

The Storyteller

HER SECOND LOVE

Nora MacDermot is apparently lost in deep thought, but nothing more exhilarating than a field and some grazing cattle seem the subject of this unusual pensiveness—unusual—for Nora is an active little body, and not often to be found holding sessions of sweet silent thought. What, then, gives her such food for reflection as she stands abstractedly there at the gate? Her self-communing at length finds expression in words.

'If it was anything else but a cow, one might hear it better. But to think that cows—those "with an eloquent gesture," have dominion over a girl's fate. To think the happiness of our lives often depends on them! How hateful and stupid they are! And how unshakable! Poor little Kitty, you had no cows, only a heart and soul, beauty and life. And sure life is now your hardest gift to keep. Ellen O'Grady had cows—twenty, they say—and so you are left and forgotten, while Terry Langan devotes himself to Ellen and the cows.'

With a somewhat impatient gesture Nora turns away, and head bent, goes slowly along the country road towards a little cottage—her home. The slight to her friend, Kitty O'Mara, has made her heart very sore. Lue seems different to her to-day. A wind, cold and bitter, has suddenly sprung up in her warm sunlit world.

She stops abruptly. Has Barney cows? Oh, yes, he has any amount—at least enough of the hideous animals. Surely he would want no more? For a moment a deeper shadow flits across her face; she seems as if in physical pain, but she quickly masters herself, and hurries on, reflecting. 'No, Barney wants no cows. He and Terry are different. He is—ah, I can't say what Barney is, but I think my fate at least does not hang on a cow!'

A pleasant conclusion to sad reflections.

Scarcely had she reached the little gate leading to the cottage than a whistle and the sound of familiar footsteps reached her ear. She stood waiting, the sombre look disappeared as shadows before the sun, and the bright, gladsome light of love shone from her fair little face. She seemed transfigured. Till to-day she had not realised what Barney was to her. He had somehow drifted into her heart unconsciously, unbidden. To-day she had seen what love had done for Kitty, and had accordingly turned the search-lights on her own heart, and found it captive. Barney had taken that fair citadel, she surrendered, nor feared betrayal.

The light-hearted whistler, coming round a corner, stood involuntarily as he caught sight of Nora, flashing on him as out of a dream. She stood so still, so restful, in the attitude of sweet unconscious grace—one hand lightly clasping the gate, the other hanging loosely by her side. The sunlight streamed around her, happy in its free embrace. She did not stir or move, but her deep blue eyes were dreamily fixed on Barney.

He stood a moment as though spell-bound, then advanced quickly towards her.

'Why, Nora, you stood so still and pensive I thought you were a vision.'

'No, Barney. I was just thinking, and I am not used to it. Never thought before, in fact, but to-day it has taken complete possession of me.'

'It suits you, so take a dose often. Your thoughts were evidently of a pleasant nature.'

Her hand dropped to her side and she turned away somewhat.

'Like most things—sweet and bitter.'

'The last find no expression, then. But what are they all about? May I know?'

'Ah, no, at least not now. They are vague and indefinite.'

'If you tell me they will take form. Perhaps I could help you, Nora,' in a somewhat too earnest tone.

'To think?' said Nora, laughing lightly. 'That is unkind. But where are you going now—to the village?'

'Yes. My uncle sent for me unexpectedly. This is a busy day, too, but now I am glad I came.'

And certainly he looked it. Nora too was feeling very happy, but strangely shy and nervous—perhaps after effects of the 'demon, Thought.'

'Then, perhaps, you had better go now. Mother will want me too. Those thoughts have kept me idle all the morning. Good-bye,' opening the gate.

'You do change quickly. A moment ago and you looked as if you meant to stay there for ever, and now you are in a desperate hurry.'

'You woke me.'

'From pleasant dreams to grim reality?'

'Not at all! From grim dreams to pleasant reality,' said Nora, turning to go in.

A light springs to the boy's eyes. He was little more than one, and leaning forward, he quickly catches her hand.

'Thanks, little Nora, for that. Good-bye now and God bless you!'

He presses her hand for a moment between his own, then lets it fall and goes quickly away.

Nora stood a moment still, her bright face flushed and happy.

'I "a" right,' she said. 'My fate does not depend on a cow.'

Nature has been accused of being unsympathetic—that is with human vicissitudes. Why should she be otherwise when the least little earthly care or distraction makes men forget her so absolutely. Barney and Nora, as they stroll in the dusky woods are all unheeding of the twilight splendor or the mystery of autumn with its brown and crimson tints.

Barney has brought Nora here to tell something important, that is how he phrased it, he would more literally have said, he wanted to break her heart. She, little girl, is happily expectant.

'Barney, we are in the depths of the woods and it is getting late. You are walking at such a pace and have not uttered a syllable for an age. Why so serious?'

'Because, Nora, life is so to me now. It is one gray cloud.'

She starts and feels suddenly the evening chill.

'Let us sit on this old tree and I will tell you all. This morning my father called me to his room to speak on business matters. Now, as you know, I work the farm and have everything to see after, but until to-day I did not know exactly how matters stood. Father told me all. With some capital the farm would be made—we would prosper. Now father says there is only one way to procure that—namely, by a good match. He has one in view for me—Eliza Morgan—with money and cattle to boot.'

There is a strained silence and Nora's face has grown strangely pale.

But I don't know nor want to know Eliza. I mean at least, I can't ever like her. Ah, Nora, for the first time I realise the bitterness of life. We cannot have everything, and I love you.'

'You love me?' she says quietly.

'You know that, Nora, but what can I do? Father says the farm must have money. There is only one way. Nora, you see we could not marry.'

'Yes, Barney, that I do see. But you speak as if you assumed I liked you.'

'But you do, Nora; don't you?' he almost pleads.

'A strange question, when you have decided to marry Miss Morgan. An insult, I take it,' she says, rising with quiet dignity, and drawing her shawl tightly round her.

'Nora don't go like that. I can't bear it. I thought you did, for I have always loved you.' She almost laughs at this. 'Speak, and say you forgive me.'

'For what? For being yourself, and not what I thought you were—a man.'

'What do you mean?'

'To go home, now you have told me all. Enough, too, I think. Good-bye, and I hope and trust you will be happy.'

'Nora, if it were only you. We could be so happy.'

'Enough of that, please. Good-bye,' she says. He calls her once—twice—she does not heed. As he loses sight of her his head sinks in his hand, his whole frame quivers, and he seems as though in keen physical agony. Let it be great and keen and sharp! He is the creator of his own misery. He has made his choice deliberately—let him abide by it.

'I can't understand what has come over you, Nora. You go about so sad and drooping like, and you used to be so bright! But to say you don't care to dance. Why I heard you say not long ago you would walk fifty miles to one.'

'The weather is hot, mother, and it tires me so,' said Nora in a somewhat weary voice.

'Tires you? Now if I said that it would sound all right, but a young girl like you! Nonsense, Nora! You are working too hard and getting depressed. You must go.'

'Very well, mother.'

'Anyone would think it was to a wake you were going, you say it so martyr-like. Are you doing too much, dearie? You never were strong, and you've lost your bit of color.'

'Oh, I am all right. Just a headache. I'll take a walk—the air will cure me.'

If only the air would cure her!