

The boy nodded, and walked on in silence through the turnstile, and across the field-path, until his curiosity overcoming his shyness he hazarded at last.

"You've been here before, I s'pose, mister?" Drayton laughed.

"Yes, I've been here before, no doubt," he said, "seeing I was born down yonder at the Mill. But when my father died and the place was sold, I went Lunnun ways, to see if I could make my fortune."

The boy looked in swift surprise at the young man beside him, who after all was only the son of old Drayton of the Mill, who had died a bankrupt, and left his son a legacy to his brother, the husband of the widowed mistress of the Oak farm. Still, despite the memory of his father's ruin, the lad's glance went wavering from the glittering watch-chain suspended from Drayton's waistcoat-pocket to the gloves upon his hands and the fine cloth he wore in his coat; the which this clumsy country lad had never seen the like on any one, beneath the rank of the Calthorpe gentry, while he conjectured inwardly that Drayton must have made the fortune he went to London to win.

"You're come down for the wedding, maybe?" the lad suggested presently when, his wonder having had time to cool, a sudden surmise struck him that all Drayton's fine dressing could not be for ordinary holiday.

"What wedding?" Drayton asked, while the gate leading into the yard of the Oak farm, wherein hens, and ducks, and cackling geese were straying freely.

"They say Nellie Drayton's going to marry my lord's head keeper," the lad said, impressively, delighted that his gossip had taken his hearer by surprise.

"Why Nellie was but a mite when I left her, nine years ago," Drayton responded doubtfully.

"She's four years older nor me," the boy said sturdily, as though those four years were ten.

"That's a great age, youngster," Drayton laughed, slipping a shilling into the lad's hand, which inspired him with a still stronger respect for Drayton's riches, and the dim and distant glories of London, where fortunes could be made so readily.

Then they were at the farm-house door, where the portmanteau was deposited with a thud, which brought a girl's face to the window, a face with bonnie eyes of blue, the shade of Willie's own, and a cloud of light hair profuse and soft, drawn off from a rosy cheek and a forehead of snowy white.

"That is not Nell, but Jessie," Willie thought as the girl withdrew her face from the window. "She has got the golden hair, and the laughing lips and eyes of long ago, when we went nutting together in the wood, and wading after stickle-backs in the stream."

"Mother, there's someone at the door, and I think it's cousin Willie," Jessie Drayton cried from within; and before Willie had time to push the door open for himself, it was flung wide, and Mrs. Drayton was welcoming him back to Calthorpe.

"Only for Jess, I wouldn't have known you, Willie, you're grown so tall and big, and so like a town gentleman," Mrs. Drayton exclaimed, looking proudly up at her nephew, who had changed from a slim lad, into a tall fine-looking young man, during his nine years of London life. "I've got old and stiff while you've been away lad, and the girls have grown into women; and, I suppose, you wouldn't have known any of us, only you seen us in the old place."

To which Willie protested he would have known them anywhere, while he kissed his cousins' flushing cheeks, and the younger one looked shyly out of her mellow brown eyes, to see how one of the group in the farm-house kitchen, not of their kith and kin, bore the friendly greeting; but my lord's head keeper never looked up from the contemplation of his strong brown hands to see the kisses given, or to mark the flush which the touch of Drayton's lips brought to Nellie's cheek.

She was the prettiest of the two girls, this younger one, of whom my lord's head keeper was said to be enamoured. Jessie was a comely country lass, fair-haired and rosy-cheeked; but Nellie's cheek was rounder and more delicately tinted, and her eyes, less laughing than the blue eyes of Jessie, were of a mellow changed brown; so that Drayton, sitting in the old farm kitchen, and watching the faces of the two girls lighted up by the glow of the warm wood fire, silently endorsed Mark Wilton's taste in choosing the delicate prettiness of Nellie, rather than the buxom comeliness of her elder sister, while sweet Nellie Drayton forgot for the moment the quiet lover sitting by the ingle nook, in the wandering contemplation of Willie's glittering chain, the ring upon his finger, and the gloves he had flung carelessly down upon the table.

"So, as ye telled me in your letter, your master's dead, and ye must look for another place," Mrs. Drayton observed, meditatively, while Willie refreshed himself with meat and ale after his journey. "But then, I suppose, a good place isn't easy found, Willie?"

"I'll take a fling out of myself before I try," he answered, putting away his plate; "but I'll not find it hard to suit myself, I've got such a good character."

