

An Unconscious Instrument.

By Louise Hardenbergh Adams.



Great swirling tongues of flame danced among the snapping pine logs in the rude fireplace. Nellie Caperton's happy face glowed in the firelight, as she turned in her chair to smile at her husband. "Oh, Kent!" she exclaimed, "it's so good to be home with you again. Why! you can never imagine how I've longed to be here and even now I can hardly believe I'm close to you, at last, and before our own hearthstone."

"I know it's awful good to have you back again," Kent responded, drawing his chair closer to hers. "My goodness, Nell! Ontario seemed a billion miles off to me—while you were there."

"And Saskatchewan was fully two billion miles away, when I thought of you out here—all alone," Nellie laughed; "even Baby failed to comfort me when I was foolish enough to want you."

"Then I can forget my great jealousy of the small baggage you gave my name," Kent said quizzically. "Say, Nell, what happened to him. Your letters were so full of hints that I couldn't make head or tail of; then you evaded all my questions so cleverly, I'm sure there's something that I ought to know."

Nellie laughed merrily. "I'm just wild to tell you about Kent Junior's first remarkable adventure," she declared, "but I really couldn't do him justice in a letter."

"Seems to me—he's making a very early beginning," Kent said jokingly, "but there's no telling what he may do, with such an illustrious mother." "Thanks," Nellie laughed, flashing him a bright look. "Kent, dear, I shall always feel so thankful for my visit; Baby was the means of doing so much good."

"So you kept saying in all of your last letters. See here, Nell," Kent cried, "you remind me of old Daddy Price. Do you remember him? I'm jes' b'ilin' over with good stories, he would quaver out, 'ye'd like to hear 'em, an' mebbe—someday—when I git 'round to it. I'll take a space o' time an' tell ye all o' 'em.'"

"I'll take my 'space o' time,'" Nellie laughed. "Kent, before I went back, it never seemed as if I'd been away for five years," she said reflectively, "and that five years had passed since we stood together in the old parlor at home, and you were so anxious to be married just right you prompted the minister."

Kent threw back his head with a ringing laugh. "I wanted that tie done with double knots," he chuckled, "for I meant to have it strong enough to last forever."

"Kent, I hadn't been home an hour before I saw pitiful changes in all the family," Nellie said abruptly. "Mother had such a worried look, and her face settled in the saddest lines when she wasn't talking it made my heart ache. Poor Father, he had changed just as much or more, and really seemed like a broken old man; and Lottie! why you know I expected to find her a jolly sort of a girl; she was always such a bright, merry little thing. But I just looked at her in amazement; I couldn't understand it; for she went about as if she was tired to death all the time, and her great brown eyes had a pathetic look in them that kept me in misery."

"It couldn't have been very cheerful for you," Kent remarked quietly. "Oh! they tried to hide everything, and make it lovely," Nellie said hastily, "but you know, Kent, love can see through all subterfuges, and I very soon felt the strain of what they were, so anxious to hide from

me. The only person in the house who didn't seem to have any special burden, or anxiety, was Aunt Abby. You remember her. Her house burned down and she went to Father's to live after we came west. She's very feeble, so Mother gave her the ell room, the one back of hers; there's only the old clothes-press closet between the rooms, and as Aunt Abby saved a few of her things, Mother gave her the closet to keep them in. She's a dear old soul, but a dreadful putterer. I soon saw that her trying to help them was a great worry to Mother and Lottie."

"That's beautiful!" Nellie exclaimed, watching the greedy flames run along the bark of the great pine log Kent threw on the fire. "I soon saw things that convinced me each one had their own botherations," she went on, "and I deliberately set to work to find them out. Mother troubled me the most, so I began with her. We were alone in her room one day, and after talking about the things that mothers understand, I turned on her suddenly, and asked: 'What's making you so unhappy, Mother?'"

"Poor Mother, she was surprised, and began to cry; then before she knew it I had my arms about her, and when you can do that with Mother you've got her defenses down, and then she had to tell me everything."

"I can well understand that," Kent laughed. "Oh, I didn't mean to interrupt you," he apologized; "go on. I'm anxiously waiting to hear everything."

"If you'd seen Mother, Kent, you would have felt as sorry as I did for her," Nellie said sadly. "I never saw her so nervous; and it was very hard for her to tell a coherent story, but she kept insisting she'd feel better if I knew it all."

"It seems Mother's old friend, Mrs. Gowen, came out to the farm to spend the day. She's been in the habit of doing so for years, and Mother always let her wander about alone, as she was fond of doing. That day she was all over the place; even went to the barn to see a new horse. When she came to put on her wraps and go home she couldn't find her shawl, a very valuable camel's hair, worth a small fortune. She was sure that she'd laid it on Mother's bed, when she came in the morning, and Mother had seen it there; but it was gone. They hunted high and low, but they couldn't find the least trace of it, and at last Mrs. Gowen had to wear Mother's cape home."

"Now the horrid part of it was Mrs. Gowen was so mad—she's old, but that don't excuse her—that when she finally had to give up her shawl as lost, she insinuated that Mother had taken it, and that was enough to start the story that Mother was a thief. I don't for an instant think any one believed such a thing, but they were just as bad, for they repeated the story, and at last it reached Mother's ears—and nearly broke her heart."

"Great guns, Nell!" Kent ejaculated sharply, "how could any one suspect our mother of stealing, or even hint such an atrocious thing? What did the woman mean?"

"Mrs. Gowen's grief over the loss of her shawl was greater than any she ever showed for her husband," Nellie said, with a touch of irony in her voice. "Perhaps she did value it more, and felt its loss as she never had his. It seemed so from the way she talked. At last Mother couldn't stand it any longer, so she went to see Mrs. Gowen, and offered to pay her for the shawl. I know from the little Mother was willing to tell me about it Mrs. Gowen treated her shamefully," Nellie cried in indignation, "then she demanded an exorbitant sum, and positively refused to accept anything less."

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