

Nina's particular provocation this morning was in her weariness, her dislike of an ever-beginning, never-ending stent of needlework, and the contrast which was forced upon her by the sight of somebody else who lived like the lilies and neither toiled nor spun. Besides, when they had been little children these girls had played together. This seemed to make it worse.

Nina looked after Belle Brinton, and a feeling of hot envy stole into her heart, not for the first time; a bitter question beat like a hammer in her brain. Why had one girl so much and another so little? For Belle's father owned the mill, and the village of Hiveton had grown up around and depended on the business of John Brinton for its prosperity. All the little household fires in Hiveton were kindled at the one great furnace; all the bread and meat came from the one manufactory where the husbands and fathers worked. Most of the families shared in the wage-earning, and many took work home, as a good deal of the glove finishing could be done by women who had their own machines, and who helped along in that way. Nina Brock was a quick and deft seamstress, and when she was in the mood did very well, but to-day she was out of sorts, in the clutches of a black demon which made her miserably unable to fix her mind or her hands on what she had to do. She gazed at her neat gingham gown and white apron in a kind of dull rage; she was comparing them with the cool, clean linen, lace-trimmed and dainty, of Belle Brinton's summer toilette. Suddenly she rose, and taking off her apron, rolled it into a ball and flung it across the room, where it fell and lay in a heap. Then she threw down her work in a bunch on the floor, and seizing her sunbonnet from the hook where it hung, started for the door, her face set and frowning. It was a sallow face, with great dark eyes, pleasant at times when Nina was cheerful, but capable of a grim ugliness when she was under the spell of her familiar fiend, ill-temper. Nothing is more disfiguring, by the way, than this.

'Nina, Nina!' called a sharp voice. 'Where be you bound, leaving your work at ten o'clock in the morning? Come straight back this instant, do you hear?'

At the sound of her step-mother's mandate, Nina turned and looked at the shrewish countenance of a small, spare woman of forty-five with a certain challenge. Then she spoke after a pause.

'You can pick up my work, Mrs. Brock, and do it yourself, if you like. I'm not going to touch it this day, so there.' And she went sturdily and stubbornly down the road.

'She's in one of her tantrums, and nobody can do anything with her. She grows worse as she grows older,' mused the step-mother, folding the disdained pile of half-sewn gloves in a towel and carelessly laying them away. She sighed, too, a fretful sigh, for life was not very easy in that house, with Nina Brock and her moods, and with Job Brock, Nina's father, always at odds with the world and ready to tax humanity with his ill-luck. He had never succeeded, poor Job, since Nina's brisk, bustling mother had died, leaving him with a baby to care for, and no knack of getting on with his comrades. The second Mrs. Brock was a woman of the nagging variety, finding fault in an intermitting weak way, which neither husband nor daughter heeded. Nina

had never called her 'mother' since once, when the child had committed some juvenile misdemeanor, she had been forbidden to do so, with the words, 'I am no mother of yours.' No love was lost between them, though they seldom openly quarrelled, but the fireside was most unhome-like, and often there was in the atmosphere an oppressive feeling of thunder brooding somewhere. It was a very gloomy home.

Mrs. Brock moved about, preparing Job's dinner. She looked half complacently at Nina's work, neglected and forsaken.

'Her dad'll give her one good scolding when she comes back, thank goodness,' she murmured. 'She ought to be ashamed of herself—lazy, loafing girl, leaving me to bear the brunt of everything. She's enough to worry a saint. I wonder what she thinks of herself, flinging her apron down like that. I'll leave it for her father to see. I wish he'd be right down harsh with her, the creature!'

Meanwhile Nina took the path to the woods, in the sunshiny day. Through the broad vistas of the forest gleamed long splintering rays of sunshine, dappling the ground where they broke into brightness at the feet of old oaks and chestnuts. The woods were very peaceful. Nina wandered on, following a winding bridle path which skirted the main road, for the forest was cleared of tangled undergrowth, and was like a beautiful park.

