

Wind Among the Barley Sheaves.

By Mrs. STANLEY WRENCH.

A MURMURING wind swept through the bearded barley, setting alive whispers in the trees that bent to listen to the secrets the blood-red poppies tell, and tall white camions swayed dreamily to and fro, virgins of the cornfields, whilst wanton poppies danced their measure, and the sky was languorous as a woman's eyes.

But Bernard the Chief, who strode through the barley-field with his burden, heard nothing of the secrets the flowers sought to tell, knew nothing of the charm of surging life, and cared little for the thistles which, for very malice, pricked his feet as he ruthlessly trod down the summer blossoms.

"T'faith," he muttered, "the child is heavy for one of so few summers," and impatiently he cursed the fence over which he was forced to climb before he could set his feet in the pathway that led up to the house upon the hill. Here report said Bernard the Chief and his smuggler gang hid their booty at whites, and here in very truth he could crow defiance to the whole county.

Once he shifted his burden, and the little bundle stirred uneasily. One might have thought there came a pitiful cry from the sacking, but if so the Chief took no heed.

The door swung open as though some silent watcher had known of his coming; indeed was the case, for woe befell the servants at the house upon the hill did Bernard the Chief have to wait at its gates for more than the space of a second. He strode within the hall, where were gathered in waiting half-a-dozen men, and swore loud and lustily, as was his wont, though not an eyelid stirred of those who stood by.

"Call Dame Marjorie," he shouted, and almost before the words had left his lips a grey-haired old woman appeared, who faced him sternly.

"How now?" she queried in a voice as sharp as his own.

He set the sack upon the floor, and guffawed long and loudly, his burly form shaking with merriment, his great red cheeks quivering with laughter as the sack moved a little, stirred again, then from out of the folds there appeared the head of a tiny black-haired child.

Not a word said his men, but Dame Marjorie came nearer.

"What in the devil's name is this?" she asked, suspicion biting into her voice.

"Thou may'st well ask, good dame," he made answer, and stooping drew out the little one, who gazed up at him fearlessly. He set her upon her feet, and looked round at his men.

"This is the little Lady Lucile de La Vendee," he said, with an evil sneer playing round his lips. "You will, I pray you, do her homage."

"What joke is this?" croaked the old woman in his ear, but he motioned her away.

"Your liege lady," he said, and motioned to the men, who one by one came forward, bent on one knee, took her baby hand, kissed it reverently as women kiss the misal, and muttered the oath of fealty which had served its turn before with the Chief himself.

The child could not have been more than four summers, yet she stood there with a gravity beyond her years, her dark eyes aglow, her little hand outstretched with the department of a queen. There could have been no better proof of her birth. The child was nobly begetten. Then how, in Heaven's name, could she be here in this nest of the Sparrow-hawk? Bernard the Chief was a smuggler noted for miles around, not only for deeds of daring, but for his doings, which whispered of bloodshed and rapine, of slaughter, and deeds at which even hardened men would shudder and turn their faces. How came he by this fair child, and for what purpose was she brought hither?

The mystery was soon solved, though it was but one pair of ears that heard the story. Dame Marjorie carried the black-haired baby away at a sign from her

lord and master, and he followed, closing the door behind him so that none could hear.

"How now?" she said again. "What new move is this?"

The child stood silently there, her eyes big with solemn wonder, and, drawing her towards him, Chief Bernard stood the little one between his knees.

"Look well at her, my mother—look well at her," he said. "Hast ever seen one like her before?"

Dame Marjorie stared hard. Then her eyes blinked, a look of fear crossed her face, and she turned away.

But the man laughed harshly.

"Well?" he queried. "Well?"

"She is like—she is very like Mademoiselle Charlotte," she stammered.

He laughed again, then bent his head lower, put a finger beneath the child's chin, tilted her face upwards, and bade the old woman watch her nostrils quiver.

"'Twas a trick of Charlotte herself," he said. "Dost remember when she was angered? Dost remember? Well," as the old woman nodded again, "this is Charlotte's child. Charlotte is now my lady of Vendee, but a widow to boot, and this is her only child."

Despite her audacity of hearing before, the old woman shivered and crossed herself now.

"Ah!" she said. "Then my lord of Vendee is dead."

He drew his fingers lightly across his throat with a dry laugh.

"So," he said. "And his child is here—his child and hers."

A passionate look crept into his eyes. "I swore to be revenged," he said. "I swore to have my own back again when he stole her from us. She was mine, till he came with his lute and his tales of the sunny South—mine till he won her heart away with his troubadour pastimes, and the nonsense that all women love. But now," and he chuckled again, "now I have his child, and my further day of vengeance will be yet assured."

