

Nellie would keep pretty much out of the way on the occasions of such visits, as behooved her retiring nature, but slyly take pains to meet me in the grounds as soon as I was fairly out of her respected mother's sight.

On the occasion of this visit a strange incident occurred. Shortly after I had sat down by the bed-side a servant announced "the gentleman who had called last Saturday," Mrs. Elson, who sat directly opposite me, turned pale, and in her voice I detected a forced rigidity as she told the servant to say she was indisposed.

The room in which we sat looked towards the south—in fact, by the doctor's orders Mr. Elson always occupied a front chamber—and I watched the man closely who had thus been turned away as he came along that part of the walk which could be seen from the window.

It was Charles Sweeman, the miller.

What could he want here? There was a mystery I could see somewhere, and I felt a satisfaction in seeing that Mrs. Elson appeared to be at fault. Her agitation was not to be concealed.

When I took my leave I felt a desire to be alone to meditate upon the occurrence and try to connect some scattered ideas I had formed of the relation the miller bore to Mrs. Elson.

Had Arthur Drammel anything to do with it? Perhaps he had; and if so I had now the clue I had long been wanting.

As thus I meditated while taking my way slowly down the hazel-bordered lane, I suddenly looked up, and coming down a little sidepath Nellie Elson appeared like a fair nymph among the hazels. All the merriment of her soul sparkled out of her bright eyes, and as I looked upon her tall majestic figure I felt a pang of regret that I had ever been unfaithful to her.

But of course I had given up Jessie Harle now and I felt easier this morning in Nellie's company on that account. My future seemed cleared up now, and I rejoiced at the prospect that morning while in her company.

When I left her another incident was awaiting me. I had not seen Werbletree for a year, and above all other times and places I never expected to meet him that morning as I emerged from the grounds of Hazelgrove.

But there he was with the same gruff-looking face and heavy beard, leaning on the fence and waiting as if knowing I was coming.

I saluted him with surprise.

"How are you, Mr. Lawnbrook?" he said, slowly, and the manner of his dwelling on my name and the tone in which he pronounced it startled me.

"Shulton is well represented in these parts," I suggested.

"Did you see Sweeman come in here?"

"No; but I knew he'd come."

Then I was right. Werbletree was still searching out the mystery and was here for that purpose.

"You know the folks here—the Elsons?" he queried.

"Yes," I reply, simply.

"That's good. You may help me yet."

"I will if I can, most readily; but tell me all you've found out so far."

I was eager to know all he knew about it, but that he was resolute in keeping to himself for a time at least.

"You'd better come to Shulton with me," he said in answer to my inquiries and entreaties. "You better come to Shulton with me. I may want you for a witness."

I expressed readiness to go, and he was pleased.

We walked on together then for a time in silence, and even in my eagerness, his manner taught me that he had reasons for not wishing me to know of his devices to discover the relation between the boy Drammel and his master, nor to what extent he had succeeded.

How strange the dignity or other manner of a man's bearing affects the intimacy of associates. I would have given anything to have known what had brought the miller to Hazelgrove, even as I walked along beside probably the only man who knew, and yet I ventured not to ask him. Thus we walked on side by side, speaking occasionally of things remote from our thoughts for I felt that he, as well as I, was thinking of the miller and his boy.

He took dinner with me that day, and towards evening, of his own accord, he touched on the question again.

"Did the miller seek an interview with Mrs. Elson?"

"He did," I replied, "but she feigned indisposition."

"And he didn't see her at all?"

"No."

"Do you think he's been there before?"

"Yes; he was announced as the gentleman who called last Saturday."

"Umph! I guess we'd better not leave these parts yet awhile. He'll likely prowl around here till he sees her."

CHAPTER IX.

"I'll read you matter deep and dangerous;
As full of peril, and adventurous spirit
As to o'er walk a current, roaring loud,
On the unsteadfast footing of a spear."

—Shakespeare.

Once more I was to return to Shulton and a hope of finding my brother revived, as I looked on this prospect. I have purposely omitted relating the circumstances of many a fruitless journey after this object lest I might tire my readers with portions of my biography interesting to myself alone, and totally foreign to the purposes of this narrative. My father's request and my impetuous promise smoldered, almost sinking into nothingness in my breast. But now the flame again began to rise; and as I look back upon it now I sometimes think that a presentiment informed me that I was drawing near a clue to his whereabouts.

After tea, just as the sun was quietly throwing its final brilliant rays over the land from the westward, at Werbletree's suggestion we started out again toward Hazelgrove. I knew he was in hopes of seeing Sweeman there; but I did not even venture to ask him that. We stealthily walked into the grounds and hid ourselves among the hazels, but our waiting was in vain, and as the hours of comparative quietness crept on I grew impatient with the monotony.

At length he opened a conversation upon a point that caught my interest and made me feel easier in his company ever after.

"Did you ever have a brother?" he questioned.

"Yes; I believe I did."

"When did he die?"

"I don't know that he's dead yet."

As I spoke I noticed a strange look sweep over his face, which, much as I pride myself on my knowledge of human nature, I failed to interpret. How much did he know concerning Zhake? It crossed my mind that he had known him and was the only one who could inform me concerning him.

"That seems strange," he said slowly, after a pause.

"You think so," I returned, watching him closely, and feeling an inward sense of pride at my speech, which was thrown out partly as a mere exclamation and partly as a query.

"Well, anyone would think so, I guess."

The composure with which he uttered, or rather drolled out, this sentence again threw me off my guard, or at any rate led me into the belief that he was in ignorance of the real facts, even if he knew something of Zhake. So I coolly related all about it even down to the facts of the death-bed scene and my promises. I was bound I would give him every chance that lay in my power if he indeed felt an interest in the discovery, as I, rightly or wrongly, believed he did.

He listened with wrapt attention.

By appointment I saw Nellie Elson the second day after I met Werbletree at Hazelgrove, and I tried by Werbletree's directions to find out what she knew of the man Sweeman. "He has often tried to gain admittance to the house," she answered, "and even once followed us to New York. That was the winter before last."

"And you have no idea what he wants?"

She had not, and as our conversation proceeded I learned that Mrs. Elson was generally agitated when he came, but would never see him. One time, in the previous summer, he stayed around Hazelgrove for several days. He always seemed to know when Mr. Elson was at his worst, and came then. A few days before he had come to the house on this last time, he stopped the coachman when Mrs. Elson and Nellie were being driven to the city and banded a note to Nellie showing by a curious inclination of his head that he desired her to pass it to her mother. Mrs. Elson caught the