Here, with shy politeness, the keeper rose up and went out, feeling he had no business to listen to Willie's concerns. Half-way to the gate he turned, and glanced back to see if Nellie would steal after him for a farewell, but Nellie only smiled and nodded to the look, and Mark Wilton passed through the gate alone, clanging it after him.

II

The snow which had fallen lightly all the past night, and left its thin white coating on field and highway, began drifting again as Mark Wilton crossed the coppice meadows on his way to the keeper's lodge, dropping down at first softly and slowly, but changing as the short day closed in, to swift short flakes, which went on falling all the night through, and when Christmas morning broke, a thick white sheet of snow lay over the earth, on which the sunshone with a cold frosty glitter.

In the Oak-farm kitchen, a strong wood fire blazed upon the hearth, where Jessie Drayton stood with her dress pinned up, frying slices of bacon, when Willie came down in search of breakfast. She looked up from her work as he came in, with a laughing face, to which the fire had brought a bright, hot flush, and wished him a merry Christmas.

"A merry Christmas to you too, Jess, and a happy new year," Willie answered in response, and going over to where she stood, he stooped downwards and kissed her. "I have brought a new gown for my aunt, and a Christmas-box for you and Nellie, Jess," he said, starting by her on the hearth.

Then, as Nellie's footstep sounded along the passage, he took a parcel wrapped in silver paper from his pocket, and drawing out of it a pair of glittering bracelets, held them up before Jessie's surprised eyes, who snatching up the hissing pang from the fire, reached out her hand for the young man's showy gift.

"It was good of you to think upon us, Willie," she said with a grateful smile on her full ripe lips, while she turned the bracelets round and round in her hand, without attempting to draw them on her wrist. "Only I'm thinking they're too fine for working girls like me or Nellie. So if the man you got them from would take them back, and give us a nice dress or the like—"

But Willie interrupted her with a laugh. "Jess, girl," he said, "jewellers don't sell dresses."

"They do down this way," Jessie persisted, still with an admiring eye on the bracelets, despite their uselessness. "There's a man goes through here once a fortnight with rings and brooches, and dresses too of all sorts."

"Ay, Brummagem Jewellery!" Willie said contemptuously, a trifle nettled at his cousin's questioning acceptance of his gift.

"Well," she said, with a smile on her bonnie honest face, "I'll no scorn your present, Willie, but I'll lock it up, and keep it to wear at Nellie's wedding."

Drayton laughed, but though he laughed, he felt his face flame hotly, as he followed the girl's smiling glance to where Nellie stood in the open doorway, watching the little scene between the cousins.

"You had best keep them for your own wedding," Nellie retorted, as she passed through the door, with a pout on her scarlet lips.

But Jessie only laughed, and said she had no chance of a wedding yet; while Nellie, with the pout upon her lip changing into smiles, held out her hand for Willie's offered present.

III.

Willie and the two girls walked together that day to Calthorpe Church by the road, as the snow lay too thickly on the meadow-path to allow of their taking the shorter route.

Coming out after service, they found stalwart Mark Wilton waiting for them in the churchyard, dressed in his homely Sunday best. He was to dine that day at the Oak farm by special invitation, and having joined the Draytons in the churchyard, he walked back to the farm with Nellie, taking his place at her side with a silent assumption of ownership, which made Will Drayton feel a trifle sulky; not that it had aught to do with him, as he told himself while he went with Jessie down the path leading to the church gates, only the girl was too dainty and pretty for such a rough giant as my lord's head keeper.

In honor of Christmas, dinner was served that day in the farm parlor, in place of the kitchen where the family dined on ordinary occasions; and at dinner Wilton took his place by Nellie again, with the same air of ownership as had offended Willie on their way home from church.

"I suppose it's settled Wilton is to have Nellie for a wife, aunt?" Willie hazarded, when he and Jessie and Mrs. Drayton had come out after dinner into the kitchen: leaving Nellie and her lover sitting by the parlor fire.

"Yes, I suppose he is. They've settled it between them, and I'm content," Mrs. Drayton said quietly.

Something in Willie's voice when he asked the question, made Jessie look sharply up at him, and then glance away again into the fire; but nothing more was said on either side, and the talk drifted away to other things.

Late in the afternoon, when the Draytons were sitting down to tea, Tom Churton, an old Calthorpe friend of Willie's, dropped in to have a chat with him; and when Churton rose to leave, Willie volunteered to walk back with him to the village, whispering to Jessie as he followed Churton out, that he would be back to say good-night to Mark before he left the farm. But when they reached Calthorpe, instead of letting him return as he meant to do when he started, Willie was induced by his companion to come into the bar of Calthorpe Inn, and have something hot before walking back to the farm through the darkness and the driving snow which had begun to fall again. Talking in the lighted bar, and drinking his brandy and water, so beguiled Will Drayton into forgetfulness, that

eleven o'clock had struck before he entered the yard gate of the Oak farm again, and saw to his dismay that all the lights in the house were out, and only a glimmering blaze from the kitchen fire gave a hope that any of the family were astir.

