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Family Reading.

OUR NELL.

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CHAPTER V.

When Nell carried the toast into the parlor, she saw her father in his usual place at the table, at her mother's right hand. The emotion of last night had, indeed, passed from his face, but there was a new expression there; there was a relaxation of the hard lines, as of a bent bow let go. Jack and Bob—who feared their father rather than loved him, and were wont to tone down their turbulence when he was by—unconsciously acted upon his different mood, and rioted secure from check.

After breakfast, Nell and her father started on their usual morning round. A night of pouring rain had succeeded many days of blazing heat; and they passed through the kitchen door into a world green and cool as from a new birth. The sultry haze, which had so many mornings blurred the hills, had given place to a pure clearness in the air, in which outline was distinct, and color brilliant. The very earth sent up a grateful fragrance, and at every step a new perfume was carried on the breeze.

Now it was the elder-trees at the pond, now the wallflower in its cranny, or the heads of the clover in the grass. It was impossible not to feel an impulse of new life in this new-created world. The swallows sailed around in graceful abandonment, the finches twittered their loudest in the helges, and the yellow ducklings dipped their little heads and plumed themselves, rejoicing in the swollen waters of the pond. By the time they reached the field where the Irish mowers were at work, the oppression in Nell's breast had insensibly lightened, and the calm in her father's face had grown deeper. The work of the haymakers was at a standstill, for though the greater part of the field had been mown the day before, the grass now lay waiting for the sun to dry the ground before it could be spread abroad.

"It's a good job we got in the Brook Pasture crop yesterday. I doubt we've had the best of the weather."

Mr. Masters spoke, after a long silence, with his every-day manner, and a mind wholly bent on the prospects of his harvest.

Nell felt a sharp pang of disappointment. Her heart was yearning for expression on her side and on his.

On their return to the homestead, the young stock must all be inspected, and the round of the premises made, for Mr. Masters had a hearty belief in the slipperiness of hirelings when from under the master's eye. Finally, they went into the stack-yard to inspect the stack of hay that had been finished the night before. It was a goodly sight, firm and even, and covered up safe from the rain. But as they were turning to go, a puff of wind lifted an inch or so of the canvas. A quick intelligence lit up Nell's eyes. On the other side the stack, Mrs. Masters could be heard with her "chuck-chuck-chuck" to the fowls, and a scatter of handfuls of corn. Bobby was officiously helping her by driving the fowls like a flock of sheep, and scaring the more timid ones out of their wits. Nell made as though she were going to her mother, and said—

"I'll be after you directly, father."

As soon as her father was at a safe distance, she darted to the ladder that rested against the stack, climbed swiftly to the top, and thrust her arm under the canvas. The hay was soaked with rain. From the stable, which had a window looking into the stack-yard, a quavering whistle struck her ear. Job must be there. Just then Mrs. Masters came round the stack, her yellow basin empty

and Bobby caught sight of Nell descending the lower rungs of the ladder.

"Nell, Nell! wait for me," he cried as she walked rapidly from him towards the gate; but she heard neither his call nor the piteous cry which her desertion wrung from him. With burning cheeks and flashing eyes, Nell strove on, unconscious of anything around her, till she reached the door of the stable, where Job was leisurely swilling the floor, and William stood cleaning the gig harness.

"Eh, miss, what's t' matter?" "Matter enough, when men like you turn out sneaks and cowards. You find it easy enough to cheat the master, now his eyes are going. Why should you think to cover up the stack at night when the fault can be mended in the morning? It's easy to cover it up with the rain in it, and save the blame and bother."

"Old Job, who had known Nell as a child was too understruck to utter a word in reply, but remained standing, mop in the air, with his eyes and his mouth getting larger. William tried to look away, but could not, and only shifted his feet uneasily.

"Yes, you may look at me, both of you; and the longer you look the better, for you'll be more likely to take it in, that though your master's blind, there's some one that isn't. I've got to be my father's eyes from this time, and you and me will have to work together, and if we can do it pleasantly, why, so much the better. For shame that we should have men to work for us that want a girl to look after them! And you, Job, for shame! that's been with us all these years! Go and get on that cover, and do what you can to set right the mischief that's come of your carelessness."

