

THE TWO AGES.

Folks were happy as days were long
In the old Arcadian times;
When life seemed only a dance and song
In the sweetest of all sweet times.
Our world grows bigger, and, stage by stage,
As our pitiless years have rolled,
We're quite forgotten the golden age,
And come to the age of gold.

Time went by in a sheepish way
Upon Thessaly's plains of yore,
In the nineteenth century lamba at play
Mean mutton and nothing more.
Our swains at present are far too sage
To live as one lived of old;
So they couple the cook of the golden age
With a book in the age of gold.

From Corydon's reed the mountains round
Heard news of his latest fame;
And Tityrus made the woods resound
With echoes of Daphne's name.
They kindly left us a lasting gauge
Of their musical art, we're told;
And the Pandean pipe of the golden age
Brings mirth to the age of gold.

Dwellers in huts and in marble halls—
From shepherdesses up to Queens—
Cared little for bonnets, and less for shawls,
And nothing for ermine-line.
But now simplicity's not the rage,
And it's funny to think how cold
The dress they wore in the golden age
Would seem in the age of gold.

Electric telegraphs, printing, gas,
Tobacco, balloons and steam,
Are little events that have come to pass
Since the days of the old regime;
And spite of Lempiere's dazzling page,
I'd give—though it might seem bold—
A hundred years of the golden age
For a year of the age of gold.

HENRY S. LEIGH.

TWIXT CUP AND LIP.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "ESTELLE'S ERROR,"
"CLOUDS AND SUNSHINE," "MURIEL'S FATE."

Skating was in full swing when Mr. Berners, Lee and Nellie reached the lake. Long before they came within sight of it the pleasant ring of voices sounded through the frosty air, mingled with shouts of laughter over a chance tumble; and the three set off at a smart trot, Mr. Berners, in spite of his fifty years, being as light and active as his two companions.

"Here you are at last!" cried Charlie Stewart, coming to an abrupt pause as they reached the bank. "We have been here for the last half-hour. The ice is splendid. Sit down, Nell; I'll crew your skates on."

Nellie glanced round hurriedly. Ned was there, but arm in arm with pretty Lily Stewart, the two apparently utterly heedless of any one else as they went swinging round the lake together. Mr. Beale was helping the unsteady steps of his little sister Arabella, or "Bell," as she was generally called, greatly to her mother's annoyance. Nellie also saw Tom, Harry, Mary, and Alice Stewart—for the rectorial quiver was as full as clerical quivers are wont to be—Ned's eldest brother, Hugh, a quiet, intellectual, proud man, and Jessie and Grace Arbuthnot, daughters of a retired naval captain, who lived in a pretty cottage in the village.

"Too many here, aren't there?" said Charlie, as Nellie looked round. "They're cutting up the ice at a fine rate."

"But, it's so much nicer having a lot, Charlie! Never mind the ice. We can't cut up such a great piece of water as this very soon."

"Oh, dear, how I wish I could skate like you!" moaned poor little Bell. "My feet hurt me so dreadfully."

"Never mind. You will soon get on if you are brave. How kind your brother is to devote himself to you!" said Nellie, with a secret hope that her praise would keep him to his work.

The puffy white face of the young man turned pink at her words, and he redoubled his efforts and encouragement. Nellie skinned gracefully along, her hands in her muff, with a passing word to all except Ned, who only bent his head lower towards Lily as she passed them. With a swelling heart, Nellie went on her way.

It seemed as if Ned and she were always quarreling now; he took offence so easily. Then she sought a quiet corner of the lake, and practised "8's" and "9's" for more than an hour, regardless of anybody, till legs and feet aching beyond endurance, she put her muff on the ground and sat down upon it to rest.

"Miss Raymond, you really must not sit there!" exclaimed the observant Dips, skating towards her and dragging a chair. "You will catch cold. Sit on this chair. May I bring you some mulled claret? Our man has just brought it."

"Yes," said Nellie taking the seat he offered; "I should like some very much."

The delighted Beale skated off at the top of his speed, and Ned drew near.

"Taking a hint from the Greenlanders, I see, Nell," he said with a sneer. "There's nothing like grease for keeping you warm."

"I shouldn't think you ever felt cold," she retorted, with a flashing glance. "Your temper must keep you at fever heat."

Ned's dark cheek crimsoned.

"Stinging-nettles are a joke to you," he said, hotly. "I wish Dips joy of his bargain. In your choice of cavaliers you show a worldly wisdom I had not credited you with. I prefer simplicity myself, not such a keen eye to the main choice. Twenty thousand a year is not to be had every day, is it?"