He knocked softly at the door, which was unbolted and opened as softly by Nellie Drayton, who crept back instantly within the warm circle of the fire.

Willie fastened the door behind him, and then taking off his hat, shook the white snow from it as he neared the hearth, where Nellie stood, looking silently down upon the blazing embers, while the glow of the burning wood shone on the silken glossiness of her hair, and lighted up the subtle softness of her eyes.

She turned to him as he approached with a little smiling nod, but her lips said nothing.

"So you are all alone, Nellie?" Willie began by way of breaking ground; for Nellie's little nod had a coy reticence in it, which lured Drayton more fatally than a freer welcome. "Where is my aunt and Jessie?"

Out of the mellow brown eyes shot a glance half smiling, half laughing, as he answered with demure gravity.

"They're gone to bed an hour ago; so if you want Jess, you won't be like to see her till tomorrow."

"But I don't particularly want Jess, Nellie." She gave her head a coquettish little toss.

"How am I to understand your London ways of asking for people you don't want?" she said, looking away from Drayton's face into the fire.

There for a moment in the silence of the leaping firelight the two stood wordless, until Nellie raising her hand to brush the hair back from her forehead, the glitter of a golden bracelet on her uplifted wrist struck on the young man's delighted eyes.

"You're a brave little cousin, Nellie," Willie cried eagerly, "to wear my gift on your arm, instead of locking it in a box like Jessie."

Nellie's eyes fell on the gleaming bracelet on her left arm, and she half laughingly covered it with her right hand.

"I only wore one to-night," she said primly, half inclined to make play for herself with the young man's eagerness, yet half abashed and touched by it, "just to show it to a friend."

"Your friend was Mark Wilton, Nell," Willie suggested. "What might Mark have said, if it's a fair question?"

To this Nellie, twining the bracelet round, and looking at it wistfully, out of her drooped eyes, answered slowly.

"He said it was foolish finery for such as me, who was to be a working man's wife."

Was it the witchery of the purple firelight, or the girl's eyes, or her wistful downward look upon her present, which made Will Drayton blurt out unguardedly—

"Only say a word, Nell, and there will be no need for you to be a working man's wife."

But Nellie either did not or would not see the drift of her cousin's rash remark, and went on demurely:

"So Mark bid me give you your pretty present back, and tell you it was too grand for a poor girl."

Willie's face flushed red. "And do you mean to say you'll do it?" he asked sharply.

The downward eyes glanced upwards to his face.

"No, I said I wouldn't because though your present was too good for me, I'd wear it now and again for sake of the kindness that made you give it."

"Evan when you are Mark's wife?"

And when Willie put the question the soft eyes wavered in their glance, and a flush came to her cheek.

"Mother and Jessie like Mark," she said in gulfed evasion. "He's steady and careful, and has some money put by, so they talk of his leaving my lord, and taking a farm and—"

Her confidence stammered and halted now, and Willie filled up her sentence.

"Marrying you and settling down in a home."

"Something like that, Willie; only I'm young yet, and it's time now to think about it."

"And if another man came for you that my aunt and Jess liked as well as Mark, what would you do then, Nellie?"

But Nellie instead of answering, looked from his eager eyes back again to the glowing wood fire.

"What would you do, Nellie?" he urged. "There, I hear Jessie calling," she cried; "she'll say I'm a silly lass to stand here talking instead of going to bed."

She slid by him into the passage leading to the stairs, but he followed her swiftly, and caught her hands.

"You never kissed me for my present, Nell," he said. "Will you kiss me now and say good-night?"

She drew her hands from his and pushed him from her, in half-laughing denial.

"How dare you be so bold, Willie?" she cried, and then with fleet foot she fled upstairs to the shelter of her room.

IV.

December drifted into January, and still Willie Drayton said never a word of going back to London, seeming but too content to spend his time in the society of his cousin Nellie. Only her mother and Jess, he kept telling himself, were on Mark Wilton's side; he had no part or

concern in Nellie's unbiassed affections. So, when the day's work was done, he sat by her in the glowing fire light talking of London, until the girl's head grew dazzled with the notion that to be the wife of Willie Drayton, and live in the great city where she might wear gold bracelets, and display a showy silk without word of comment, was to be almost, if not quite, a lady.

