

CHAPTER X.

THE nest of the tuneful Burnhams, although in the suburbs of Indian Spring, was not in ordinary weather and seasons hidden from the longing eyes of the youth of that settlement. That night, however, it was veiled in the smoke that encompassed the great highway leading to Excelsior. It is presumed that the Burnham brood had long since folded their wings, for there was no sign of life nor movement in the house as a rapidly driven horse and buggy pulled up before it. Fortunately, the paternal Burnham was an early bird, in the habit of picking up the first stirring mining worm, and a resounding knock brought him half dressed to the street door. He was startled at seeing Father Wynn before him, a trifle flushed and abstracted.

"Ah ha! up betimes, I see, and ready. No sluggards here — ha, ha!" he said heartily, slamming the door behind him, and by a series of pokes in the ribs genially backing his host into his own sitting-room. "I'm up, too, and am here to see Nellie. She's here, eh — of course?" he added, darting a quick look at Burnham.

But Mr. Burnham was one of those large, liberal Western husbands who classified his household under the general title of "woman folk," for the integers of which he was not responsible. He hesitated, and then propounded over the balusters to the upper story the direct query — "You don't happen to have Nellie Wynn up there, do ye?"

There was an interval of inquiry proceeding from half a dozen reluctant throats, more or less cottony and muf-

fled, in those various degrees of grievance and mental distress which indicate too early roused young womanhood. The eventual reply seemed to be affirmative, albeit accompanied with a suppressed giggle, as if the young lady had just been discovered as an answer to an amusing conundrum.

"All right," said Wynn, with an apparent accession of boisterous geniality. "Tell her I must see her, and I've only got a few minutes to spare. Tell her to slip on anything and come down; there's no one here but myself, and I've shut the front door on Brother Burnham. Ha, ha!" and suiting the action to the word, he actually bundled the admiring Brother Burnham out on his own doorstep. There was a light pattering on the staircase, and Nellie Wynn, pink with sleep, very tall, very slim, hastily draped in a white counterpane with a blue border and a general classic suggestion, slipped into the parlor. At the same moment the father shut the door behind her, placed one hand on the knob, and with the other seized her wrist.

"Where were you yesterday?" he asked.

Nellie looked at him, shrugged her shoulders, and said, "Here."

"You were in the Carquinez Woods with Low Dorman; you went there in disguise; you've met him there before. He is your clandestine lover; you have taken pledges of affection from him; you have" —

"Stop!" she said.

He stopped.

"Did he tell you this?" she asked, with an expression of disdain.

"No; I overheard it. Dunn and Brace were at the house waiting for you. When the coach did not bring you, I went to the office to inquire. As I left our door I thought I saw somebody listening at the parlor windows.

It was only a drunken Mexican muleteer leaning against the house ; but if *he* heard nothing, *I* did. Nellie, I heard Brace tell Dunn that he had tracked you in your disguise to the woods — do you hear? that when you pretended to be here with the girls you were with Low — alone ; that you wear a ring that Low got of a trader here ; that there was a cabin in the woods ” —

“ Stop ! ” she repeated.

Wynn again paused.

“ And what did *you* do ? ” she asked.

“ I heard they were starting down there to surprise you and him together, and I harnessed up and got ahead of them in my buggy. ”

“ And found me here, ” she said, looking full into his eyes.

He understood her and returned the look. He recognized the full importance of the culminating fact conveyed in her words, and was obliged to content himself with its logical and worldly significance. It was too late now to take her to task for mere filial disobedience ; they must become allies.

“ Yes, ” he said hurriedly ; “ but if you value your reputation, if you wish to silence both these men, answer me fully. ”

“ Go on, ” she said.

“ Did you go to the cabin in the woods yesterday ? ”

“ No. ”

“ Did you ever go there with Low ? ”

“ No ; I do not know even where it is. ”

Wynn felt that she was telling the truth. Nellie knew it ; but as she would have been equally satisfied with an equally efficacious falsehood, her face remained unchanged.

“ And when did he leave you ? ”

“ At nine o'clock, here. He went to the hotel. ”

“ He saved his life, then, for Dunn is on his way to the woods to kill him. ”

The jeopardy of her lover did not seem to affect the young girl with alarm, although her eyes betrayed some interest.

“ Then Dunn has gone to the woods ? ” she said thoughtfully.

“ He has, ” replied Wynn.

“ Is that all ? ” she asked.

“ I want to know what you are going to do ? ”

“ I *was* going back to bed. ”

“ This is no time for trifling, girl. ”

“ I should think not, ” she said, with a yawn ; “ it's too early, or too late. ”

Wynn grasped her wrist more tightly. “ Hear me ! Put whatever face you like on this affair, you are compromised — and compromised with a man you can't marry. ”

“ I don't know that I ever wanted to marry Low, if you mean him, ” she said quietly.

