

The Storyteller.

"PRIDE GOETH BEFORE A FALL!"

A CYCLING IDYLL.

(By MARGARET KELLY, in the *Catholic Ensign*)

CHAPTER I.

MISS EDMONDS lifted her hands in horror. "My dear child!" was all she could find words to say.

"Yes, auntie, it was all my own idea. I think it is delightful, and so does George. At all events it will be something towards waking up this abominably sleepy little village. Don't you think so?"

Nellie Edmonds was an undeniably handsome girl, with a touch of mannishness about her which, however, did not add to her attractions. She was tall and well made, rather slight, but as straight as a rush, with her head poised in an unmistakably wilful, haughty, and independent manner. That same head was particularly pretty, and not all the mannish habiliments worn by Nellie nor her athletic inclinations could rob it of its femininity, for it was essentially womanly. There was something about the arrangement of the soft brown tresses, something gentle and winning in the expression of the face, that seemed to belie the severely-cut cycling costume and the slangy expressions that now and then escaped from the exquisitely-shaped lips, and set one to work mentally attributing Miss Nellie in some soft clinging, sweeping silky gown, with plenty of lace falling away from the throat and arms, which, notwithstanding any amount of exercise, were still soft and round as any baby's.

Nellie Edmonds was the only child of her parents, who had both died when she was young, leaving her under the guardianship of her aunt—her father's eldest sister Mary. As a child Nellie had been very strictly brought up by Aunt Mary in accordance with the rules of a rather old-fashioned propriety. In those days she was an extremely pretty and well-behaved child—quite a model in fact—and the despair of all mothers who visited her aunt and who were blessed with children who *were* children.

Then came the time when Nellie went to a fashionable boarding-school, where she made the acquaintance of girls who soon taught her to cast her prim manners to the winds, and so from one extreme she was not very long in passing to the other. Miss Edmonds nearly fainted upon hearing the first slang phrase escape from the lips of her idol—but now she had become quite accustomed to this and many other unladylike habits of her niece, bitterly as she had at first deplored them.

Having matriculated, Nellie considered that her education was now finished. She left school and took up her abode at Beecheroff with her aunt. Beecheroff was a village situated in the heart of beautiful sleepy Devonshire, which still existed in its primitive simplicity. It nestled in a hollow, and was surrounded by hills clad with verdure, or showing here and there patches of ploughed earth of the lovely red hue which contrasts so well with Devon's green fields and hedges and trees. On the sides of the hills and crowning their summits were trees in abundance. Sometimes it was a giant oak that stood alone in the centre of the rich meadow, and whose gnarled branches spread out far and wide to give shelter to the numerous sleek kine which browsed there; but more often the trees clustered in groups or made straggling chains by the side of road or river.

It was a pleasant village, and the "Croft," which was to be Nellie Edmonds' inheritance, was the pleasantest homestead in the neighbourhood. The Edmonds were not rich, but they were in very comfortable circumstances, and were somewhat looked up to in Beecheroff by reason of their grandfather and his grandfather before him having lived and died at the "Croft."

Miss Edmonds often reflected with grief upon the apathy with which Nellie regarded her home, and compared it very unfavourably with the real delight that some of her young friends displayed at the sight of the ancient oak-ceiled and panelled rooms, the valuable paintings and the rare old china. The "Croft" possessed besides these a real secret hiding-place, and there were many legends and traditions relating to the house, which Miss Edmonds loved to untold to sympathetic listeners.

Nellie turned up her pretty nose at what she privately dubbed "such bosh," and had no scruple in taking off her aunt's audience to "field" for her while she "wielded the willow," or to accompany her on a fishing or cycling expedition.

Nellie was twenty-two years of age when she became acquainted with George Hobart.

George was the son of a lawyer in the neighbouring town of Beechford. He, too, was going to be a lawyer some day, but in the meantime he was a great athlete and took much more kindly to cricket, football, and other such manly sports than to Sir William Black-tone and the dry procedure of a lawyer's office.

By and bye the acquaintance ripened into friendship, and Miss Edmonds began to think that eventually they might fall in love with each other, and there would be the inevitable marriage.

Well, if it were so, Miss Edmonds would not be altogether displeased. To be sure George was not very fond of work, but Lawyer Hobart was well off and had only two other children—daughters—to provide for; besides George was young—he was only twenty-one; he would get sense when he was a little older.

So Miss Edmonds dreamed and planned, and meantime her predictions were verified, and the young people did fall in love. Then they became engaged, and as everyone seemed agreeable, the course of true love went on smoothly, and the date of the wedding was fixed upon.

It was now that Nellie showed her originality

"I'll tell you what, George," she said eagerly one evening as they were returning home on their cycles, "we will astonish Beechcroft!"