"I believe I can have it any day I choose," said Nellie coolly, as she brushed the snow off her muff.

"Take it then," exclaimed Ned, in hoarse, angry tones; "and much happiness may it bring you! I thought you were a very different girl from what I see you are;" and he dashed away as Mr. Beale approached with a steaming tankard, casting a look of fierce contempt at the small figure as he passed.

Nellie nearly choked as she gulped down the hot wine. Handing back the silver mug to its owner, who was beaming with satisfaction, she said—

"Thank you. That is very refreshing. Make your little sister have some." And then as he went off, she rose and rejoined the rest of the party, fearful that he would return if she remained alone any longer.

The short winter afternoon faded, the great red sun went down behind the distant hills, and the silver moon, taking his place shone down upon the indefatigable skaters. Little Bell Beale had given in and hobbled homewards with aching feet, the Misses Arbuthnot had gone to their five-o'clock dinner, and Hugh Vignoles had returned to his mother and his books; but the Rectory and the manor-house party remained. Ned, tired of devoting himself to Lily, skated sulkily up and down by himself, smoking his meerschaum pipe as a solace for his woes.

"Come, Nellie, it is nearly six," said Mr. Berners at last. "Off with those skates and let's toddle. Ned, bring Nellie a chair and take off her skates. Lee may do as he likes; but she and I have had enough of it."

Ned obeyed in silence, repressing with difficulty an inclination to squeeze the pretty little foot that he held in his hands; and then as Nellie stood up with a quiet "thank you," and held out her hand for the skates, he said gruffly, "I'll carry them; I've had enough of it."

Nellie and he were walking side by side in silence along the narrow path through the woods, while Mr. Berners kept the unwilling Dips engaged in conversation on ahead. With his hands in his trousers-pockets and a pair of skates slung over each arm, Ned strode along in silence, whilst Nellie, not well knowing what to say, was equally taciturn. Presently she slipped on a projecting root, and caught hold of his arm to save herself from falling. Ned turned.

"Are you hurt?" he asked quickly. "Take my arm;" and, without waiting for an answer, he placed the skates on the other arm, and pulled her hand within the disengaged one. "Nellie," he said, in a low hurried tone, "why do you try to make me miserable! What is the meaning of your behaviour all to-day?"

"I didn't want to make you angry, Ned," she answered humbly, a great lump coming in her throat. "You so easily get cross with me now."

"I know I do, darling," he said, bending down to look into her face; "but you know why. I'm a jealous brute: I can't bear you to speak to any other fellow. Besides, you ought not to encourage that wretched Dips, to throw him over at last, Nellie," he whispered as the others turned a corner, "we mustn't quarrel again. It makes me so wretched, my own little darling, though I know you care for me really;" and, before she could stop him he had drawn her close to his beating heart and kissed her burning cheek passionately again and again.

"Don't, Ned—don't, please!" she said, bursting into tears and releasing herself. "You must not do that. We are only friends, and can never be more. You must not misunderstand me."

Ned stopped short, barring her onward way. "Wait a moment, Nellie," he said, in a voice hoarse with emotion; "I do not understand you. Do you mean that you are really encouraging Beale?"

He waited, and Nellie tried to control her sobs.

"Oh, Ned, do not speak in that tone!" she said, putting out her hand, which he would not take. "I can't help it. Won't you be friends still? I shall always like you just the same."

"Thank you," he said shortly, turning to go on. "You mean when you are Mrs. Beale. Well, I have made a mistake, it seems. We will, as you say, be friends still; and I hope you will be happy in your wealthy marriage. I will not interfere again, I promise you."

His voice was trembling with emotion and jealousy, and Nellie felt as if her heart would break; but she could say nothing. It would be easier for her to bear if he were angry with her. So they walked on in silence whilst she calmed her sobs by degrees. When they reached the gate, they found the other two waiting for them.

"Come, Nell, you'll be late for dinner!" said Mr. Berners. "Good-night, Mr. Beale. Ned, are you coming in?"

"No, thank you, Mr. Berners; they'll be expecting me at home;" and, barely touching Nellie's outstretched hand, Ned turned away and strode off without a glance at the disappointed little Dips, whilst Nellie and Mr. Berners walked silently up the moonlit drive.

The old gentleman saw that his ruse had failed to bring peace to his favourite, and determined to find out what was wrong; but he knew that there would be no time now for such a full explanation as he intended to have.