"What of the child?" she asked, her eyes on his face.

"Look well to her," he said. "Let her want for nothing. Let her lack nothing that those of gentle birth have as their right. If need be, get her silks and geggaws; jewels she can have in plenty," and again he laughed. "There are more in the treasury yonder than she can ever wear. Get her a servant, and see that when she grows there is someone to tutor her, for I would not have Mademoiselle Charlotte's child grow up ignorant of such things as are reckoned of great store amongst those of high birth. She shall look on me as her relative—call me what you will, but teach her to forget La Vendee. She is but a child."

At that instant the babe looked up at him with big, innocent eyes and a strange smile played about her mouth, so serious for a child of such few summers.

"I am four years old," she said gravely, and the words sounded like a menace.

He lifted her high in his arms with a huge laugh. He liked a maid of spirit.

"God's truth, and so you be," he said. "Well, but you'll make a likely lass one of these days. There'll be more nor one head cracked through you, I'm thinking, ere you reach the age of four score. But go to, now. He a good lass, and you shall have plenty of playthings, though I ha' to pluck out hearts to get you gold."

He set her down, laughed again, stuck his knife into his belt, and strode from the chamber. Then Dame Marjorie turned to the child.

"What is your name, little one?" she said.

The baby stamped her foot.

"I am not little one," she said. "I am Lady Lucile of La Vendee."

Dame Marjorie laughed.

"Toity-toity," she said. "A proud little madam, like her mother, Mademoiselle Charlotte as was. Still, by God's good grace that can be cured."

But Madame Marjorie little knew. The child's proud spirit rather grew with her years, and she exacted obedience as a matter of right from all with whom she came in contact. Bernard the Chief was little at home, his smuggling exploits took him farther and farther afield, but when

he heard the accounts of her doings he would rock himself with loud laughter.

"Ah, a proud young madam—a likely lass!" was all he would say, and even Dame Marjorie brought him tidings of her misdeeds, for, like all healthy children, she often did amiss; he would not have her punished, but rather joyed in her misdeemeanors.

"No!" he would say; "well, she will find a mate some day. He will tame her. But sparrows cannot prate to eagles."

By the time she had reached the age of fifteen she was a beautiful maiden, with hair the colour of a raven's wing, eyes like sloes with the bloom upon them, and a skin that rivalled the hawthorn in its whiteness. She had tutors by this; the good cure taught her all the Latin he knew, and showed her how to juggle with figures, whilst one of the maids, a creature from the South, brought back by the Sparrow-hawk on one of his wanderings, showed her how to do wonderful stitches in silk, and set stories in a piece of tapestry. It was over one of these, a captive Love, with laughing Graces round, that the girl laid down her needle.

"Tell me," she said, and peered up into the Southern girl's face—"tell me who and what is Love?"

The blue-eyed serving maid smiled slyly. She knew the tale, but, Jack-a-day! how could one tell it to a child's ears?

"Love is a song," she said. "Hast never heard it, my Lady Lucile? It is when the flowers whisper together, when the trees bend and tell their secrets, and when the birds answer one note of silver with another of liquid gold."

"Ah!" said the child softly. "I know. I have heard it among the barley sheaves."

The serving maid laughed.

"Faith, and I have no manner of doubt," she said. "When the reapers bind the sheaves there be many a tale of love told, I fancy."

"Why is Love's song so sad?" she asked.

The serving maid bent lower over her task to hide the blushes.

'Tis a trick he hath when he sings to a woman's ear," she said. "I doubt not a man hears it all joyous."

The Lady Lucile was silent for the space of three needlefuls of silk and their working.

"Does love wear a blue cloak?" she asked.

The maid started.

"Ah, Mother of God!" she cried. "What fancy is this?"

The child pointed to the tapestry.

"Love hath no clothing on here," she said; "but when he sings among the barley sheaves doth he wear a blue coat?"

"Maybe, yes," said the maid, all a-twitter with wonder. "I have no doubt he dons his brave clothing then."

"So!" said the child, threading another needle. "May one speak with Love if one meets him?"

The serving man laughed gaily.

"Aye, to be sure," she cried. "Wherefore not? 'Twould be but a lonely day were there no honeyed speeches."

"So!" she said again, and was silent, but her eyes were very thoughtful, and that night as she said her beads she added another prayer, and went to bed with cheeks aglow.

It was the time of the barley harvest, and the little Lady Lucile loved the whispers that ran through the field of bearded grain, so that she would take her book of Hours and sit there for the space of a whole afternoon at whites, her maids content, for they could gossip in the stableyard then, or hang together and tell tales of sunnier climes and happier days than now, when they were free, and before they had heard the dread name of Bernard the Chief, or, as most folks now called him, the Sparrow-hawk.

