

HOW BILLY WENT UP IN THE WORLD.

BY ANNETTE L. NOBLE.

The previous conversation, if only mildly humorous, certainly need not have been depressing in its effect; yet the thought of Nan not liking a man to be a farmer—worse still, the idea of this section of country being haunted by a sentimental college professor, made Billy uneasy and inclined to gloom. He gave a dry response to Nan's question, and began talking of impersonal matters.

"Where is the professor?" persisted Mr. Ellery. "Why don't he come out? Is he afraid of the dew?" "He is talking with mother; he knows friends of hers."

"I'll warrant he does. I never knew anybody from New England who did not know friends of your mother," said the old farmer. In a few minutes the party in-doors came to join the three without. First came Miss Sara Wells, with whom Billy had already a slight acquaintance; then Mrs. Ellery, anxious lest they take cold; last, the "professor," looking very manly and dignified, and soon appearing both sensible and interesting. There was no reason why the professor should not have found the same truth of Billy, for the latter aroused himself, so as not to seem stupid to Nan, and talked and jested with the rest.

All the while as they were there together, however, Billy was arguing with his jealous fears, and trying to allay them. How perfectly natural it was that Nan should make agreeable acquaintances, and invite them to her home. If she did so, what concern was it of his? None whatever, he assured himself; yet all the time he knew he meant—what if some acquaintance, like this gentleman, should be finding out how "agreeable" Nan was, should try to please her, and should succeed? That was his concern. The fear and jealous pain of the very thought, let him plainly realize he had given all the love he had to give to any human being, to this woman. She shared it with no father, sister, or brother—only with the faint memory of a long dead mother; and Billy was of a nature to feel with his might where he felt at all. As a boy, he had awakened to his first love for her when poor Ned Fenton had seemed to please her girlish fancy; now as a man, he was tenfold more in earnest.

With Nan herself, he was aware he had made no headway. They had been continually separated, meeting often, but in tantalizing ways like the present brief interview; and their old time, commonplace familiarity was an obstacle to any nearer understanding. Nan, at least, made it so, by a cunning always that she knew all about him—or, sometimes it was that he fancied she did not care to know anything about him, which was equally grievous to his heart and his pride.

Billy was unconsciously proud in one respect. Nan, as the only child of a rich farmer, was considered a "catch," by the young men thereabouts, and Mr. Ellery often laughed at the interest they took in him. Knowing this, Billy set a task always before himself, the gaining of a position among men, honorable if relatively humble, and something to call his own, before he would even venture to make the first direct effort to win Nan Ellery's love. He would do this, lest somebody should dare to say he was mercenary, was "after a rich wife." Early in the evening, as he heard Nan singing, he was fancying himself a little older, wiser, in every way more worthy of her; was verifying the poet's words:

"The thing we long for, that we were, For one transcendent moment, Before the present, cold and bare, Can give its answering comment."

But the last lines had been trusted after the professor appeared. He called himself a fool, and a very presumptuous one at that. "Let us go down the lane by the orchard," exclaimed Sara Wells, in a pause of the conversation. "I want to see the apple blossoms in the moonlight."

Mr. Ellery nodded slyly at Billy, as much as to say: "Did I not tell you we were sentimental these days?"

Billy did not heed him, for as the young people instantly assented to Miss Wells's plan, he sprang quickly into place by Nan. They left Mrs. Ellery expostulating about dew, night air, and malaria, and strolled away laughing and chatting.

"What did you give for your farm, Billy?" was Nan's first practical speech.

"It is not paid for yet, nor will it be in some time. Haywood asked five thousand dollars. I gave five hundred down, and agreed to pay so much each year until it is paid for in full."

"You will have work enough ahead of you to keep you out of mischief," said Nan. "I am not afraid of work, but I don't want work just for work's sake," he returned.

"Nobody wants that. There is a rainbow with a pot of gold at the end of it before every one of us, is there not, Sara?" Nan asked laughingly, as she stopped to get a ruffle of her dress off a briar.

"Certainly," replied Sara; "so you must remember what you read this morning—Strive; yet I do not promise."

The prize you dream of to-day Will not fade when you think to grasp it, And melt in your hand away."

"That is particularly adapted to you, Billy," began Nan, as Sara went on with her companion. "Don't set your affections on this farm of yours, and fancy you will astonish us all. Say to yourself that crops fail, droughts come, and there is the busy little potato bug, on which I heard father growing eloquent a while ago."

"Your father said you were sentimental, but I do not perceive it."

"I am not, but the professor is," she answered, laughing low to herself, and starting in surprise when Billy exclaimed:

"What is he doing here, anyway?"

