

"And I saw him yesterday," observed Miss Laura, with downcast eyes.

"Yesterday?—where?" demanded her cousin Richard—who had sat silent and bewildered all this time.

"At the foot of Crossways Lane, by the pond," said the younger daughter; and then she added, with some hesitation, "And—and Nancy was with him."

"Really, I am more than surprised," said the vicar, with unusual emphasis, "at such conduct on the part of that young man. I had always considered him a most respectable, well-bred, honourable young fellow—indeed, I had a very great regard for him, even when he and I differed in our political views; but that he could have stooped to this clandestine correspondence—"

"Papa," said Gertrude (who also seemed to regard the young Scotchman with favour, and was modestly anxious to put in this meek apology for him), "don't you think he may have been waiting for an opportunity of coming to speak to you? Perhaps he may have wished to have all his affairs in Yorkshire settled first."

"Oh, if there has been any hole-and-corner business in the affair, be sure it was Nancy's own doing!" said Mr. Richard, scornfully (alas, how inconstant are the hearts on men! had he no recollection of certain moonlight strolls up and down a hushed little courtyard—a courtyard so hushed that one could almost in the darkness have heard poor Nanciebel's heart throbbing for very joy?), "she was always for romance, and mystery, and secrecy; and I have no doubt she persuaded this fellow into concealing the whole affair until they could declare themselves married. Or perhaps they are married already?—that would be just like Nancy. And now I know why she looked so frightened when I came here yesterday—"

"Cousin Richard," said Gertrude, rather piteously, "I hope you will not think I had any part in this. I could not help seeing what was going on; and perhaps I ought to have told papa, or written to you; but then I thought it would be dishonourable. Many a time I have been sorry for you, and thought you ought to know."

"Oh, but look here, Gertrude," he exclaimed, "you mustn't blame yourself at all—you mustn't imagine any harm has been done to me. Why, if what you suggest has all come true—if Nancy has gone and got married—or is about to be married—that would be for me—"

But he paused and was silent. The future was too vague and uncertain; these wild and dazzling hopes were not to be spoken of as yet. Nevertheless the two girls could gather from his face that he was in no wise disappointed or depressed by this sudden news; he only insisted, in a matter-of-fact kind of way, on the necessity of getting to know of Nancy's whereabouts and immediate prospects.

He remained to mid-day dinner at the Vicarage; he went with his cousins to evening service; he had some bit of supper with them later on ere he set out to walk in to Bristol. And now that he had almost convinced himself that his relationship with Nancy was really, finally, and irretrievably broken, he began to think of her with gentleness—not with any anger or desire for revenge. She had been a most affectionate and loving kind of creature: too loving and affectionate, perhaps; she could not suffer being alone; she must have some one to cling to, some one to pet her, some one to "be good to her." Well, well, he had nothing to reproach her with, he said to himself, as he walked along the solitary highway. When Nanciebel's soft, dark eyes had looked into his, they had been honest enough at the time: it was her too tender heart that had played her false; she was hardly to blame, for how can one alter one's temperament? And he understood that letter now. It was not altogether artificial. Perhaps there was a little sentimental regret in her bidding him good-bye; and perhaps she thought she could best express that in the language of books. And if Nancy wished to betray a sweet humility—or even to convey a subtle little dose of flattery—in talking of the honour of the position that had been designed for her, why should he be scornful of these innocent girlish wiles? Poor Nanciebel! She had been kind in those bygone days; he hoped she would be happy, and run no more risks of separation.

But he was hardly prepared for his next meeting with Nancy. He had spent all the Monday morning in wandering aimlessly about, discussing with himself the various possible ways and means of getting into communication with that errant damsel; and at last he was returning to his hotel, about lunch-time, when behold! here was Nanciebel herself, her hand on the arm of a tall and rather good-looking young fellow of grave aspect and quiet demeanour.

"Oh, Mr. Richard," said Nanciebel, with her face flushing rosyly and her eyes shining gladly, "this is just what I have been hoping for! I knew we should meet you somewhere? Will you let me introduce my husband—you've met before."

The two men bowed, and regarded each other with a somewhat cold and repellant scrutiny; which could tell how the other was going to take this odd situation of affairs? But it was Nancy, with her eager volubility, who got over the awkwardness of the meeting.

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Richard, for I made sure you would be glad when you heard the news. I have seen for many a day that you wished our engagement broken off—I could read it in every line of your letters; but I wanted you to speak first. Then you frightened me on Saturday—did you really mean what you said?—or what was your intention?—anyway, it's all right now, and you are free; and now James and I can make any apologies that are necessary for the concealment that has been going on. Oh, but that was all my doing, Mr. Richard—indeed it was!—I declare it was! James was far going direct to your uncle and explaining everything—and I said that would only provoke a tremendous family disturbance—that it would be far better for us to get married—and then no objection could be taken. Yes, we were married this morning," continued Nanciebel, with a becoming modesty, "and Mr. and Mrs. Stephens, with whom I am staying, have gone away home, and so James and I thought we might come for a little walk. I am so glad to have met you, Mr. Richard—"

But here Mr. Richard, who had been considerably flurried by this unexpected encounter, and by Nancy's rapid confessions, pulled himself together.