It was one thing to be the head keeper's wife, whom everyone called Mark, if they did not call him Wilton; but it was another thing to marry her cousin whom people always called Mr. Drayton, not daring to make too free with so well-dressed and prosperous a gentleman.

Nellie's foolish head went round in those days, when she dreamt dreams and saw visions, in a way she marvelled at later, when the glamour had faded.

She liked Willie's blue eyes and chestnut hair, his comely face and his town-bred ways, better than the homely, honest lover who had nothing in common with Willie's dandyism and fine clothes and gold watch-chain, all of which were so many snares in the way of foolish Nellie Drayton.

At first Nellie's flirtation was kept out of Wilton's ken, who came and went as usual, and from whom she stole moments to be given, when he was gone, to Willie Drayton. But as her zest for Willie's society strengthened, she grew careless and saucy to her old lover, and leaving him with her mother and Jessie for company boldly went out of doors with her cousin, and, in the short winter gloaming, while the clasp of the old love was warm on her hand, yielded her lips to the kisses of the new.

"Nellie's only a bit dazed with Willie's talk about London," Mrs. Drayton would say excusingly, when she saw Wilton's look darken or his brow lower at Nellie's open defection.

But Wilton would answer never a word of complaint or reproach to mother or sister of the girl he loved so well. Only, as time went on, and Nellie grew more heedless of his silent patience, or his silent pain, he began coming less frequently to the Oak farm, a proceeding which very much disconcerted Mrs. Nellie, who was well-pleased to sit as queen between her two admirers.

"You're like to lose a good man with your giddy-headed nonsense, and I don't believe you care a pin for Will Drayton," Jessie said to her, warningly. "It's only the folly of gold bracelets, and foolish bits of ribbon in your hair, that's lifting you off your feet."

For Nellie, not daring to wear Willie's bracelets every day, had taken instead to tie up her pretty brown hair with ribbons of blue and ribbons of scarlet, that Willie bought in the village for her adornment, and to which vanity of the flesh Jessie scornfully alluded. Whereupon Nellie laughed saucily, and told Jessie she liked Willie better than she liked Mark, to which Jessie impolitely responded that if she did she was a greater silly than she took her for.

"My ye you'll take Mark yourself, when I'm gone up to London to be a lady?" Nellie suggested in reprisal.

"A lady!" Jessie echoed in pitying derision. "A fine lady you'll be in a London lodging, living on Will Drayton's weekly wages, which, in my opinion, he can spend the bulk of on himself without a wife."

Upon which Nellie walked out of the kitchen to the dairy, with her head in the air, full of the flattering notion that Jessie was jealous of her coming good fortune. But when the cream was churned, and her deft little hands were busy with the butter, the memory of the old honest love, on which she had leant from childhood, came back to her regretfully, and stood beside the gilded shadow of a passion less real and less true.

Yet, when evening came, and she strolled into the farm kitchen after a walk with Willie Drayton, wearing Willie's ribbons in her hair, and a knot of Willie's buying at her throat, the fitting regret had vanished, and the light of the new love shining in her mellow eyes of brown had killed the light of the old.

As January closed in, Mark Wilton's dropping visits to the farm had ceased totally. At first Mrs. Drayton bemoaned his absence with Jessie, but grew reconciled, when she saw Nellie taken up with her new lover and the notion of the fine-lady life she was to lead in London, when she was to have nothing to do, only to dress and go out with Willie when his day's work was over. Drayton had no true appreciation of the pleasures of home, and filled Nellie's head with the idea of theatres, and *Christy Minstrels*, and summer afternoons at *Kew* or *Richmond*, never pausing to think that the salary he usually spent on his personal enjoyment, might not afford the same delightful recreations to two.

Looking at Willie's picture of their town life in its gilded setting, one cold February afternoon, while he was absent in the village, and her hands were busy washing up the cups after their early tea, Nellie was startled out of her day-dream by a shadow falling athwart the open doorway. Glancing up she saw the stalwart figure of Mark Wilton entering the kitchen, carrying his gun in his hand, and bending his head as she had seen him bend it many a time under the low old-fashioned entrance. The scarlet blood flew hot to Nellie's cheek.

"You frightened me with that gun, Mark," she said, in excuse for the tide which would not be stayed, although the small plump hands busy amongst the tea-cups, never faltered in their work.

"There's no need to be frightened," he said. "It's not loaded; though for all that I shouldn't"