

Marriage of Barry Wicklow

By RUBY M. AYRES

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(Continued from Yesterday)

"Yes, it was; and you who kept him up at some theater without knowing who he was, or what his name was. I should have thought, Mary, that you'd been taught better than that by this time. Your own marriage—"

"She broke in tremulously. "We don't want to speak about that. I made a mistake, I know, but it's over and done with, and Hazel isn't married, or thinking of getting married."

Daniels scowled. "Ashton reminds me of Jim Bentley, anyway. He's got that same soft way of looking at a girl; that same soft tongue. Bah! It makes me sick. There are plenty decent lads round Bedumid if she wants a husband, without fawning after gentlemen in positions above her own. That young Norman Wicklow has asked her more than once, I know."

Mrs. Bentley flushed. "Oh, no! She would surely have told me if he had."

The farmer looked superior. "No girl tells her mother any more than she thinks she will," he said unkindly. "His sister's eyes filled with tears; Hazel was all that was left to her from the wreck of her pitiful marriage; and she could not bear to think that perhaps she had not got all the girl's confidence."

Joe Daniels kicked off his boots. "It's bedtime," he said gruffly. He went up upstairs, but Hazel's mother sat for a long time lost in thought, the tears dropping fast on the dainty work she was doing.

The tragedy of her own marriage was a thing long since ended and forgotten, but it was an endless dread with her that some day her own life's story might find an echo in her daughter's."

Young as Hazel was, she had already had half the boys of Bedumid at her heels, and she had turned up her nose at them all. "As if I could marry any of them, mother," she said, with a faint disdain. "They're so rough. I don't want to live on a farm all my life. If ever I marry it must be a man in a good position—a man who can take me to live in London."

"She's beginning to talk like they do in London," her uncle said once, disgustedly. "I don't know where she gets her fine words and manners from."

Mrs. Bentley knew; knew that the refinement and charm with which Hazel's father had captured her 20 years ago had been inherited by his daughter. He had been a fickle, mercurial man, but he had made her more miserable during the three years of their married life than she had ever believed it possible for a woman to be; and yet down to the day of his death she had loved him and thought him the most attractive man she had ever met.

Over and over again she could see him in Hazel, some little-erick of speech, some expression in the eyes, and back would come the old heart-ache.

Her husband had been thrown from a restive horse he was trying to train, and had broken his back. They had brought him home to her on an improvised stretcher and laid him down at her feet in the little parlor where she had spent so many lonely hours, and there he had died. It had been impossible to move him; impossible to do anything to prolong his life.

She could see it all as plainly as if it had been but yesterday, though it was 17 long years ago.

He had looked up at her as he lay there with a little flash of his old smile.

"Send for the governor; he'll come now," he said weakly; and he had been right. The old man who had refused to acknowledge her or his son's marriage, came a few minutes before that son died.

There had been no time for explanations, or even for forgiveness. Jim just looked at his father and pointed to Hazel—a little curly-haired mite of 2 years then, hiding shyly behind her mother's skirts.

"Don't be hard on the kid," he said with a touch of anxiety in his weak voice. "She's all a Bentley, anyway."

And a moment later he had died; without a word to his wife, without a look for the girl who had loved him so devotedly.

Her husband's people had offered to take Hazel, but the offer had been refused indignantly, and Mary Bentley had never seen any of them since. It was then that Joe Daniels stepped into the breach and brought her back home to Cleave farm, and she and Hazel had lived there ever since.

And Hazel was more "all Bentley" every day. Lately, too, she had asked a great many questions about her father's people.

"I don't know anything about them," her mother told her. "They never recognized me. I only saw your grandfather once in my life, and then he did not speak half a dozen words to me."

But she knew that in a quiet way Hazel had tried to find out something about them. Once she had found her poring over some old books of her father's—an old Bible with a list of names written on the blank page in front.

She had looked up at her mother with puzzled eyes. "If my father was James Bentley," she said, "he must have had all these brothers and sisters. Where are they all? They can't all be dead?" Mrs. Bentley turned away from the eager questioning with a little pang at her heart.

"I know nothing about them," she said again quietly. "They did not consider I was good enough for them."

Hazel heard the hurt tone in her mother's voice; she got up and kissed her impulsively. "Poor little mother! But then they didn't know you."

Mrs. Bentley lived through all these little incidents again as she sat alone in the lamp-lit parlor and thought over her brother's words. Joe loved Hazel, she knew, and perhaps for that reason he was prejudiced against Norman Wicklow and Mr. Ashton, seeing in both of them possible suitors for his niece.

She rose presently, turned out the lamp and went upstairs. She passed Hazel's door, and stood for a moment outside, but there was no sound from within, and she went on to her own room.

After all, age and grey hair cannot make a woman's heart old; and tonight Mary Bentley felt herself to be once again the girl who had crept out of her father's house in the early dawn of a spring morning to be married to Hazel's father; and she took his portrait from the locker she always wore round her neck and kissed it before she got into bed and cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER VIII.

"There's a letter for you, Mr. Ashton," Hazel said the following morning, meeting Barry in the doorway.