"But look here," said he boldly, "where's the wedding-breakfast?"

"Oh!" said Nancy, with another blush, "the Stephenses are to have a few friends in the evening; but I think we shall leave by the afternoon train for London."

"Very well," said Mr. Richard, "but in the meantime? See, there is my hotel—suppose you and your husband come in and have lunch with me—let it be wedding-breakfast, if you like—what do you say, Mr. Bruce?"

An odd kind of half-embarrassed smile came into the young Scotchman's grave and handsome face.

"I have not much experience in such matters," he answered, in his slow, incisive way, as he looked at his bride with affectionate eyes; "but I should think, in such a case, it would be for the young lady to say what should be done."

"Oh, then I say yes!" cried Nancy, in an instant. "Oh, it is so kind of you, Mr. Richard—for you know I wouldn't for the world have any disagreement or ill-feeling remain behind; and now I can write down to Stratford that you are quite good friends with us, and I hope you'll tell your mother so, and your uncle, and Gertrude and Laura. It is so very, very kind of you, Mr. Richard!" again said Nanciebel—almost with tears of gratitude in her soft, dark eyes.

The improvised wedding-breakfast was a great success; and Mr. Richard played the part of host with a quite royal magnificence. The young Scotchman was throughout grave and self-possessed, but not taciturn; when he did speak, there was generally something in what he said. But, indeed, it was Nancy who did all the talking; chattering about everything and nothing, and always turning for confirmation (but not waiting for it) to James. And then again, when it was time for them to go, Mr. Richard accompanied them into the hall, and had a cab called for them; and as he bade them good-bye on the wide stone steps outside, Nancy took his hand and pressed it warmly, and looked into his eyes almost as once she had looked, and murmured in a soft undertone:—

"You have been kind!"

Such was the fashion of their parting; but Nancy's eyes were still once more turned back to him, and she waved her hand to him as she and her husband drove away.

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Now it was about a fortnight afterwards—perhaps a day or two less—that Mrs. Kingston and her niece Florence were in the little boudoir at Woodend; and, strange to say, the latter was down on her knees, with her head buried in the widow's lap, as if she had been making confession.

"And may I call you mother?" was the conclusion of her tale uttered in only a half-heard voice.

"Indeed, you will be the dearest daughter I could have wished for," said the widow, most fervently, as she stroked the pretty hair with both her hands. "I never thought to see this day; it is everything I could have wished for, dear Florence."

"You are not angry, then?" said the fair penitent, without looking up. "But I shall never believe you care anything about me until you call me Floss."

"I will call you anything you like, my dearest," said the widow, again clasping and petting the pretty head that lay beat and humbled before her.

Then Cousin Floss arose. Humility with her could only be a passing mood. She seated herself next the little widow, and put her arm within hers.

"What do you think papa will say?" she asked.

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Kingston, "I think I know what he will say; but if you are at all afraid, I'll go into the garden and ask him myself—this very moment."

"Will you?" said Cousin Floss, with shining eyes. "And mind you let him know that Richard has told me everything—everything Papa knew about—about Miss Nancy, didn't he?"

In a second or two the widow was in the garden, where Uncle Alexander, with his quick, shuffling little step, was pacing up and down the measured path.

She told him her story. Uncle Alexander's instant question was—

"Well, how much had you to pay?"

"I don't understand you," the widow said, truly enough.

"How much had you to pay?" the hypochondriac repeated testily (for he had been interrupted, and had forgotten where he was in his prescribed laps). "What money did you give the girl? It was my proposal originally; I must reimburse you. I dare say you gave her far too much; but never mind. I'm glad Floss is going to be taken off my hands—she worries me. What money had you to pay?"

"Why, we never offered Nancy a halfpenny!" Mrs. Kingston exclaimed, but she was far too happy to take offence. "We could not! She has married a young man in a very good position, of excellent character, and with the most favourable prospects. But I will say this, Uncle Alexander," continued the widow, grown bold. "If you are generously minded about her, give me a certain sum, and I will add a similar amount; and when Richard and dear Florence go up to town with us next week, they can look about and buy something to send to—Nancy."

"Very well, very well," said Uncle Alexander—and away he went on his shuffling pedestrianism again.

About half an hour thereafter Mr. Richard returned to Woodend—he had been into Stratford about some small matters. Cousin Floss tripped off to meet him in the hall.

"Oh, Cousin Dick," said she, "do you know what has happened now?"

"Has the sky fallen?" said he. "And have you caught any larks?"

"Oh, you will be quite sufficiently surprised," she said, confidently. "For papa has been told everything; and he has not cut off my head; no, his plans are quite different. Do you know the very first thing you and I have to do when we go up to town next