“ And Dunn would n't marry you now. ”

“ I'm not so sure of that either. ”

“ Nellie, ” said Wynn excitedly, “ do you want to drive me mad ? Have you nothing to say — nothing to suggest ? ”

“ Oh, you want me to help you, do you ? Why did n't you say that first ? Well, go and bring Dunn here. ”

“ Are you mad ? The man has gone already in pursuit of your lover, believing you with him. ”

“ Then he will the more readily come and talk with me without him. Will you take the invitation — yes or no ? ”

“ Yes, but ” —

“ Enough. On your way there you will stop at the hotel and give Low a letter from me. ”

“ Nellie ! ”

"You shall read it, of course," she said scornfully, "for it will be your text for the conversation you will have with him. Will you please take your hand from the lock and open the door?"

Wynn mechanically opened the door. The young girl flew up-stairs. In a very few moments she returned with two notes: one contained a few lines of formal invitation to Dunn; the other read as follows:—

"DEAR MR. DORMAN: My father will tell you how deeply I regret that our recent botanical excursions in the Carquinez Woods have been a source of serious misapprehension to those who had a claim to my consideration, and that I shall be obliged to discontinue them for the future. At the same time he wishes me to express my gratitude for your valuable instruction and assistance in that pleasing study, even though approaching events may compel me to relinquish it for other duties. May I beg you to accept the enclosed ring as a slight recognition of my obligations to you?

"Your grateful pupil,
"NELLIE WYNN."

When he had finished reading the letter, she handed him a ring, which he took mechanically. He raised his eyes to hers with perfectly genuine admiration. "You're a good girl, Nellie," he said, and, in a moment of parental forgetfulness, unconsciously advanced his lips towards her cheek. But she drew back in time to recall him to a sense of that human weakness.

"I suppose I'll have time for a nap yet," she said, as a gentle hint to her embarrassed parent. He nodded and turned towards the door.

"If I were you," she continued, repressing a yawn, "I'd manage to be seen on good terms with Low at the

hotel; so perhaps you need not give the letter to him until the last thing. Good-by."

The sitting-room door opened and closed behind her as she slipped up-stairs, and her father, without the formality of leave-taking, quietly let himself out by the front door.

When he drove into the highroad again, however, an overlooked possibility threatened for a moment to indefinitely postpone his amiable intentions regarding Low. The hotel was at the farther end of the settlement toward the Carquinez Woods, and as Wynn had nearly reached it he was recalled to himself by the sounds of hoofs and wheels rapidly approaching from the direction of the Excelsior turnpike. Wynn made no doubt it was the sheriff and Brace. To avoid recognition at that moment, he whipped up his horse, intending to keep the lead until he could turn into the first cross-road. But the coming travelers had the fleetest horse; and finding it impossible to distance them, he drove close to the ditch, pulling up suddenly as the strange vehicle was abreast of him, and forcing them to pass him at full speed, with the result already chronicled. When they had vanished in the darkness, Mr. Wynn, with a heart overflowing with Christian thankfulness and universal benevolence, wheeled round, and drove back to the hotel he had already passed. To pull up at the veranda with a stentorian shout, to thump loudly at the deserted bar, to hilariously beat the panels of the landlord's door, and commit a jocose assault and battery upon that half-dressed and half-awakened man, was eminently characteristic of Wynn, and part of his amiable plans that morning.

"Something to wash this wood smoke from my throat, Brother Carter, and about as much again to prop open your eyes," he said, dragging Carter before the bar, "and glasses round for as many of the boys as are up and stir-

ring after a hard-working Christian's rest. How goes the honest publican's trade, and who have we here?"

"Thar's Judge Robinson and two lawyers from Sacramento, Dick Curson over from Yolo," said Carter, "and that ar young Injin yarb doctor from the Carquinez Woods. I reckon he's jist up — I noticed a light under his door as I passed."

"He's my man for a friendly chat before breakfast," said Wynn. "You need n't come up. I'll find the way. I don't want a light; I reckon my eyes ain't as bright nor as young as his, but they'll see almost as far in the dark — he-he!" And, nodding to Brother Carter, he strode along the passage, and with no other introduction than a playful and preliminary "Boo!" burst into one of the rooms. Low, who by the light of a single candle was bending over the plates of a large quarto, merely raised his eyes and looked at the intruder. The young man's natural imperturbability, always exasperating to Wynn, seemed accented that morning by contrast with his own over-acted animation.

"Ah ha! — wasting the midnight oil instead of imbibing the morning dews," said Father Wynn archly, illustrating his metaphor with a movement of his hand to his lips. "What have we here?"

"An anonymous gift," replied Low simply, recognizing the father of Nellie by rising from his chair. "It's a volume I've longed to possess, but never could afford to buy. I cannot imagine who sent it to me."

