

THE OLD RED-BRICK HOUSE.

(Continued.)

Then the two girls cried over each other; and Nelly told how Jack had gradually persuaded her, and how at last she had agreed. Jack had wished her to go without telling anyone; but she could not. She had lain awake all night, and found she must tell somebody—it was such an awful secret to have to keep. And, at the thought of leaving home forever in disobedience to her father, Nelly wept as if her heart would break.

"Oh, Nora," she said, "if matters were only all right between you and Frank, I should not feel so unhappy!"

"That is an impossibility; he can never be anything to me again," said Nora, in a low voice.

After breakfast, Nelly went up stairs and whispered a passionate goodbye to Nora, breaking down entirely, and trembling so that she could hardly button her jacket.

"What a strange sad wedding it will be!" said Nora sorrowfully, looking at the mournful little figure in the serge dress and sealskin jacket.

Tears were coursing down Nelly's face as she collected a few little treasures and took a long lingering look at her old home, sobbing convulsively and clinging to Nora, imploring her to beg her father's forgiveness. Then she put on her veil, and, with a wildly-beating heart, crept downstairs and astonished Daisy by taking her up in her arms and kissing her passionately. Presently the hall door was slammed—Nelly had crossed the threshold of her home, and it was too late now to repent or go back. With bowed head she hurried up the street, acting and feeling like one in a dream.

Meanwhile Daisy, child-like, sought Colonel Despard, and told him that Nelly was crying, and that she had gone out, and had kissed her just as if she were going away for ever. Something in the child's words aroused the Colonel's suspicions. He summoned Nora to him, and her tear-stained face told its own tale.

"Where is Nelly?" he asked abruptly; and Nora, meeting his stern gaze, was obliged to tell the truth.

"Oh, my child," he exclaimed, "you might have trusted your father!"

The old man went out and stole unobserved into the church. The service had commenced, and there stood Nelly beside Jack Hamilton. There were no signs of anger on Colonel Despard's brave noble face, only an expression of intense pity and tenderness as his glance fell upon the young bridegroom.

When the words "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?" were spoken, the Colonel stepped forward and placed his daughter's hand in that of the astonished young officer, who at that moment felt thoroughly ashamed of his clandestine arrangements, and could have knelt down there and then and begged the brave noble old man's forgiveness.

Not a hard word did Colonel Despard say to Nelly—perhaps the recollection of Nora's sad face softened him—he forgave his daughter fully and freely, saying, with tears in his eyes—

"If my child marries against her father's will, it shall never be said that she went to a foreign land without his blessing!"

Captain Hilliers, sitting in the reading room of his club looking idly over the newspapers, saw the words "Lieutenant and Mrs. Hamilton," among the list of those departing with a certain regiment in a troop-ship bound for India; and he bit his lip and flung down the paper, vowing he would never have faith in woman again.

If Nora was unhappy in the old red brick house, Captain Hilliers was just as miserable trying to kill time in London; the young officer was moody and discontented, taking no pleasure in anything.

Old Mr. Hilliers was dying. Struck down by paralysis, he was carried up-stairs to his death-bed. Captain Hilliers was telegraphed for; but the old man was dead before his nephew arrived.

The Captain was now master of Hilliers Court; but he loathed the place and determined never to live there—it reminded him too much of Nora—so he gave directions to his solicitors to let or sell the house as soon as possible.

"Nora dear," said Colonel Despard one afternoon, "will you take my letters to the post? It is a fine day, and the walk will do you good; you stay too much in the house, my child."

So Nora put on her hat, and went slowly down the street to post the letters. As she was coming out of the post-office, a shadow darkened the doorway, and looking up, the girl found herself standing face to face with Frank Hilliers.

The meeting was awkward and unpleasant for both of them. For one brief moment their eyes met; then the young soldier started back in sudden surprise, his face flushing, his eyes wide open with astonishment.

"You here!" he exclaimed almost involuntarily, taken thoroughly aback by this sudden and unexpected meeting, and gazing in astonishment at Nora's pale face and quivering lips.

She was striving to be cold and calm, yet feeling how utterly impossible it was to be so in his presence. She had known he was at Hilliers Court, and had thought it possible they might meet; but, when she stood before him, all her stored-up courage and fortitude gave way, and she could not conceal her agitation.

Captain Hilliers, who had thought of Nora as Jack Hamilton's wife in India, was so surprised at her unexpected appearance that, instead of being severe and indifferent, he stared at her as if she were a ghost.

