

## Nolly and Nelly.

"My dear chap, what on earth is it that prevents you from going boldly up to the girl, grabbing her hand, and singing out, 'Nelly, I love you; will you love me?'"

Nolly Collingham stared at his friend for some moments, then, taking out his handkerchief, wiped his forehead.

"What's to hinder you from doing that?" repeated Jack Anstey. "It would be as easy as—"

"As hanging; is that the word you're in search of?" suggested the other. "If it's not the word, it should be the word, for it exactly applies to my case. Everyone knows that the actual operation of hanging doesn't take very long, but the walk from the condemned cell to the ladder must seem half round the globe. I believe that I'm constitutionally incapable of facing that girl in cold blood and singing out point blank—well, what you say I should sing out. I should know! I've tried it every day during the past week. What opportunities I've had! Man alive! chaps have complained to me that they never had a chance of saying a dozen words to the girls whom they wanted to marry. Well, they weren't like me—that's all I've got to say. I can't complain of being without chances. Why, to-day alone I was with her long enough to discuss the most interminable question, and yet nothing came of it, worse luck!"

"Well, you can't blame her, at any rate," said Major Anstey. "She too gives you your chance. If you only muster up courage enough to call her 'Nelly' she'll jump at you."

"At me? on me, you mean."

"Not she. Men are too scarce. Chaps like you are the scarcest of all. The V. C.'s are the scarcest of the scarce. Have you ever told her how you got the V.C., by the way?"

"She never asked me; she's the only girl I ever met who didn't. I believe that's how I first came to think of her. Some of 'them ask me twice over. They forget, you know, that they did it before, and they think that I like bragging about it. They little know the agony—oh, I wish to goodness I'd let you lie among the wreck of your guns, Jack. What on earth possessed me to pull around the troop because you happened to be knocked down I can't imagine. Oh, here comes the general. We may give up all idea of having a moment to ourselves."

It was pretty plain to the majority of the people who were staying at Cranstoun Towers that Captain Collingham had only to tell Nelly Barwell that he was anxious to marry her to receive the hearty acquiescence of that young woman in his proposal. Everyone could see that he was in love with Nelly, and everyone could see, moreover, that Nelly saw it. She showed no reluctance to give him four or five dances of an evening, and she submitted without a word of protest to be taught all that he knew on the subject of horses.

People said that Nelly Barwell was

a very lucky young woman, and she was not disposed to disagree with them. It was, however, only when she had met Oliver Collingham that she fully appreciated how lucky she had been in refusing to marry the three men who had given her a chance of doing so during the previous eighteen months.

Perhaps it was hearing how she had won a reputation for fastidiousness that attracted Oliver to her; and for the same cause his own natural shyness had been so increased as to make him shrink from telling her that he loved her. He was naturally of a retiring temperament, though his behavior during the interviews he had had with the Afghans was not of the exact type that tended to impress this characteristic of his upon them. He had undoubtedly his forward moments, as his friend Major Anstey had said.

However this may have been, he had certainly no forward moments when in the presence of Nelly Barwell; and some young women began to exchange views on this very subject—the men never went farther than to exchange winks and nods when it was alluded to. The young women wondered how a man who could send his horse flying into the midst of an Afghan army and induce the men of his troop to follow him, could fail to muster up so small an amount of confidence as was necessary to catch a girl's hand and tell her that he loved her, and this fact shows how little they knew of men.

Nelly Barwell, however, knew something of men—had she not refused to marry three of them?—and it did not seem to trouble her greatly that, when her hostess, Lady Cranstoun, whispered to her after an evening spent by the side of Captain Collingham, "Am I to congratulate you, my dear?" she could only reply:

"Certainly I am to be congratulated on being the guest of the most delightful of women in the most delightful of houses."

Lady Cranstoun shook her head gravely. She was too good a hostess to be a matchmaker, but too good a woman to be able to refrain from matchmaking. She felt that Nelly was being badly treated; but she also knew that it was in her power to convince Captain Collingham that he had only to have five minutes—nay, three minutes—she had heard of a man's proposing to a girl in three minutes—of courage to make him the happiest of men. No, it was very provoking, to be sure, but to interfere with a view of precipitating a proposal would be indiscreet to the verge of madness.

The next day Collingham came across his friend Anstey on the way to the stables.

"I'm going to do it to-day," he said, in a resolute tone. "I've been thinking over what you said yesterday, Jack, and I've made up my mind that I've been a howling fool. Why, man alive, she can't do more than send me about my business," and he laughed with great uneasiness.

Jack Anstey slapped him on the back.

"Keep up your heart, man," he cried. "Don't you fear that she'll send you about your business. I know girls, and when I see a certain look in their eyes when a particular man is near them I know that he's all right."

"And you're sure that she—I wish I could be sure, Jack," said Collingham, doubtfully—rather more than

doubtfully. "How on earth have I a right to hope when three other chaps as good as I am—two of them a deal better—were flung by her?"

"My dear old Nolly, you're on a wrong track altogether," said Jack. "A girl like Miss Barwell will take a chap because she happens to love him, not because he has a title like Jimmy Ludbury"—Lord Ludbury was the name of one of the men refused by Nelly the previous year—"nor because he happens to have twenty thousand a year, like Algy Chorn"—the name of the second man in the list of Miss Barwell's refusals. "She'll jump at you because you happen to have caught her fancy, strange though it may appear."