The day after she had worked at the tapestry she went out into the barley field with cheeks aglow, walked the whole width of the field, and sat down beneath the hedge where wild clematis wreathed the branches in feathery masses of silver-grey, and purple sloes gleamed like dusky eyes amongst the gold and green of the leaves.

As on the day when she had been brought hither, poppies danced a wanton measure in the breeze, white camion blossoms swayed like maids in a dream, and gaudy marigolds blinked their petals as the hot sun poured down upon them. Little Lady Lucile lay back upon the bank, closed her eyes, and listened for the song of the wind among the barley sheaves. Soft and low, faint and clear, like echoes from the revels of the Wise Wee Folk, she caught its refrain, and smiled to find how it fitted in with

dreams of her own weaving. There was the sea's wild note mingled with the laughter of spring, the panting breath of summer and the whisper of a west wind, than a wail of sorrow for the parting of the year, and a graver, deeper note breathing of something of which she knew not the meaning of yet.

Then slowly the sun faded, the colour went from the sky, a grey mist crept up from the pebbly beach, and the dun barley field with its scarlet poppies and azure cornflowers melted into a colourless void. Fog such as sometimes sweeps inland from a steel-grey heaving sea, and my Lady Lucile alone, save for the wind among the barley sheaves.

He came then, this wonderful elfish sprite, who had danced in upon her moods before, wearing, as was his wont, a blue cloak, his curls like the golden wheatears of San Fe, where the wind is soft and the skies are always blue.

He came before her, bending low, and little Lady Lucile kept her eyes closed, for she knew if she opened them too soon the vision would fade.

"Art alone, my Lady Lucile?" he said.

"How sweet his voice was—how low!"

She answered him by a sign, for she feared to speak.

"Tell me," he pleaded, and his voice had a winning note. "Tell me, doth the Chief tarry at the house upon the hill?"

She shook her head.

What strange questions he asked, and how odd was his fashion of wooing!

"Dost remember La Vendee, little Lady Lucile?" he asked; and with that she opened her eyes. How should Love know of La Vendee?

Mystery of mysteries, he was still there. He had not vanished as ever before.

Her eyes grew wistful.

"Dost know La Vendee, too?" she queried, her little voice sharp with a misery no child should know.

"Aye," he said abruptly. "I come from thence."

She held out piteous, pleading hands.

"Dost know my mother, Mademoiselle Charlotte?" she cried. "I hear my serving maids tell of her. 'Tis whispered the Chief loved her too well."

There was sound oddly like an oath from the blue-clad figure in the mist. But Lady Lucile was used to oaths and took no heed.

"My mother," she pleaded. "Tell me of her."

"He came a little nearer."

"She mourns a daughter," he said. "She has sworn vengeance."

Her heart beat fast.

"How?" she queried. "On the Chief?"

"Aye," he said. "But needs must wait. Another twelvemonth and 'twill be time enow."

A dull rhythm throbbed through the gloom, and she strove to see his face.

"How shall I know?" she queried, for her wits were sharp.

"In the time of the barley harvest," he said. "Thou shalt hear a song among the sheaves."

"So!" she said, and smiled. "Good-bye, Love. I will be here waiting."

She tarried a little longer, tarried till the splash of oars below told her that the blue-clad figure had vanished from her ken, then sighed again as the wind swept through the bearded barley.

"A whole year," she sighed. "I must possess my soul in patience."

That winter my Lady Lucile worked hard at her tapestry, so that the Loves and the Hours and the Graces were finished, and when the Sparrow-hawk came back from one of his marauding adventures he found the needlework hung in the inner hall, and praised the diligence and handiwork.

"How so?" he said, and stared at her as he had never stared at her before.

"Thou art an industrious wench."

Never had he called her wench before, and her cheeks flamed.

"I am Lucile of La Vendee," she told him proudly, and he rolled with laughter.

"How now?" he cried. "How now? The minx hath a proud spirit. See now, how old art thou, pretty one?"

"I shall be sixteen next moon," she answered him proudly.

He seemed surprised, and thought for a while in silence; then he summoned the old priest, who, fat and mumbling, knew little save his book and his prayers.

"I will wed the Lady Lucile at the time of the next barley harvest," he said. "Do thou see she is in readiness. Teach her all that a wife must have heed, the duty of humility, meekness, and how to keep a still tongue for her lord's sake."

If Lucile heard she took no heed, but all noticed that from that time she bore herself even more proudly and communed much with herself apart. Likewise too