Nell turned to go; and now that the spell of her eyes was off him, Job murmured—

"Eh, but t' little miss be for all the world as bad as t' feyther. I allus meant to take the cover off when t' master's back were turned."

As Nell crossed the threshold, the fire within her died out, and her heart leapt to her throat, for her father was sitting outside. He must have heard it all. He would be angry and hurt—how hurt and angry she did not know—for not only had he found out that his men took advantage of his blindness, but would he not also think that she could cheat him too, that she had tried to tick him out of the knowledge of it? But whatever he thought, Mr. Masters said nothing. He took Nell by the arm, and walked hastily towards the house. Nell felt the grip on her arm, and feared to look up at his face. When she did so, a thrill went through her, for tears were running slowly down his cheeks. He was not angry? out, oh, what pain it must have given him! When they reached the parlor, Mr. Masters sat down in his chair, keeping Nell close to him.

"Nell, my lass," he said, "I've something to tell thee."

Coming after the late suspense, and the power of anger which had quite died out, the tenderness of his tone o'ercame Nell. She knelt beside him sobbing.

"Nay, nay, lass; it is nothing to grieve thee. I have it in my mind to tell thee how things stand with me. I've just made up my mind to face this trouble that's come upon me, and to bear it like a man; but there's a deal of pride in me, Nell, and it's been a bitter night—a bitter fight; and if I've been a bit hard on you and the others of late, it's been because I was hit hard myself. But I've been thinking there's a many things that would be worst to bear than this; and till the worse has come upon a man, there's little to be said for him if he lets the spirit go out of him. How should I stand up under it if it was a thing that would bring shame upon me, if I'd done a wrong, or if any that belonged to me had done a wrong? And it's not as if I had need be beholden to any one, for as long as I've got my Nell here, I canna want help of pity from strangers."

CHAPTER VI.

Walter Derwent, during a ramble one morning, found himself before the farm-

house at Elm-tree Corner, and the desire to sketch it arose in his mind. When he came to the garden gate, he stopped, and looked over it. He saw paths of glittering grey spar, a clump of tiger-lilies by the side of the gate, and a lawn beyond, gay with flowers. To his right was a path, damp and shady, under tall evergreens and bushes. Trusting himself to this, he soon found himself at what was evidently the front entrance. The door stood open and disclosed a passage very cool and retired, containing a so-called clock, an antiquated barometer, and a stuffed dog in a glass case.

"This is unpromising. I must try the back door," he thought. "In this kind of place life centres in the kitchen. If one wants to study the habits of this species in nature, and not under the influence of best-parlor manners, one must go there."

He found his way to the back door. Here, this hot June morning, had Mrs. Masters, with flushed face and floury hands, been scouring these two hours to and from flour-bin and pastry-table, larder, and preserve-kettle.

Already a row of pies stood on the dresser, with the browning of a delicate baking on them, and a great beef-steak pudding simmered over the fire. It was eleven by the kitchen clock, half-past ten by the day, and care sat on Mrs. Masters' brow, for the week's baking was yet before her. Derwent knocked at the door and introduced himself. Her habitual complaisance towards the gentry, struggling at first under the pressure of her morning's work, and a discomposing sense of her work-a-day cap and gown, needed Derwent's pleasant speech to fully gain the day, and it was with a beaming face that she said—

"Well, to be sure! Come in, sir—come in. To think of your coming to the back door, and me in the midst of my cooking!"

"Pra, don't apologise, Mrs. Masters. I only came to beg permission to sketch this charming old place of yours. I have quite fallen in love with it."

"It's very kind of you to say so, sir, I'm sure. If we'd knew you was coming, we'd have had the garden done up; it's but untidy, I doubt, for it gets neglected when the hay's about."

When Nell returned from an errand in the village, Derwent was established in the shade of a clipped box-tree in the garden, using his pencil swiftly. Nell beheld him over the garden wall, and marvelled how a man could be idle at that time of the day, if he had any muscle in him.

In an hour's time he had had enough of his occupation, and set off for the kitchen, in search of amusement there. In that region business was in full swing again. The bread was set down to rise, and Nell was in the dairy, making up the butter. Plainly there was no room for him.