"No, no; she'll not just jump at me," said Collingham. "The most that I can hope for is that she'll be so taken by surprise she may accept me before she knows what she is about."

"Well, you've disappointed her so often she may be a bit surprised at your coming to the point at last," remarked Major Anstey, with an affectation of the most cordial acquiescence.

"Anyhow I'm going to do it to-day; I've made up my mind to that," said his friend, straightening his collar with the air of a determined man.

"Let me take your temperature," suggested Anstey. "What's the order of the day?"

"Nelly, is mad on fishing, and Winifred has asked me to drive both of them to the Purl after lunch. I'm to carry the landing net."

"Oh, that's all right; if Lady Cranstoun stands over you, I do believe that you will propose after all."

"I'm afraid that she'll go away and leave us." There was actually what singing-masters call a tremolo in his voice.

"Not she," cried Anstey, encouragingly, as he continued his walk to the stables. "Not she. She'll stand by her young protegee and see fair play. She'll take the edge off her young protegee's surprise."

But it so happened that Nolly Collingham's surmise was justified by the conduct of his cousin, Lady Cranstoun. For before she had been fishing by the side of Nelly Barwell for more than twenty minutes on the banks of the picturesque stream known as the Purl, she gave an exclamation that almost justified Oliver's belief that she had a bite.

"Good gracious!" she cried. "How could I have been so idiotic! The committee meeting of the Soup and Blanket Guild takes place at four o'clock, and here am I nearly a mile away at five minutes to four. I must drive back immediately."

"Oh! what a pity!" said Nelly. "Never mind. A committee meeting of the Guild will be a new experience for me. Captain Collingham may take both rods and we'll drive back for him."

"Nothing of the sort," said Lady Cranstoun. "I've no idea of spoiling your sport. Nolly won't mind taking charge of you for the hour or so that I'll be absent; he'll show you how to get to the best parts of the stream. Won't you, Nolly?"

"I'll do my best," said he.

"Oh, it would be so good of you, Captain Collingham," said the girl, with no foolish flutter in her voice. "You'll take Winifred's rod, will you not?"

"Here it is," said Lady Cranstoun. "I hope that when I return I shall hear that you have landed a prize. Nolly."

She got into the phaeton and drove off, leaving the pair very industriously whipping the stream.

During the next quarter of an hour they had varying success. Miss Barwell succeeded in landing two small trout, using a fly of her own, but her

companion managed to get five with a grey fly.

"I think my fly is too bright for the Purl," said she, as he worked his way up to her.

"I've a spare grey. Let me tie it on for you," said he.

"I do think I'll let you as you've been kind enough to suggest it," said she. "I'm a bit tired, and it will be a rest for me."

She seated herself on the bank and he got beside her. But he fumbled so among the flies of his book that he ran a hook into his thumb—fortunately not past the barb, but quite deep enough to produce a copious stream of blood.

She gave a cry of distress.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she said. "Let me bind it up for you."

"It was my own clumsiness," said he, shaking off the ruby drops, and winding his handkerchief round the wounded thumb.

"You are binding it up most clumsily," said she. "Do let me bind it up properly. I've a bit of fine gut that will be the very thing."

He allowed himself to be persuaded, and he knelt before her while she deftly discharged the duties of a surgeon. Her little fingers crept round his larger ones with the tender touches of a tendril. Their heads were very close together, so that he could hear the faint, like sound of her breathing.

He felt that his hour had come. After two or three false starts he managed to say:

"You said you were sorry, Miss Barwell."

"And do you doubt my sincerity?" she asked. "Of course I was sorry; you did it for me, you must remember."

"Did what for you?" he asked.

"Spilt your blood," she replied. "Don't wobble your hand about like that, please."

"Oh, I'd—I wouldn't mind—"

He knew what he meant to say. He meant to say that he wouldn't mind shedding every drop of his blood for her; and he believes to this day that he would have said it all right if she hadn't made the final tie on the gut at that instant and looked up. His eyes met hers, and he fancied that there was an indignant look in hers. He examined his bound-up thumb most critically. He wondered how she had managed to wind the thin gut so evenly round it.

"You were about to say that you wouldn't mind something—what was it you wouldn't mind?" she asked.

"I—I—well, I only meant that—that I think it is so clever of you to be able to bind up a chap's thumb like a—well, it's like a rag doll that you'd find in a bran-pie at a bazaar."

He held it up, and she said, coldly, without looking at it:

"I daresay it is something like that. Anyhow I'll go on with my fishing."

She rose and walked away from him and made a cast with the utmost sangfroid. He had an uneasy feeling that she suspected what he had in his mind to say to her, and was slightly offended. Had she not refused three men inside of eighteen months?

He remained seated on the ground while she worked her way up the stream. He was nearly sure that if she had not looked at the critical moment he would have been able to tell her that it would please him to shed every drop of his blood for her. If she was a little put out, however, by her suspicion of what he was going to say, it was rather lucky, he thought that he had stopped short where he had; so that, on the whole, he had got himself very well out of a rather tight place.

In a short time Lady Cranstoun returned, and they all drove home together, Nelly Barwell laughing pleasantly and chatting briskly all the way.

When she was alone with her husband before dinner Lady Cranstoun