

## CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Miss Nellie reached the first mining extension of Indian Spring, which surrounded it like a fosse, she descended for one instant into one of its trenches, opened her parasol, removed her duster, hid it under a boulder, and with a few shivers and cat-like strokes of her soft hands not only obliterated all material traces of the stolen cream of Carquinez Woods, but assumed a feline demureness quite inconsistent with any moral dereliction. Unfortunately, she forgot to remove at the same time a certain ring from her third finger, which she had put on with her duster and had worn at no other time. With this slight exception, the benignant fate which always protected that young person brought her in contact with the Burnham girls at one end of the main street as the returning coach to Excelsior entered the other, and enabled her to take leave of them before the coach office with a certain ostentation of parting which struck Mr. Jack Brace, who was lingering at the doorway, into a state of utter bewilderment.

Here was Miss Nellie Wynn, the belle of Excelsior, calm, quiet, self-possessed, her chaste cambric skirts and dainty shoes as fresh as when she had left her father's house; but where was the woman of the brown duster, and where the yellow-dressed apparition of the woods? He was feebly repeating to himself his mental adjuration of a few hours before when he caught her eye, and was taken with a blush and a fit of coughing. Could he have been such an egregious fool, and was it not plainly written on his embarrassed face for her to read?

"Are we going down together?" asked Miss Nellie, with an exceptionally gracious smile.

There was neither affectation nor coquetry in this advance. The girl had no idea of Brace's suspicion of her, nor did any uneasy desire to placate or deceive a possible rival of Low's prompt her graciousness. She simply wished to shake off in this encounter the already stale excitement of the past two hours, as she had shaken the dust of the woods from her clothes. It was characteristic of her irresponsible nature and transient susceptibilities that she actually enjoyed the relief of change; more than that, I fear, she looked upon this infidelity to a past dubious pleasure as a moral principle. A mild, open flirtation with a recognized man like Brace, after her secret passionate tryst with a nameless nomad like Low, was an ethical equipoise that seemed proper to one of her religious education.

Brace was only too happy to profit by Miss Nellie's condescension; he at once secured the seat by her side, and spent the four hours and a half of their return journey to Excelsior in blissful but timid communion with her. If he did not dare to confess his past suspicions, he was equally afraid to venture upon the boldness he had premeditated a few hours before. He was therefore obliged to take a middle course of slightly egotistical narration of his own personal adventures, with which he beguiled the young girl's ear. This he only departed from once, to describe to her a valuable grizzly bearskin which he had seen that day for sale at Indian Spring, with a view to divining her possible acceptance of it for a "buggy robe;" and once to comment upon a ring which she had inadvertently disclosed in pulling off her glove.

"It's only an old family keepsake," she added, with easy mendacity; and affecting to recognize in Mr. Brace's curiosity a not unnatural excuse for toying with her



charming fingers, she hid them in chaste and virginal seclusion in her lap, until she could recover the ring and resume her glove.

A week passed — a week of peculiar and desiccating heat for even those dry Sierra table-lands. The long days were filled with impalpable dust and acrid haze suspended in the motionless air; the nights were breathless and dewless; the cold wind which usually swept down from the snow line was laid to sleep over a dark monotonous level, whose horizon was pricked with the eating fires of burning forest crests. The lagging coach of Indian Spring drove up at Excelsior, and precipitated its passengers with an accompanying cloud of dust before the Excelsior Hotel. As they emerged from the coach, Mr. Brace, standing in the doorway, closely scanned their begrimed and almost unrecognizable faces. They were the usual type of travelers: a single professional man in dusty black, a few traders in tweeds and flannels, a sprinkling of miners in red and gray shirts, a Chinaman, a negro, and a Mexican packer or muleteer. This latter for a moment mingled with the crowd in the bar-room, and even penetrated the corridor and dining-room of the hotel, as if impelled by a certain semi-civilized curiosity, and then strolled with a lazy, dragging step — half impeded by the enormous leather leggings, chains, and spurs, peculiar to his class — down the main street. The darkness was gathering, but the muleteer indulged in the same childish scrutiny of the dimly lighted shops, magazines, and saloons, and even of the occasional groups of citizens at the street corners. Apparently young, as far as the outlines of his figure could be seen, he seemed to show even more than the usual concern of masculine Excelsior in the charms of womankind. The few female figures about at that hour, or visible at window or veranda, received his marked attention; he respectfully

