gossamer veil and when she went forth, and when the bells pealed a welcome and children scattered a carpet of blossoms under her feet from the church door to the carriage; when the horses crushed them as they dashed off a happier bride could never have breathed than Lucy Burke. And if love—true, warm hearted, ill-regulated love—could render a heart happy hers might well be so; for if ever a human being doted on another, with the whole strength of his manhood, that being was Thomas Burke. She did him no more than justice there; his thoughts were all on the young and lovely woman he had wedded; not on her possessions—possessions which had now become his own, save a trifling settlement prepared without her knowledge by the guardian and signed unread by the husband No, no, Thomas Burke cared nothing for the money; it would have been better perhaps, if he had indeed possessed more of the mercenary character imputed to him.

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'My wife—my own sweet wife! How strangly though musical the words fell upon her ear—how full of brooding tenderness were the soft eyes that dared not look up on the face of that manly made husband—so young, so glorious he seemed to her full—turned upon her with all that wealth of tenderness beaming through! they sat in silence for the full tranquility which flooded in their hearts was unfitted for any effort at conversation, save the fragmentary symbols so gently endearing which now and then broke from the lips as with linked hands the husband & wife looked forth on the dewy morning together.

'How changed every thing seems here,' murmured the bride; 'I did not know that our own home was so full of pleasant objects; the garden smiles like an Eden this morning.'

'It is an Eden, and here,' said the young husband, kissing the forehead uplifted to his face, 'here is my Eve—Adam never fell for one more lovely.'

'But may not the tempter creep in?' It was a vague question brought on by thought of her guardian's caution, and Lucy repented have spoken it before the words had left her lips, but he only kissed her again, and observed.

'Not while we love each other thus.'

They went into the house together, and sat down to breakfast, happy and confident in the future.

A year went by. Lucy Burke was in town once more, the most flattered beauty of a season Her husband, too, was there; thoughtful manhood and happiness pure and deep, had given new dignity to his person and a more finished grace to his manner. No man about town was more popular. There was none who gave such suppers, or entertained his friends so lavishly. His establishment was kept up on the most expensive scale: his horses were unrivalled, his equipage remarkable for its costliness, its splendor and the exquisite taste which even in magnificence avoided gorgeousness. Lucy's fortune had not been enormous at first though fully sufficient for splendor & occasional prodigality, but the style kept up in her home was princely, and could only have been warranted by the most abundant supply of money. Still the generous woman was happy; she knew herself to have been rich, and with no idea of the relative value of money and that which it purchases, never dreamed that her possessions were melting away like snow in the warm sunshine. She was flattered in the world, followed after and caressed to a degree that could not fail to excite herself love, especially as she saw that it gratified her husband—He was still to her the first and dearest object in existence; no music came to her ear so sweetly as his footfall on the stairs, when she could retire to her dressing room and think of him in peace; no sight gladdened her eye so surely as a glimpse of his fine person as she rode through the Park or passed him in her carriage while standing on the club house steps. Amid all her triumphs, all her splendor, the well spring of her young heart was kept pure and free. The little hour spent with her husband over the breakfast table, in her pretty morning gown and her delicate face shaded by a deeply bordered cap of costly lace, was the most precious hour of the twenty four to her. She had not yet repented the choice she had made, and wrote her guardian so.

And Thomas Burke, was he changed in his love of that generous woman?

No, no—changed he might be, but not in his love for her—there he kept he firm though his old habits were creeping in insidiously back upon him, and all good resolutions melting from his heart beneath the influence of a town life and old associations.

At length this alteration in his habits forced itself on the attention of his wife A shadow fell upon her heart, and occasionally her sweet face took a care, worn expression; but with the anxiety came a strength and fervency of affection unknown in her heart before. She kept her pledge and did most truly love him in spite of his faults.

Lucy was sitting alone in her dressing room one night—for she never allowed herself to retire until he returned home—she had taken a book and turned its leaves somewhat nervously for hour after hour was wearing away and still he came not. At length, toward daylight, there came a double knock at the street door which aroused the beautiful watcher, who had fallen asleep in her chair with her cheek nestled against the swansdown on her dressing robe. She started up—a pleasant smile shone to her before drowsy eyes, and she hastened to hear the porter unclose the door. He was too sound asleep in his leathern chair, and when the knock was again repeated Lucy girded her dressing gown around her waist with a silken cord which belonged to the festal garments she had just flung off, and taking a lamp hurried down stairs. She opened the door and there stood her husband flushed with wine; his hat off and the masses of raven hair falling over his brow damp and dishevelled. He stooped unsteadily, and made a random effort to rescue his beaver from the ground Lucy shrunk back, and every vestige of color left her face; he came into the hall, stumbling as he walked, holding out his hand to greet her with a vague smile which seemed fearfully out of place on those soulless features.

Lucy glanced hurriedly toward the porter's chair. The occupant was sound asleep breathing deep and full, like a man determined on his entire measure of rest let circumstances go as they might.