"We generally manage to do that pretty well," replied George, whose lip indicated a spice of sarcasm in his nature.

"Perhaps you do," returned Nellie, with stress on the "you." "You astonished us all yesterday in the match by coming out without scoring a single run. I could have fainted really. I never was so shocked in my life.

George smiled faintly; he gave one the impression of his being serious—almost to sadness.

"Ranjitsinhji only scored seven the other day; my 'duck' isn't so bad, comparatively speaking. But tell me how *we* are to astonish Beechcroft?"

"I thought it would be awfully jolly to have a bicycle wedding."

"Really though?" George looked contemplatively at the front wheel of his machine.

"Yes, really. I think it would be so up-to-date and all that, you know. They shan't be able to say about me in the *Beechcroft Chronicle*—The bride was gowned in the orthodox white duchesse satin, her train being borne by so-and-so and so-and-so. No, they shan't be able to say that about me."

"What will Miss Edmonds say?" asked George cautiously, as he looked at her.

"Auntie may say what she likes—but you forget that I am the mistress at the "Croft," and shall do just what I please."

"Suppose I object," George advanced.

"But you won't—I know you won't," Nellie almost pleaded, for George had a will of his own too, when he chose to exert it. "You are the dearest boy; you wouldn't disappoint me if I set my heart upon it?"

George submitted to this bit of coaxing with very good grace, and was not long in falling in with Nellie's views.

Nellie had on her return to the "Croft" gone straight to her aunt and laid her plans before the old lady, who was genuinely shocked.

"You needn't be a bit put out, Auntie; it is quite the thing, you know. I shall have Sissy Forest and Mabel Stanley for bridesmaids; they are good riders, and I am sure they will be only too pleased."

"And how am I to get to Beechford?" asked poor Aunt Mary with tears in her blue eyes. "I couldn't ride a bicycle if I practised from now till the crack of doom."

"There's no necessity for you to do so," smiled Nellie, as she conjured up a vision of Aunt Mary's tall, attenuated figure, robed in her best black silk, and mounted upon a wheel; "you may be sure Mrs. Hobart won't come on a cycle. You will just come in the ordinary way."

"I can't think where you have got your notions from," murmured Aunt Mary wiping her eyes with a delicate lace handkerchief, and replacing her gold-rimmed spectacles. "I am sure I hope I shan't be held accountable for them. As for going to the most solemn action of your life perched upon two wheels—well!"

"I don't see any difference from being perched upon four wheels," put in Nellie very flippantly.

"Oh, my dear—don't speak like that. And what about your veil?"

"Veil, Auntie? Do you think I am going to have a veil streaming after me, and it is three miles from here to Beechford?"

"What!" almost screamed Aunt Mary in consternation, "married without a veil! What are you coming to? I have just been looking at the veil your mother and grandmother were married in. It is fit for a princess. Anyone might be proud to have such a lovely piece of lace to wear."

"Perhaps I shall wear the veil," said Nellie, "I must inquire. I hope it isn't a very long one."

CHAPTER II.

"Here comes George. I must tell him the arrangements exactly."

Nellie was the speaker, and she was sitting with Miss Edmonds and the young lady who was to be her bridesmaid on the lawn at the "Croft." They were having tea after a very warm time of it at tennis.

George came forward with his easy, swinging step, his arms and legs, doubtless from long practice at cricket, seeming to be ready to fly forward at a second's notice. He was tall, but not of the muscular type; his slightness seemed to take off from his appearance as an athlete and gave him an air of refinement and gentlemanliness instead. As he walked across the lawn with his straw hat pushed on the back of his head, the sun glinting on the light brown hair and his blue eyes smiling, Nellie thought that his equal did not, and never again would, exist.

"I was just saying, George," she said, handing him a cup of tea as he sat down upon the grass, "that Sissy and I would decorate the tandem and we would ride it down from the "Croft" on Wednesday morning (just as practice for me, you know) as far as Beechesoff-lane, where we could meet the other girls and get into proper order. Coming back, of course—"

"You leave it to me, dearest. It is just as well to practice the tandem that morning—in case you might be nervous or anything of that sort, you know."

"As a matter of precaution, yes. I am so pleased that we have been able to arrange matters so nicely. Everyone will turn out to see it, and I shouldn't like there to be the slightest hitch."

"I have promised my cousin Rex a new cycle if there should be anything of the sort, so we must mind our p's and q's. So sorry you don't care about the project, Miss Edmonds"—George was a favourite of Aunt Mary's and he knew it—"but you must expect this sort of thing—the march of modern society, the progress of civilisation, and all that, you know. I expect we shall all live to see ourselves buried on cycles or in motor-cars or something of that style—that is—I mean if we live long enough we shall—er—what do I mean, Nell? Help me out."