At intervals there were rustic seats where people might rest, and in summer, when city visitors were staying in the country round, these were usually occupied by wayfarers, but for a wonder nobody seemed to have sought Brinton Woods this morning. Nina had the sweet, still place all to herself. She was a girl who did not, as did most of her mates, prefer shop windows and streets to Nature. From her childhood she had flown to the forest for comfort when her step-mother had angered her, or when she was storm-tossed by her own passion, poor untaught little one! They had always calmed her, and their silence and the sense of room and freedom had given her strength. Her father, who dimly understood her need, would bid her mother let her go to the shelter of the trees.

Nina sat under a bowery chestnut, slipping from the rude chair to the soft cushiony ground, rich with velvet moss. Her brown hands smoothed the mosses wistfully with tender longing and love. The woods were like a church. Far up in the treetop a bird sang softly. Nina's dark mood melted away. She forgot her grievances and was no longer mean and ignoble and envious. She began to be penitent, and said her morning prayer. Nature, the dear mother, was leading her up to God, who gave nature to be so undisturbed at our caprices, and who has such balms for our hurts.

Nina was tired and she almost drifted into sleep as she sat on the ground, with the squirrels frisking near her, not in the least afraid of one who kept so still and paid them so little attention. From the lulling drowsiness she was suddenly roused by a cry for help—a cry repeated twice and dying off the second time into faintness.

Instantly on the alert and with her wits about her, she ran rapidly in the direction of the sound. She was not two minutes in reaching a scene of outrage which stir-

red her blood to fierce resentment. There, in her phaeton, her hat fallen off, her dress torn and disordered, sat Belle Brinton, nearly swooning with terror. One rough, unkempt tramp held her trembling pony by the bridle, and his fellow, with an evil grin on his sullen, leering face, was stuffing Belle's pocket-book into the breast of his grimy flannel shirt, and clumsily unfastening her jewelled belt.

'Halt, there! What are you about?' rang Nina's voice, sternly. 'Let that lady alone!'

'What have you got to say about it, missus?' asked the second thief, coolly, as he turned and saw no stalwart man advancing to the rescue, but a slip of a girl, stout and strong, it is true, and with blazing eyes of wrath and defiance. Only a girl. Why should a man fear her?

Why, indeed? Except for this, that evil is always cowardly, and detected crime is prone to scuttle away under cover. The first thief, he who was holding the horse, exclaimed:

'Best make off, Jack! There's more behind her, or she wouldn't be so bold!'

'Yes' (Nina's tones were fearless), 'there is more behind me. There's the law, and a striped jacket, and prison for both of you for what you've done, unless you make haste and repent, and go away as fast as ever you can. Here, give me the lady's belt. Give me her ring. You should be ashamed to attack Miss Belle, that everybody loves!'

And Nina seemed to grow an inch taller as she stood bravely facing the robbers, with blazing eyes. The tramps cowered before her. This girl belonged to a type they knew, and perhaps she reminded them of a sister or mother who would be ashamed if they suspected how low these men had fallen. They threw ring and belt at Nina's feet on the grass without another look at Belle, and took to their heels in flight, lurching away the faster, that through the perfect stillness of the woods penetrated at the moment the long, insistent whistle of Brinton's Mill, the noon whistle which summoned the hands back to their afternoon work. In some states of the air this peremptory whistle carried for a very long distance, and it smote the silence, both of Nina and the tramps, with a familiar cadence, not unlike a military order. To Nina it said, reproachfully, 'Laggard, you are away from your duty.' To the tramps it was a note of warning, reiterating the girl's threat of stripes and a prison cell. They heard it and hurried the more swiftly, inwardly gleeful for all their retreat, because of the purse which they had secured, a purse well lined with bills and silver.

But Nina had no time to think of anything, except how to revive and reassure her companion. She remembered that a fainting person must be laid in a reclining position, and she tried to place Belle more easefully on the carriage cushions. As she did so, Belle's eyes opened, and color came back to her cheeks.

'Oh, Nina, Nina!' she exclaimed, 'how good it is to see you. Oh, Nina, dear!'

'Don't be worried, Miss Belle; the men are gone. I'm right down mad to think that such a thing should happen in our wood. Brinton Wood that's always been so safe and so sweet. I'm so glad I came in time. Now, do you think you can drive home, or shall I go for help?'

'Step right in here with me, Nina, and