Nora was the first to recover her self-possession, and she walked calmly past him, and out of the door without a word. In her trepidation however

she had dropped a glove; and, picking it up, he hurried after her, and soon overtook her.

There were tears on her eyelashes now, and she started nervously when he addressed her in the old familiar tone she knew so well.

"This is your glove—you dropped it in the post-office."

Nora took the glove and thanked him almost inaudibly, turning away her face, ashamed that he should see her tears. He lingered for a moment looking at her, feeling very bitterly how much he had lost.

"Good-bye!" he murmured hoarsely.

The girl held out her hand, and he took it in his, fixing his eyes earnestly upon her face.

She was in his power now. Should he say something bitter and reproachful—make her feel at least a pang of regret for what she had done? No; Frank Hilliers might be hot-tempered, but he could not be mean or ungenerous. The sight of her pale patient face, with the tearful eyes and trembling lips, touched his heart and the stern angry expression died out of his eyes. If she had appeared to be happy, he could have found it in his heart to be angry with her; but, when she raised her eyes to his for a moment, he only pressed the hand he held, and said gently—

"Heaven bless you, Nora! I could never say a hard word to you; I love you too well for that, though perhaps you don't think so." There was more feeling in his voice than he meant to display; and, dropping her hand abruptly, he added, "You have soon come back from India!"

"From India? What do you mean?"

Captain Hilliers looked at her with an air of bewilderment.

"I suppose I was mistaken," he said; "but I saw your name in the newspapers, and thought you had gone."

"No," replied Nora. "I have not left home since——" Her cheeks flushed hotly and she bit her lip, angry with herself for making such a stupid blunder.

"Since when?" he asked, thinking she referred to her wedding.

"Since Nelly's marriage," answered Nora quickly. "I suppose you heard she married Mr. Hamilton and went to India with him?"

The Captain stopped and grasped her arm, the truth seemed to flash into his mind all at once.

"Oh, Nora, what a fool I have been! I thought you married him."

If her life had been at stake, Nora could not have prevented a little gleam of amusement from coming into her eyes; for the expression on Captain Hilliers' face was ludicrous. The corners of her mouth twitched with a smile; and then she suddenly burst into tears; while he stood dumfounded, but feeling as if a heavy weight had been lifted off his heart.

"Oh, Frank!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, Nora!" he ejaculated. "And so we have been wretched all this time for nothing!"

They had now left the village, and were walking down the quiet river-path in the shade of the trees.

A very few words of explanation served to set everything right, and the game of cross-purposes was at an end forever. When it was all over they looked in each others faces and laughed—they were so happy now, they could afford to be amused at their late misery. But Captain Hilliers was angry with himself still.

"I made you so unhappy!" he said, looking tenderly into the face he had not expected to see again. "Nora, I wonder you can forgive me!"

"I ought to have told you who Jack was," she answered softly. "Frank, we were both to blame; but we will never keep anything from each other again."

"And, for the future, I will never trust the evidence of my own eyes!" declared Frank. "I was certain it was you who was at the ball that night with that fellow Hamilton. But how was I to know that your sister was a duplicate of yourself, and that you would be dressed exactly alike, Nora? What a rage I was in!"

"I should have known you anywhere, Frank."

"Say what you please, Nora. I deserve it all, and more—only always remember I didn't see your sister's face. If she had looked up, the mistake would never have been made."

"Papa has been so angry with you!" whispered Nora. "But it will be all right now."

The setting sun of the calm spring evening was shining brightly on the old red-brick house as they reached it, walking slowly, lovers once more.

"Go in to papa yourself, Frank," pleaded Nora.

The Captain remonstrated; but she escaped to her own room, in a state of happy excitement, and did not come down till the explanation was over.

When she at length made her appearance, Colonel Despard looked delighted, and was talking to Captain Hilliers as if nothing had ever happened to disturb their friendship. Blushing and smiling, she went up to her father, who took her hand and said with feeling—

"Frank, although she is my own child, I will say that you would not have found many girls to care for you through all this misunderstanding as she has. Not a word against you has ever passed her lips; and she would not let me malign you either. And now God bless you both!"

And so peace and happiness were restored once more to the old red-brick house. Captain Hilliers changed his mind about selling Hilliers Court, and engaging an army of painters and upholsterers, he had the house redecorated and refurnished for the reception of its new mistress.

It was a peaceful warm evening, and the two lovers were walking once more up and down the old garden, talking of many things. In the happiness of the present, the past few months of misery and estrangement were almost forgotten, or remembered only to make the joy of reconciliation still sweeter.

"If Nelly were only home now, how nice it would be!" said Nora.