

HILARY'S WEDDING DOWER.

(By GEORGE E. WALSH in *N. Y. Independent.*)

A SOFT, balmy breeze was sighing through the tall pine trees, and rustling a marshy bed of coarse wire grass that flourished on the banks of a small lagoon in Southern Florida. A few Northern song birds, happy in their Southern home, were echoing their familiar thrills from the dense intricacies of a neighbouring cypress swamp. The unusual bellowing of a bull alligator arose from the marshy lake occasionally, and hushed the croaking frogs into silence; while the fierce cries of voracious hawks, circling around in the air, startled the smaller singers in their innocent enjoyment. The distant crack of some teamster's whip, clear and sharp as the report of a rifle, sounded through the pine woods in unison with the long drawn "Git up" of the "cracker" settler.

These were the only sounds that broke the oppressive silence and lonesomeness of the place. A small, Cracker log-home stood on the summit of a knoll just back of the lagoon, surrounded on two sides by an orange grove and on the other two by pine woods. A half visible sandy road began at the door of the log house, and wound its sinuous way into the pines, disappearing gradually into semi-darkness. The golden fruit of the orange trees, the pendant blossoms of the climbing jasmine, the huge roses of every hue and shade, decorated the lonesome house and its surroundings with the richest gems that Nature can produce. The beauty of the flowers was no more attractive than their odour, which scented the air with the delicate fragrance of a dozen perfumes.

Hilary Benson, clad in a loose-fitting, poorly-made stained dress of some unknown hue, was working quietly among her rose bushes. A broad-brimmed sun bonnet shielded her face from the glare of the sun. Her hands, once small, shapely and pretty, were sunburnt, stained with the juice of fruits, and dirty with the fresh soil. The clear complexion of her face was gradually taking on the same dull brown colour of her hands, while her long locks of hair were falling carelessly over brow and shoulders.

She was not a pretty picture thus attired, nor was her appearance neat, tidy and attractive. She was conscious of this, too, and occasionally, with a twinge of conscience, she would straighten herself up, and try to smooth out the locks of stray hair, brush out the wrinkles in her dress, and glance ruefully at her spoiled hands.

"It's no use, though," she burst out, petulantly, as she stopped once in the midst of this process. "I can't be tidy, and clean, and— and pretty, as I once was. I don't see anyone down here, and Jim isn't a bit like he used to be. He's getting low, and rough, and dirty—just like all the Crackers. And I—"

She looked down at her poor, soiled garments, and then continued:

"Yes, I'm getting so, too."

Unable to contain her feelings longer, she burst into a flood of tears. Her soil-stained hands were clasped over her face, while the tears trickled slowly between her fingers. Violent sobs shook her slight frame, and made the old, ill-fitting dress shake and bob about in the most ludicrous manner. When she had finished crying she dried her eyes, and as if half-reluctant her show of weakness, she plucked a rose and said softly to herself:

"And yet I love these flowers, and fruits, and the birds. If I could only have companions—some one to talk to. It would be—"

She gave a quick start and uttered a little feminine scream. Standing within ten yards of her, smiling, apparently, at the ludicrous evolutions through which the queer, old-fashioned dress had been passing, stood a stranger, holding the bridle of a Cracker pony in his right hand. The smile instantly faded from view and the face assumed a grave expression.

"I beg pardon, Miss, at this intrusion," he began, in a clear bass voice; "but I need a little information. I've been in the saddle all day, riding round in a circle, I fear, and not yet at my destination. These Florida roads are very confusing. Can you direct me to Mr. Benson's?—Jim Benson, I believe they call him."

Hilary had time to collect her thoughts during the time it took the stranger to make these remarks; and when the question was put to her she replied quickly, showing no traces of her recent feelings in her voice:

"You will not have to go far to find that place. I know Mr. Benson well, and he lives right here."

She gave a sweet smile which seemed to change her whole being. Then adjusting her hat on her head, she continued:

"Jim will be here soon; I expect him every moment. Meanwhile, you can put your horse up in the stable, and make yourself comfortable. You must be tired after such a long ride. I know from experience that it is very fatiguing to ride through these pine woods. I used to go with Jim on fox chases when we first came down here; but I don't any more."

"Then you're from the North, too, I judge," responded the stranger, evidently glad to find a Northerner in this far-off wilderness.

"Yes, indeed, I am," said Hilary, emphatically. "And I wish I was back in New York again."

She checked her enthusiasm, blushed violently, and continued, with more restraint:

"I like these pine woods, and the flowers, and the fruits, and the beautiful birds; but life gets monotonous down here. I don't have many companions, and Jim is away a great deal. It gets very, very lonesome."

Unconsciously she uttered the last sentence in such a sad tone that the stranger's attention was attracted by it rather than the words.

"I suppose so," he remarked sentimentally.