"He is visiting us with Sara Wells."

"I never want to see him again."

"He is a very scholarly man and a perfect gentleman."

"So much the worse."

"What a savage you are," remarked Nan, coolly.

"I hope he is going to marry Miss Wells."

"Sara is engaged to a young minister out West."

Billy was desperate. He had no controlling idea beyond the thought that he could not and would not strive for years to come after something that he must lose after all. He would rather know once for all that striving was utterly folly. He did what he had always said he must, not do. He told Nan that he loved her, that for five years he had hoped and feared, planned and waited, expecting to keep silence for a long time to come, but he could not hold his peace any longer. Words came fast, and much was told in a short time. He gave Nan no chance to speak, had she wished to do so; but if she were proud, there was nothing in this man's confession that need irritate her, and if she were not "sentimental," she could not but be moved by his earnestness, unless she disliked him.

By the way she drew back he feared she felt an aversion to him, and he ended with the sudden pained query: "You can't like me, perhaps; but you don't dislike me, do you, Nan?"

She spoke then, impetuously, "I am dreadfully sorry for it all! I like you—that is just it—like you, and that is all of it, or that there ever can be of it; so don't say another word! Come, Sara! Let us go back now, we have gone far enough."

The professor was studying the moonlit landscape from the top of a stone fence, and took his time about coming down. Billy said good-night in haste, and strode along the lane homeward. If he "writhed" in the days that followed, even sharp-eyed Prissy failed to detect it. He went about his farm work with the energy of a young giant; and all the steady-going farmers in that part of the country prophesied that Knox would succeed for there was "no nonsense about him."

A few days after this evening walk, Sara and the professor departed from the Ellery's; Nan remained with her mother, but Billy seldom saw her.

FATHER HAMILTON'S TEST.

If there was a trouble in Billy's heart about these days, he took the wisest way to conquer it; for with tireless industry and intelligent energy he gave himself to his farm work. Much as Silas Barnard liked Billy, he had joined himself to him with some doubts about his entire ability to "run a farm." His doubts vanished with a rapidity he could hardly have explained to an outsider's satisfaction. Before Billy had done anything in the least remarkable in an agricultural way, Silas was sure he could accomplish whatever his hand found to do; and certain it was he showed a great deal of foresight and sagacity in all his operations.

The first season was one of the most favorable a farmer could desire. There was just enough sun, just enough rain, and as the summer months passed, Billy had every reason to anticipate a bountiful harvest.

He was particularly satisfied with his barley, which was coming on splendidly, and he resolved to cultivate it more extensively each year; for no crop could be easier to raise, less exhausting, or bring in better returns. He watched it with great interest, and at last, in just about three months' time from sowing it, his barley crop was grown, threshed, and ready for market. It had not lodged and was not stained in harvesting, but was in every respect of a quality to command the highest market price. From his twenty-five acres he had thirty-five bushels to the acre, and he readily sold it to the Sefton brewery for eighty cents a bushel making his share of the profits three hundred dollars, and the same amount, of course, went to Haywood.

The day he sold his barley, he reflected that everything else about the farm promised equally well, and naturally he was exceedingly gratified. After supper that same night, he went over to the farm to report himself to Mr. Ellery, according to the latter's request. Knox had been frequently to the Ellery farm throughout the summer, but he went very seldom within doors, and when he saw Mrs. Ellery he had not seen her daughter. Nan did not openly avoid him. He sat two pews away from her every Sunday, and he knew just how the pink rose-buds on her best bonnet fell against the rings of soft hair over her left ear. But he had made up his mind not to annoy her in the future; perhaps he was the least bit sulky when he remembered the professor, who in Billy's slightly disturbed imagination, was always, as he saw him last, perched on the stone wall, in the moonlight, ready to descend and conquer when he would.

This evening, as Billy entered the house, he found the family together in the dining-room, and, a little to his surprise, Nan greeted him with unusual cordiality; but he vaguely understood that, knowing she had hurt him, she might be endeavoring to be doubly kind.

Farm matters were talked over, and Billy lingered until the lamps were lighted; then until the school-house bell began to ring for the Wednesday evening meeting.

"I can't go over there to-night, Nan," said Mrs. Ellery. "My rheumatism is troubling me again, and your father is too tired, he says; so Billy can go and come with you, if he will; these evenings are pretty dark."