In a shabby, well-worn, but still comfortable easy-chair in the school-room, her feet on the fender, sat Nellie, two days later, fast asleep. Her face was pale and sad, traces of tears were on her cheeks and eyelashes, and altogether she looked as little like the bright Nellie Raymond, blooming with health and happiness, of a few

days before as she well could. Outside the window a steady drip, drip announced that Jack Frost's reign was over—at any rate, for the present. Inside the fire burnt sulkily, the room felt chilly, and stillness reigned supreme. Lee was out, Mr. Raymond ill in bed with a nervous headache, and his wife in close attendance, while Mr. Berners was writing letters in the library.

Presently the door opened quickly, and the old bachelor entered the room. For a moment he did not see Nellie, and was going away disappointed, when a long-drawn breath made him look again, and his eyes fell upon the sleeping figure. Cautiously shutting the door, he advanced to the hearth-rug and stood looking at her.

"There's something more than a lover's quarrel here," he muttered angrily. "I shouldn't wonder if Master Lee is at the bottom of this! There's a queer look and manner about him. He watches Nell closely; and what does he mean by bringing that little tallow-merchant to the house so constantly? Hilloa, what's here?"

Mr. Berners took up a note that lay in Nellie's lap and read it. It was a formal proposal from Mr. Marmaduke Beale for the hand of Miss Ellen Raymond, and couched in such terms of confidence that the rosy face of the reader deepened to beetroot colour. Twice he read it through, and then, raising his eyes, met the startled gaze of two dark ones fixed upon him.

"That's the coolest piece of impertinence I have met with for some time!" ejaculated the indignant little man before she could speak. "That comes of Master Lee's encouraging the fellow. I'll answer this, Nell. You won't see much more of him, I'll promise."

Nellie shook her head, and stretched out her hand for the note.

"No, Mr. Berners, thank you. I—I must write. You ought not to have read it. I would have told you presently, when it was all settled."

"Settled! Ah, I'll settle it!" he answered angrily. "And pray why were you such a goose as to cry over the note? Answer me!"

But Nellie could not answer him.

"Perhaps the best plan of all," Mr. Berners went on, "will be to put his note in an envelope and return it without a word. Where's your desk, Nellie? Never mind, I'll take it to the library."

He turned, as if to go; but Nellie sprang up and placed her hand on his arm.

"Stop, Mr. Berners, please!" she exclaimed, her cheeks turning crimson. "I mean to accept, though I hope—at least—perhaps we need not be married just yet. It—it will be a very good thing for all."

She turned away her head. There was such a piteous tone of despair in those last words that for some moments Mr. Berners could not speak. He put a hand on each shoulder and shook her.

"How dare you, Nellie! How dare you tell me such a thing! Do you suppose I have known you and loved you all these years to let you end your days as the wife of that—that Dips? Answer me!"

There was another shake, and Nellie raised her eyes and looked him full in the face.

"I am very sorry that you are so vexed. I think he will make me a kind husband; and perhaps I shall be happy by-and-by. But I don't want to marry at all just yet; and I hoped he would not have spoken so soon. I shall tell him I cannot give him a decided answer yet."

Mr. Berners led her back to her arm-chair, and, pushing her down into it, stood over her like a soldier on guard.

"You'll give him a very decided answer to-day, or my name is not John Berners! Speak out, Nell; you don't stir out of that chair till you have told me every word. Why have you thrown over Ned for this little brute?"

Only a crimson blush answered him. The tears were near her eyes.

"How much does Lee owe him?"

Nellie started violently.

"Has Lee told you anything? How did you know?"

The gleam of satisfaction on the face of the other showed her the mistake she had made. Nellie turned her face in her hands and burst into tears.

"It is mean—mean of you!" she sobbed. "You had no right to trick me so. How angry Lee will be! Oh, Mr. Berners, how could you?"

Mr. Berners strutted up and down the room, his hands behind his back, muttering as he did so—

"See it all now. Pretty fellow that Master Lee! Good shot of mine! Precious glad I found it out! The idea!"

At last Nellie cried herself out. When the deluge was over and she sat gazing stupidly at the fire, he approached her once more.

"Now make a clean breast of it," he said, seating himself by her side, and taking her hand as if he were going to feel her pulse.

"You've let the cat out, and there's no use in making any more fuss. Lee owes Beale money that he can't pay and wants you to marry him to keep his mouth shut. How much is it, and what is it for?"

Nellie saw that she could not help herself, and told him all. What a relief it was to pour out her trouble to a friendly ear! Mr. Berners grunted fiercely during the recital, and then sat silent, playing absently with Nellie's hand.

"You are a little fool, Nell. Why didn't you tell me all this sooner?"

