

## Romance of a Pink Gown

By Alice Josephine Johnson

Miss Lester made little Millie Currer very happy when she offered to give her piano lessons. The child was passionately fond of music, and to take lessons had been her dearest dream, but there had seemed small chance that it would ever be realized. Millie had no piano, and the aunt with whom she had lived since her mother's death had no money to spare for luxuries.

Miss Lester had come to Hardwick only the previous year, hoping the country air would benefit her invalid mother, but her hopes were in vain, for her mother failed instead of gaining, and died six months later. The young lady staid on with her faithful old servant in the pretty little house she had rented, feeling that one place was much like another in her sorrow and loneliness.

Millie had been one of her first friends in Hardwick, for the child used to linger outside the house to listen as she played, until the lady discovered her, and invited her to come in. And then came about the proposal that almost took Millie's breath away, that Miss Lester should give her lessons, and that she should come every day to practice on the beautiful grand piano. Millie was an affectionate child, and she almost worshipped the kind friend who had opened a new and delightful world to her, and her grateful little heart longed to do something in return. It all seemed quite impossible, but it was destined to be realized beyond her fondest hopes. And this is the way it came about:

On the following May Judge Hancock's little girl gave a lawn party and invited all the children of the village. Poor little Millie had no dress to wear, and she sadly admitted it when Miss Lester asked her if she was going.

The young lady said no more then, but just as Millie had finished her practicing and was preparing to go home, her teacher came into the room with a lovely gown in her hand.

It was a pink cashmere, embroidered with tiny sprays of lilies of the valley.

Margaret smiled at Millie's admiration, but there were tears in her eyes as she said, half to herself: "What happy days I have seen in that dress!" and then continued, as Millie looked at her inquisitively: "My father bought it for me the winter we spent in Paris. I wore it on my birthday, and we had a little fete; we four only, my mother, and father and—one friend."

"What a lovely present! and did you have other presents on your birthday?" asked Millie, who loved to hear of those gala days which she had never known.

"Oh, yes, books and candy, and dozens of pink roses and masses of lilies of the valley to match my gown, and a beautiful diamond locket, containing a miniature."

"Oh, Miss Lester, may I see the locket?" asked the child eagerly.

Her friend looked suddenly grave and stern as she said: "No, I haven't it on now," and Millie, though longing to know if it were lost, or what its fate, dared ask no more questions. But the next moment, the young lady surprised her by telling her she was to have the gown and wear it to the children's party, and inviting her then and there to go to the dressmaker's to have her measure taken, so that the work of making over the dress could be begun at once.

Millie could hardly believe her good fortune, and for the next few days could think of little else but the approaching party, and the beautiful pink gown.

At last the day came, and when she was really dressed in all her finery, her delight knew no bounds.

She threw her arms about Miss Lester's neck, exclaiming: "Why, you are really my fairy godmother!" And this godmother had provided a very complete little outfit, even to the slippers, which, though not of glass, were of the prettiest pink kid, and an exact match for the pink stockings, which were of the same shade as the dress.

How lovely Millie looked, and how she enjoyed staring at herself in her friend's long mirror! It was hard to tell which was the prettier sight, the child herself, or her innocent delight in her appearance.

The party itself was fairytale to her, with the beautiful lawn and garden, lighted by Chinese lanterns as darkness fell, the luxurious mansion, the gayly dressed children, and best of all the music, for a small orchestra was provided, and there was dancing on the broad piazza.

There was a lull in the music while the performers were having refreshments, and Millie was playing an exciting game of drop the handkerchief in the summer house, when a child came running to join them. As he took his place in the ring, he said: "Mrs. Hancock wants some one to play for 'Going to Jerusalem,' and I was afraid she would ask me, so I got out of it. Somebody told her that you could play, Millie Currer, but she does not know where you are, so you are all right."

Millie flushed at the mere thought of playing before so many people, and she was tempted to remain where she was but Miss Lester's influence made itself felt. She did not formulate it, but she felt unconsciously that since her kind teacher had done so much for her, it was only right she should make some use of what had been so generously given her. And so, despite the remonstrances of the others, she left the game and returned to the house.

Very timidly she made known her errand to Mrs. Hancock, who smiled a kind approval upon her, as she thanked her, and told her that the children had run away, thinking the game was given up, but would probably soon return. In the meantime would not Millie play one of her pieces? Mrs. Hancock asked.

There were several people in the drawing-room, among them a gentleman whose appearance had created some excitement from its being so unexpected.

Mr. Darrah was an old friend of the

Hancocks' but it was several years since they had seen him, owing to his long absence abroad. He happened to be traveling through their part of the country, and finding that he should be obliged to pass the night at Eastern Junction, only ten miles distant from Hardwick, he had hired a horse and carriage and driven over to call upon his friends.

They were delighted to see him, and hospitably urged him to spend the night. He declined the invitation, however, as he wished to take the first train in the morning from the junction, and so must drive back that evening.

They assured him that he could not escape dining with them, as they had postponed their dinner until eight o'clock on account of the children's party. He expressed his pleasure at being able to do so, and they were in full tide of earnest conversation when Millie came into the room.

He was in the midst of a sentence when his eyes fell upon her, and he suddenly stopped, evidently much impressed in some way by her appearance.

He watched her intently while she played, and at the close, when others were applauding her for having done so remarkably well, he went over to the piano and began to talk to her.

Mrs. Hancock, seeing his interest in the child, proposed to Millie that she should take him to the refreshment tent for an ice. The arrangement was most agreeable to both of her guests, who were soon on such friendly terms that the gentleman went so far as to admire his companion's dress.

"If you can buy such pretty things in Hardwick," said he, "I shall advise my lady friends to come here to do their spring shopping."

"I guess we were never in our Hardwick stores," answered Millie, laughing merrily at the idea. "No, indeed, this dress came from Paris!" and not without pride, she glanced at her companion to observe the effect she was producing by her surprising statement.

"Miss Lester," said Millie.

He drew a sharp breath. "Miss Margaret Lester?" he demanded.

"Yes, that is her name," replied Millie, surprised in her turn at his excitement.

"And she is not married?" continued Mr. Darrah.

"No, indeed. She is all alone. Her mother died last year, and she is very sad and lonely."

"Both father and mother dead! Poor girl!" he said, softly, and seemed lost in thought for a moment, but soon resumed his catechism.

"Miss Lester," said Millie.

He asked abruptly. "Where do you shop?" he inquired, smiling, though his voice had a curious sharp ring.

"Oh, no, of course not. I never was there. My music teacher gave me this."

"And her name?" he asked, breathlessly.

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"Where does she live?" he asked abruptly. "Not in this town?"

"Yes, just below here!" Millie replied, "you can see the house from here; that yellow one with the cupola," pointing it out.

"Thank you very much," said he.

He was outside the grounds, hurrying down the street.

Millie looked about her for a minute blankly enough, but soon made her way to the refreshment tent and gazed herself on her own account.

At eight o'clock the barges which Judge Hancock had provided were driven to the door to take the little guests to their respective homes. As Millie made her adieus, Mrs. Hancock asked her what she had done with Mr. Darrah, and Millie told the story of his sudden disappearance.

Mrs. Hancock and her husband looked at each other in surprise, which increased as their guest failed to appear. They were not aware that he was a friend of Miss Lester, whom they knew but slightly.

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