The small pony was properly cared for in the primitive sort of barn, and then the two turned towards the house. The loud crack of a whip reached their ears, and a lumbering ox cart was seen to

emerge from the pine woods, rolling slowly down the heavy, sandy road.

"Is that your husband, now?" inquired the stranger.

"That is Jim," replied Hilary, evasively, looking towards the heavy cart.

She left her brother and the stranger talking about orange groves and Florida land, and entered the small log house shortly afterwards, to prepare the evening meal. She knew well enough the meaning of the stranger's visit to her home. Her brother was one of the "land poor" Crackers who was anxious to dispose of some of his Florida fruit and vegetable land to Northern settlers and speculators. He had been advertising in the county paper and had made arrangements with several real estate men to send possible purchasers out to him.

Jim Benson was a Northerner by birth, and he had enough of the Yankee spirit in him to devise schemes to get rid of his land for fair prices. Purchasers would come to him when they would not go to any one else. His strict eye to business was called "luck" by many; but he knew better than to believe in such a fickle goddess. He had come South to make money, and, though he always complained of being poor, he was really getting rich fast. So far as ready cash was concerned he was poor; but his lands were increasing in value every year. Nevertheless, he had degenerated. Money-making had absorbed all of his time and attention, and he had gradually sunk into the low state of things which are characteristic of those isolated sections of country. He had adopted the peculiar vernacular of the Cracker tongue, and had lost all of his former habits of cleanliness in dress, speech, and manners. He was careless, slovenly, and dirty to a degree that would have astonished his Northern friends. The tendency to fall into such ways is strong in all isolated places, and Jim had simply yielded to it with a degree of passivity that was more than common.

Hilary, on the contrary, vainly strove to keep up the old standard of respectability. She vigorously refused to adopt any of the Southern expressions, and watched her language carefully. Her garments were neatly made, and for years she tried to make them look pretty and tasteful. But Jim constantly complained of lack of money, and she could not get the material to make new ones. Then she patched and repatched, made and remade the old ones until there seemed to be no possible way of making them look better. Things began to grow worse. She had to beg, coax, scold, and demand new household utensils. Every cent that her brother made he wanted to put in land, and she had fairly to wring a few dollars from him to get the ordinary necessities of life.

This was not the sort of life that the girl had expected when her brother had made the proposition to her to go to Florida and keep house for him, while they cultivated their orange grove. She had gladly given her consent, for she loved her brother, and thought that she would enjoy the warm, balmy Southern climate. Five years later she was dissatisfied with her bargain, and with good cause.

Often she would look in her small mirror—a relic of her early home—and note the marks of change on her pretty face. There was a healthy glow on her cheeks, but that was gradually changing into a brown, sallow hue. Continual drudgery, irritation, and longing for companionship were also leaving their marks on her knitted brow.

This afternoon she threw off her hat and hurried into her room to inspect her flushed face in the mirror. She started back with an expression of horror as she caught a glimpse of herself. Then she broke down in laughter, which finally gave place to an expression of mortification.

Her face was streaked with lines of dirt in the most ludicrous manner. If she had painted herself for the clown in the circus she could not have made a better effect. The whole cause of it flashed across her mind in an instant. Before the appearance of the stranger on the scene she had clasped her soil-stained hands to her face, and the tears, mingled with the dirt, had completed a picture that was truly mortifying.

She looked into the glass again, and then laughed at the sight until the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"What a sight I must have made," she broke forth. "He must have been laughing at me all the time I was talking to him. But, then, I don't care; he thinks I'm Jim's wife, and I won't tell him otherwise."

Consoling herself with this thought she soon made her toilet, and stirred around briskly to prepare the meal for the evening.

It was nearly sundown when Jim Benson entered the house accompanied by the stranger, whom he introduced to her as Mr. Dawson.

"He's come down here ter buy some land," he continued, after the introduction; "an' I jes' guess I've got some that'll suit him. He ain't goin' way from here till he sees some of the purtiest land in Florida. We ain't goin' ter charge ye nothin' fur yer board while ye stay here, so don't get alarmed 'bout how long ye stay here."

"But if I stay here for any length of time I should prefer to pay board," Mr. Dawson replied.

"Waal, we won't talk about that now." Jim answered, effecting a sort of compromise which he intended to take advantage of if the stranger concluded not to buy of him.

"Hilary there ain't much use ter strangers down here," he continued, jerking his finger in the direction of his sister. "I 'specks she's mighty glad to see ye, Mr. Dawson."

"Why, Jim, of course I'm glad to see anyone," quickly replied the girl, flushing up in spite of her effort at control. "That is only natural. It is a little lonesome here."

The visitor was not a little interested in the change that had been made in the appearance of Hilary. Her face was flushed by her exertions over the fire; her eyes sparkled with joy and excitement, while a neat and very becoming dress had replaced the old-fashioned garden gown. Her hair was neatly combed back and tied in a simple knot on the top of her head.

Everything about the home was neat and tidy, showing that an experienced housekeeper had been at work. The meal was simple