"I could not tell about Lee. Besides, I did not think it would be of any use. I knew you could not afford to help us, even if you

had felt inclined. I have been wishing you were very rich ever since I knew of it."

Mr. Berners grunted, and, dropping her hand, rose and planted himself before the fire, with his legs very wide apart.

"Eight hundred pounds!" he said. "It's a large sum—and I don't suppose that Master Lee could pay me a halfpenny of interest if I lent it him. Don't mean to lend it him—that's another thing. But never you mind that, young lady. You just sit down and write Mr. Tallow a prompt and decided refusal of him and his greasy thousands, and I'll settle the other matter. Hold your tongue!"—as Nellie opened her mouth to speak—"you have nothing to thank me for. Going to marry you myself probably. If I don't, I shall take care you marry whom I choose, and not anybody else's choice. Write that note and give it to me at once. I shall take it myself to Dips, and settle matters with him in my own way."

Nellie sat down to obey him, half dazed with the reaction of her feelings. Half an hour before her only hope in life had been to defer her misery; and now could she really be free—free to snub the odious little Beale if he persisted in his attentions—free to make friends once more with Ned!

Mr. Berners took the note from her and read it through.

"All right," he murmured—"cool and decided. Our friend must have more pluck than most men if you hear any more of him after he gets that."

"I wish I knew what you were going to do," said Nellie wistfully. "You are quite sure I may do this with safety to Lee, and papa shall not know?"

"Tell your father yourself, if you like," was the blunt answer. "He won't hear it through any one else. An hour hence Lee shall be a free man. Now go to sleep again." And away he went, slamming the front door behind him, and splashing through the sloppy snow and moist gravel.

Half-way down the drive he met Lee with his head bent and hands deep in his trousers-pockets, looking somewhat like a criminal on his way to execution. Mr. Berners stopped short and held up the note he carried.

"Look here," he said gruffly, "that fellow Dips, or whatever you call him, had the impertinence to send Nellie an offer of his hand and fortune this morning. Found it out in time and prompted her answer, which I am just going to take to him myself. Like to see the fellow look small. It all comes of your encouraging the little cad about the house."

"Do you mean that Nellie has refused him?" asked Lee, surprised.

"Rather," answered Mr. Berners. "What else did you expect?"

In his effort to be calm Lee bit his lip till the blood nearly started.

"There is some mistake here, Mr. Berners," he said, in tones that trembled in spite of himself. "Nellie is not free—at least did not intend to refuse Mr. Beale. In fact, she has given him every reason to expect a different answer; and I must ask you not to take that note until I have seen her—that is, if you know for certain that it is a refusal."

"I tell you I dictated it myself, and read it when finished," returned the other coolly. "And I mean to take it to the young jackanapes myself this very minute. Good Heaven, man, do you mean to say you would consent to such a marriage, even if she wished it?"

"The days of such wide distinctions of birth are over, Mr. Berners," said Lee. "Girls of all ranks are ready to marry men with twenty thousand a year; and Beale, if not refined, will make her a very kind husband."

"He won't make her a kind or unkind husband, Master Lee, for she hates him, and shall never marry him. Now look here, I know all; and I don't choose that Nellie shall be sacrificed for you or anybody else. I'm not the pauper you imagine. I always intended to leave you a little legacy, and, if you've forestalled it, you can't complain. By giving up smoking and a few other indulgences," he added, with a grim smile, "I can manage to let you have your thousand pounds now; so I shall take this note to Mr. Tallow, tell him the sale is at an end—article disposed of by private contract—and bring you back a release from all your debts of dishonour. Just you take care they are your last, for you'll get no more help from me, and Nellie will be otherwise disposed of—shall marry her myself most likely. Good bye."

Before Lee could speak, Mr. Berners was off at his usual rapid pace and out on the road. An hour later he placed a paper in Lee's hands, saying—

"There's your freedom. Don't thank me; you've paid for it out of your own pocket. Only be thankful you were prevented from sacrificing the happiness of your sister's life."

Three days later Nellie sat once more in the shabby, cosy school-room, painting diligently. It was a picture for Mr. Berners' chambers, and she wanted to get it finished for him to take away on the following day. The thaw still continued, the snow had vanished, and a steady drizzle prevented walking or riding, so that the picture stood a good chance.

Ned and she had met several times—for he did not avoid her as she had expected—and she could not break down in the very least the barrier between them. He addressed her carelessly, called her "Nellie," as before, but never met her eye if he could help it, and adopted a hard, off-hand tone that made her heart ache.