Nan colored, but said to Billy, very simply: "I will be glad to have you do so." Then she put on her bonnet and made ready to go. On their way to the school-house she talked rapidly, and drew him into the half-playful style of dialogue once common between them. Billy took his part easily, for to talk seriously with Nan was more difficult in his present state of mind toward her. He had carried himself bravely these past months; but more sun must shine, and more rain fall on the young farmer, before he could outgrow his old love. When they reached the school-house they found about twenty neighbors assembled, and already singing the hymn, "Nearer, my God, to Thee!"

There was no vacant place by the door for here, as often in larger prayer-meetings the attendants chose their seats as if with a view to sudden flight from the spot; so the new comers were forced to go forward, and sit side by side.

In the chair by the battered desk, where day by day the school-teacher sat, was an old man, who was universally esteemed for his blameless character. His words were usually few, but they always came from the heart; and so, as Goethe says, they never failed "to go to the heart." Being feeble, he did not stand, and because he was too dim-eyed to read out of the fine-print Bible there, he merely folded his trembling hands, and sitting, with the mellow lamp-light on his silvery hair, said:

"I have only two short verses in my mind to-night, but they mean whole volumes. One means the most honest outcry that a human soul can send up to its Creator; and the other means the greatest work the Almighty Father can do for his children. The first is an awfully solemn prayer, if we can only comprehend it, my friends. Don't ever dare to say carelessly to your Maker: 'Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts.' Above all never fall into the error of supposing you can sincerely pray that prayer, and have the matter end there. Years ago I prayed this old prayer with earnestness, and I thought it likely that God would pour down on me at once, some rich, peculiar blessing, because of his pleasure in my willingness to have Him read my inmost thoughts. How I thank Him, now, that I had not really first read them plainly myself. If I had done so, I might have kept them forever as they were; for, although He blessed me—yes, in the end, most abundantly, yet first, He proved me! Oh, when God brings us to the proving, if it need be, for our own purity, there will be struggle, or bitterness, or tears, or agony, or loss! But when all is over, God knows that we love Him, and we know in whom we have believed."

The plain words of old "Father Hamilton" had put Billy into a thoughtful mood; and he was applying the ideas suggested to his own consciousness, when he was startled by the request:

"Will you pray, my young brother?" He sat nearest the old man, who was looking directly at him when he glanced up, and who must have meant him. Regaining his self-possession in a moment, he began, but could not at once forget himself, or the fact that Nan was at his side; then frightened, lest his words be a mockery, his quick unuttered petition was for the true spirit of prayer; and soon out of the "abundance of his heart," his mouth began to speak.

While he was praying, it came to him suddenly, to say: "Search me and know me" etc.—the request which the old man had rightly called "awfully solemn;" but instantly after the impulse, there was borne into him the impression that unless he meant it all—unless he was indeed willing to be proven by God, it would be profane for him to go on. Then, as quick as lightning, came the suggestion: "Change your intended prayer; say something else." He dared not do it, for the old man's later words returned to him, in regard to the reason for a possible secret shrinking from uttering that prayer.

The listeners supposed the young man was hesitating a second from some embarrassment, but it seemed to him he was a long time silent, so many conflicting thoughts were in his mind. "I ought to be able to say it," he thought, "and I will, for God knows that I do not want to be double-minded." Then, a little out of breath, as one after a struggle, he finished his prayer, and the meeting went on in the old quiet way.

Before they sang the closing hymn, Billy had wondered how he could have made so much of so simple a matter, for on calm reflection, he was aware of no covered wrong-doing in his life or conduct. Indeed, as he went out into the night, a quiet happiness filled his soul. After all, when the Lord proved his children, what was it but the "good hand" of their God upon them?

Old Father Hamilton never makes talk for the sake of talk, in prayer-meeting," said Nan, as they walked home together. "He is very feeble and forgetful about common matters—is just a simple, gentle, old man; yet, when I listen to him, I always feel as if in some past time he might have been a hero, although maybe nobody but God knows it. He seems to me the kind of a man who, if every one else about him was going wrong, would make true to himself the saying I have read somewhere: 'One with God is a majority; weakness with God is omnipotence.'"

Nan seldom spoke so reverently. She usually kept her best thoughts, but she had been impressed to-night by the spirit of earnestness manifest in the speaker. She showed this so plainly, that Billy soon found himself telling her how the passage of Scripture had, for a little while, stayed the prayer on his lips. She understood him, and their after talk took on a new tone of interest. He remained with the Ellerys an hour or more, then returned home, grateful that, temporarily and spiritually, it was as well with him as it was.

As communities go, the region about Sefton was not worse than many another farming section, still there was in it a great deal of impatience, some infidelity, and various forms of immorality. The nearest church was four miles from our friend's farm, but just within easy walking distance from them was the school-house, where