Lucy looked upon his unconsciousness with a sense of relief. He need not be a witness to the degradation of his master: this thing could never happen again, and no one would have seen it but herself. Poor Lucy Burke! she knew for the first time how heavily lies the knowledge we would forget, but have not the power. A world of suffering passed through that gentle heart while she was gazing upon the face of her husband, that face so pale and unnatural in its expression.

She took his arm soothingly and led him up stairs to her dressing room. He flung himself into the deep chair which she had just left, smiled in her face with an expression that made her heart sick, and falling heavily back sunk to sleep on the cushion that had supported her, with his head resting on the crimson velvet yet warm from the pressure of her cheek.

The poor wife stood gazing sorrowfully upon him her meek eyes were full of tears, and after a little she stole away to a corner of the room, knelt down by a pile of cushions, and, smothering her sobs in their silken billows, seemed to be praying with painful intensity. At length she arose to her feet, with an air of gentle resignation, and gilding toward her husband who still slumbered on in the dull heavy sleep of inebriety, she bent down and removing the damp hair from his forehead, kissed it. Then she stole away into her bedchamber and remained till morning in its georgeous gloom, watching him through the open door, but herself concealed lest he might awake and be abashed in her presence.

Alas! poor wife, this unhappy night was but the prelude to many more equally wearing equally humiliating to that true heart.

And now the beautiful face of Lucy Burke grew anxious with care and suffering. She no longer frequented the gay circles that would have won her forth from the splendid solitude in which her days were spent, but her step grew languid in that sumptuous home, her meek eyes dim with watching. Almost every night that irregular knock summoned her to be the witness of her husband's degradation. But she hoped on, whispering to herself, 'it will be better soon, my true love must win him back, for still I *do* love him in spite of his faults'

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The guardian's prophecy was accomplished at length. Ruin total and irretrievable ruin, swept over the thoughtless husband. Ruin that overthrew the household gods from his hearthstone and left his young wife standing amid the fragments, astounded by the magnitude of difficulties that surrounded her; terrified by a dread of losing the object dearest to her on earth by some act of that law which crushes the poor man as it does the felon she sat trembling within her desolate home, miserable, but firm in the deep affection that no time, no prosperity or misfortune could shake for an instant.

The last and most cruel blow came—her husband was in prison. When the young wife heard this she arose, gathered her mantle about her, and went forth into the street on foot and unattended.

Thereas in the heart of London a huge building, dark and fearfully gloomy, upreared itself and frowning over the cheerful dwellings and beautiful specimens of architecture that surround it like a blasted fortress cumbering a beautiful country with its huge proportions. The very sight of this prison house is enough to make the soul shudder. Many a wretched heart has withered within its walls or broken in the intense agony of its sufferings; many a head has turned gray while watching those damp, naked walls, year after year, till hope and even the wish for liberty grew feeble with suffering. Man's inhumanity to his fellow creatures was written on every massive wall sunk deep in the cold flags worn by the prisoner's feet. There Shylock creditors demanded their pound of flesh, and there the profligate, the unfortunate and the poverty stricken herded alike in gloom and misery. There the villain gloried in his sin; unblushing vice chuckled over former evil deeds close by the honest unfortunate, who, bowed down by shame and sorrow, ate his scanty portion in tears, longing for a grave scarcely more terrible than that which immured him.

Within these walls, a prisoner, with no hopes of release by Thomas Burke.—They had given him a cell to himself, and there in solitude he lay moaning to and fro on his straw pallet; over and anon he sat up and looked upon the bolted door with bloodshot eyes and lips that trembled as he gazed.

She came at last and the sound of her footfall on his dungeon floor stole to that feverish heart like dew upon a bruised flower.

The young wife sat down by his couch and tried to force back the tears that lay so heavily on her heart, but as she laid her hand upon his forehead and gazed into his face, so changed with the midnight revel and his own bitter thoughts that a stranger had not recognized it, sobs burst from her bosom, and bending down she kissed him again and again, as if she feared he might deem them a reproach.

He turned away and muttered hoarsely to himself

'Can nothing be done—must we remain here forever?' said the wife, conquering her tears.

The young man sat up and made an effort to appear calm.

'Leave me Lucy,' he said, 'leave me to the fate I have so Well merited. You are not quite destitute. Thanks to your guardian for that—not to me, wretch that I am—I never thought of providing for you—I who loved you so—'

Lucy started up and a flood of joy rushed over her face.

'And have we any thing left? where? how? tell me, my husband. I thought that all was gone.'

'There is a settlement of some thousands, I do not know how many, by enough for your comfort. So he told me at the time—I never read it.'

Lucy did not hear him out, she started up, tied on her bonnet with hands that trembled like aspens, and knocked hurriedly on the door. They let her out and Burke was alone again.

'She, too, has left me,' he muttered in a choked voice, and falling back on his couch he wept like a child.

Once more the young wife stood before her guardian not with the warm confidence which had formerly strengthened her in that presence, but trembling like a frightened bird, and pale with terror lest her suit might be denied.

It was denied at first, sternly and with words of calm reproach, but there was something in that agony of spirit with which she prayed—a self devotion so

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