It was quite early—only just after 7, but Barry had developed an astonishing taste for early rising since he came to Cleave farm. From his window he had seen Hazel out in the yard feeding the chickens, and he had raced through his toilet and come down in time to meet her at the door.

"A letter—for me?" he echoed blankly. He could not think who could have written to him; he had given his address to nobody except his uncle. It was something of a relief, therefore, to see that it was his uncle's writing.

"Dear Barry," Mr. Wicklow wrote, "as I have not heard anything of you I thought I had better write and ask how you are progressing. Norman's ankle still keeps him a prisoner, I am glad to say, but he has written several times to a certain lady who shall be nameless, and, needless to say, the letters have not been posted. I had a note from Mrs. Dudley this morning asking very urgently for your address. She rang up yesterday when I was out. What am I to do? Please let me have instructions. Wishing you good luck—Your affectionate uncle JOHN WICKLOW."

Barry frowned. "You don't look very pleased," Hazel said, smiling at his serious face. "Is it bad news?"

Barry tore the letter across and across. "I hate letters from people," he said, irritably. "I hate answering them. I came away for a holiday. My brow cleared and he smiled. "I shan't answer it anyway," he said, boyishly.

"Is that the way you treat all your correspondents?" she asked. "I hate letter writing," Barry said again, evasively. He wondered what the dickens Agnes wanted his address for. He had done with her. It seemed ages and ages since he had danced obedient attendance at her heels.

It was strange how a man could change in a short time; his eyes wandered to the girl beside him. For the first time he saw that she, too, had a letter, which she was folding and refolding rather nervously in her hands.

"Who has been writing to you?" he asked, abruptly.

She looked up startled, flushing a little. She put her hands behind her back. "Nobody very much," she said, quickly. "I get very few letters, but—oh!" she had dropped the letter.

Barry grabbed for it. He glanced at the writing on the envelope as he returned it to her. It was Norman's. For a moment he did not speak. There was a bitter feeling of jealousy in his heart. So, in spite of his father, Norman had managed to get one letter through?

"I suppose it's from that chap in the photograph?" he said, shortly. She did not answer.

The blood rose to Barry's face. "Is it?" he insisted.

She looked up at him. "Really, Mr. Ashton, I can't see what it's got to do with you." She moved past him into the house.

He stood where she had left him till breakfast was ready. He was in no mood for company. Hazel glanced at his sullen face as he took his seat at the table and a little smile lit her eyes.

Joe Daniels had had his breakfast earlier and gone out. Barry and the two women were alone.

They were all rather silent. Mrs. Bentley looked a little pale, as if she had not slept very well.

"Any letters this morning, Hazel?" she asked, presently.

"Yes, mother, Mr. Ashton had one, and there was one for me from Mr. Wicklow." She glanced at Barry as she spoke.

Mrs. Bentley looked up. "From mother's voice; she got up and kissed her impulsively. "Poor little mother! But then they didn't know you."

Mr. Wicklow—it is quite a long time since we heard from him. Is there any news?"

Barry's spoon tinkled agitatedly against his cup for a second as he waited for Hazel's reply.

"He says that he has sprained his ankle," she said, evenly, "but that if it is better he hopes to be able to come down tomorrow—for the week-end."

Barry raised startled eyes from his eggs and bacon; his face had flushed crimson.

"Coming here, for the week-end," he stammered.

Hazel looked at him calmly. "So he says—if his ankle is better."

"There was a poignant silence. "Does Mr. Ashton know Norman?" Mrs. Bentley asked in faint surprise. Hazel shook her head.

"You know he doesn't, mother." "I thought it might be possible," the elder woman answered. She looked at Barry. "Once or twice I have thought that Mr. Ashton and Mr. Wicklow were somehow alike; only in expression, of course."

Hazel laughed. "Mother! They're not a bit alike."

But Mrs. Bentley stuck to her point. "It's only an occasional expression, of course," she admitted. "But every now and then something in Mr. Ashton's eyes—"

She broke off apologetically. "I am flattered," said Barry, dryly. He had noticed that Mrs. Bentley had alluded to his cousin as "Norman." They must be on very friendly terms for them to call him by his Christian name, he thought, jealously.

As soon as breakfast was over he went out for a long walk by himself. He knew that Hazel came to the door and looked after him as he strode away down the garden, but he did not turn his head. He was smarting with jealousy. He believed that she had deliberately tried to hurt him by her frequent reference to his cousin.

(Continued in The Bee Tomorrow)

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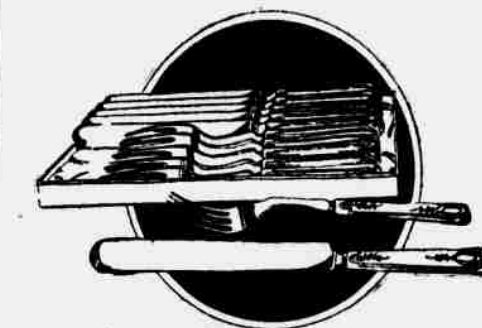
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