"I shall take the liberty of coming back to finish my sketch some day soon, Mrs. Masters. No, thank you, I won't come in. I should not like to hinder you one moment from the composition of those appetising dishes which I can see and smell. But my cousin tells me you have a 'holy well' on your farm, which used to be much visited by the curious, and which I should like to see for the sake of the pretty dell in which it lies. Can you make it clear to me how I am to get there?"

"It's t' sick well I expect you mean, sir; but I doubt you'd never find it yourself. Here, Nell, love," called Mrs. Masters, going to the door of the dairy, "put off your hat, and show Mr. Derwent the way to t' sick well."

Nell appeared, but not with great alacrity. Her level brows were contracted, and a little furrow showed between them, which was her usual sign of inward discomposure. The butter was on her mind, and she had an aversion to the necessity of putting on company manners to attend a stranger. She reflected that Sally might with more propriety have been selected for the office.

Walter patte the shaggy shepherd-dog that lay basking in the sun outside the door, and smelt the bunch of wall-

flowers that stood on a jug on the window-sill.

"Some one has an eye for color in your house, Mrs. Masters. What an admirable arrangement—the deep red of these wallflowers against the dark blue of the jug. The effect is perfect."

Nell was taking her hat down from behind the door. As Walter said this, he looked up, and discovered her eyes upon him, with a keen look of scrutiny in them.

A cordial farewell exchanged with Mrs. Masters, the two set out. Nell, with a sense of compulsion within her, walked behind on the narrow field path. This did not suit her companion, who was accustomed to be on friendly terms wherever he found himself.

"I believe you know my cousin—Miss Oliver?" said he, moving to one side, that she might walk on a line with him. "I ought to, for she's lived in Hazlewood ever since I was born, sir."

Nell made no movement to join him, and Derwent had a sense of discomfiture. Miss Lettice as a subject seemed unfruitful. He tried something else.

"What do you call that house over yonder?" and now he stepped back to walk by her side.

"Why, you must mean Beechover Hall," Nell laughed. "Don't you know that?"

"You forget that I haven't lived here ever since you were born."

"But long enough to know the name of the hall, sir."

"You uncompromising young savage!" was Derwent's inward comment. "I will try what equal coolness will do." Then, aloud, "Well, to tell you the truth, I did know, but as you would not talk to me, you see I had to talk to you, and that struck me as something to say."

Nell experienced a growing wonder. Here was a man who felt himself so much obliged to talk that he would talk nonsense rather than not talk at all. Derwent felt somewhat uncomfortable under her steady gaze. He had intended to make acquaintance with the girl much as a naturalist inspects a new species, and now he had a vague sense that the girl regarded him in like manner. As Nell said nothing, he continued—

"Well, whatever be its name, the hall is a picturesque old place; I must walk over there some day. There must be some fine old trees in the park, are there not?"

"Yes, there's a deal to many of them. It's but a gloomy place, to my thinking."

Evidently the girl was difficult to talk to, and Walter did not like difficulties; they walked on in silence. He had not thought her a girl of this kind, as he watched her in the hay-field. A vivid recollection came to him of her merry face and musical laugh. He must find some way to make her look at him like that. Presently they came to a stile, Walter vaulted it first and held out his hand to Nell, who came over with as much agility as he, and without need of assistance. At the moment when Nell could not avoid looking at him, Walter said, with a smile—

"What a temper you were in when your mother sent you with me!"

Nell looked at him with astonishment for a moment, quickly changing into a friendly comradeship.

"Yes, that I was!" said she; "and I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir."

"It is that I should beg your pardon, and thank you for your kindness in coming with me, in spite of your reluctance."

"Nay, you can't think there's any cause for thanks, since mother sent me against my will."

"Well, then, we are quits, and understand each other. Shake hands, and be friends with me."

Nell colored, and shrank back.

"The proud little monkey!" thought Walter. "I have lost my ground again."

Here they came out into a lane, against a row of cottages. The door of one stood open, and Derwent stopped before the little gate to admire.

"What an exquisite study of color!" he exclaimed. "Just come here, where I am standing, and look at the delicate blue tone of these walls, and the vivid scarlet of the geranium; the spotless