followed the two auburn-haired daughters of Deacon Johnson on their way to choir meeting to the door of the church. Not content with that act of discreet gallantry, after they had entered he managed to slip in unperceived behind them.

The memorial of the Excelsior gamblers' generosity was a modern building, large and pretentious for even Mr. Wynn's popularity, and had been good-humoredly known, in the characteristic language of the generous donors, as one of the "biggest religious bluffs" on record. Its groined rafters, which were so new and spicy that they still suggested their native forest aisles, seldom covered more than a hundred devotees, and in the rambling choir, with its bare space for the future organ, the few choristers, gathered round a small harmonium, were lost in the deepening shadow of that summer evening. The muleteer remained hidden in the obscurity of the vestibule. After a few moments' desultory conversation, in which it appeared that the unexpected absence of Miss Nellie Wynn, their leader, would prevent their practicing, the choristers withdrew. The stranger, who had listened eagerly, drew back in the darkness as they passed out, and remained for a few moments a vague and motionless figure in the silent church. Then coming cautiously to the window, the flapping broad-brimmed hat was put aside, and the faint light of the dying day shone in the black eyes of Teresa! Despite her face, darkened with dye and disfigured with dust, the matted hair piled and twisted around her head, the strange dress and boyish figure, one swift glance from under her raised lashes betrayed her identity.

She turned aside mechanically into the first pew, picked up and opened a hymn-book. Her eyes became riveted on a name written on the title-page, "Nellie Wynn." *Her* name, and *her* book. The instinct that had guided



her here was right; the slight gossip of her fellow-passengers was right; this was the clergyman's daughter, whose praise filled all mouths. This was the unknown girl the stranger was seeking, but who in her turn perhaps had been seeking Low — the girl who absorbed his fancy — the secret of his absences, his preoccupation, his coldness! This was the girl whom to see, perhaps in his arms, she was now periling her liberty and her life unknown to him! A slight odor, some faint perfume of its owner, came from the book; it was the same she had noticed in the dress Low had given her. She flung the volume to the ground, and, throwing her arms over the back of the pew before her, buried her face in her hands.

In that light and attitude she might have seemed some rapt acolyte abandoned to self-communion. But whatever yearning her soul might have had for higher sympathy or deeper consolation, I fear that the spiritual Tabernacle of Excelsior and the Reverend Mr. Wynn did not meet that requirement. She only felt the dry, oven-like heat of that vast shell, empty of sentiment and beauty, hollow in its pretense and dreary in its desolation. She only saw in it a chief altar for the glorification of this girl who had absorbed even the pure worship of her companion, and converted and degraded his sublime paganism to her petty creed. With a woman's withering contempt for her own art displayed in another woman, she thought how she herself could have touched him with the peace that the majesty of their woodland aisles — so unlike this pillared sham — had taught her own passionate heart, had she but dared. Mingling with this imperfect theology, she felt she could have proved to him also that a brunette and a woman of her experience was better than an immature blonde. She began to loathe herself for coming hither, and dreaded to meet his face. Here a sudden thought struck her. What if he had not come

here? What if she had been mistaken? What if her rash interpretation of his absence from the wood that night was simple madness? What if he should return — if he had already returned? She rose to her feet, whitening, yet joyful with the thought. She would return at once; what was the girl to her now? Yet there was time to satisfy herself if he were at *her* house. She had been told where it was; she could find it in the dark; an open door or window would betray some sign or sound of the occupants. She rose, replaced her hat over her eyes, knotted her flaunting scarf around her throat, groped her way to the door, and glided into the outer darkness.