Wynn was for a moment startled by the thought that this recipient of valuable gifts might have influential friends. But a glance at the bare room, which looked like a camp, and the strange, unconventional garb of its occupant, restored his former convictions. There might be a promise of intelligence, but scarcely of prosperity, in the figure before him.

"Ah! We must not forget that we are watched over in the night season," he said, laying his hand on Low's shoulder, with an illustration of celestial guardianship that would have been impious but for its palpable grotesqueness. "No, sir, we know not what a day may bring forth."

Unfortunately, Low's practical mind did not go beyond a mere human interpretation. It was enough, however, to put a new light in his eye and a faint color in his cheek.

"Could it have been Miss Nellie?" he asked, with half-boyish hesitation.

Mr. Wynn was too much of a Christian not to bow before what appeared to him the purely providential interposition of this suggestion. Seizing it and Low at the same moment, he playfully forced him down again in his chair.

"Ah, you rascal!" he said, with infinite archness; "that's your game, is it? You want to trap poor Father Wynn. You want to make him say 'No.' You want to tempt him to commit himself. No, sir! — never, sir! — no, no!"

Firmly convinced that the present was Nellie's and that her father only good-humoredly guessed it, the young man's simple, truthful nature was embarrassed. He longed to express his gratitude, but feared to betray the young girl's trust. The Reverend Mr. Wynn speedily relieved his mind.

"No," he continued, bestriding a chair, and familiarly confronting Low over its back. "No, sir — no! And you want me to say 'No,' don't you, regarding the little walks of Nellie and a certain young man in the Carquinez Woods? — ha, ha! You'd like me to say that I knew nothing of the botanizings, and the herb collectings, and the picnickings there — he-he! — you sly dog! Perhaps

you'd like to tempt Father Wynn further and make him swear he knows nothing of his daughter disguising herself in a duster and meeting another young man — is n't it another young man? — all alone, eh? Perhaps you want poor old Father Wynn to say 'No.' No, sir, nothing of the kind ever occurred. Ah, you young rascal!"

Slightly troubled, in spite of Wynn's hearty manner, Low, with his usual directness however, said, "I do not want any one to deny that I have seen Miss Nellie."

"Certainly, certainly," said Wynn, abandoning his method, considerably disconcerted by Low's simplicity, and a certain natural reserve that shook off his familiarity. "Certainly it's a noble thing to be able to put your hand on your heart and say to the world, 'Come on, all of you! Observe me; I have nothing to conceal. I walk with Miss Wynn in the woods as her instructor — her teacher, in fact. We cull a flower here and there; we pluck an herb fresh from the hand of the Creator. We look, so to speak, from Nature to Nature's God.' Yes, my young friend, we should be the first to repel the foul calumny that could misinterpret our most innocent actions."

"Calumny?" repeated Low, starting to his feet. "What calumny?"

"My friend, my noble young friend, I recognize your indignation. I know your worth. When I said to Nellie, my only child, my perhaps too simple offspring — a mere wildflower like yourself — when I said to her, 'Go, my child, walk in the woods with this young man, hand in hand. Let him instruct you from the humblest roots, for he has trodden in the ways of the Almighty. Gather wisdom from his lips, and knowledge from his simple woodman's craft. Make, in fact, a collection not only of herbs, but of moral axioms and experience,' — I knew I could trust you, and, trusting you, my young friend, I felt I could trust the world. Perhaps I was weak, foolish. But

I thought only of her welfare. I even recall how that, to preserve the purity of her garments, I bade her don a simple duster; that, to secure her from the trifling companionship of others, I bade her keep her own counsel, and seek you at seasons known but to yourselves."

"But . . . did Nellie . . . understand you?" interrupted Low hastily.

"I see you read her simple nature. Understand me? No, not at first! Her maidenly instinct — perhaps her duty to another — took the alarm. I remember her words. 'But what will Dunn say?' she asked. 'Will he not be jealous?'"

"Dunn! jealous! I don't understand," said Low, fixing his eyes on Wynn.

"That's just what I said to Nellie. 'Jealous!' I said. 'What, Dunn, your affianced husband, jealous of a mere friend — a teacher, a guide, a philosopher. It is impossible.' Well, sir, she was right. He is jealous. And, more than that, he has imparted his jealousy to others! In other words, he has made a scandal!"

Low's eyes flashed. "Where is your daughter now?" he said sternly.

"At present in bed, suffering from a nervous attack brought on by these unjust suspicions. She appreciates your anxiety, and, knowing that you could not see her, told me to give you this." He handed Low the ring and the letter.

The climax had been forced, and, it must be confessed, was by no means the one Mr. Wynn had fully arranged in his own inner consciousness. He had intended to take an ostentatious leave of Low in the bar-room, deliver the letter with archness, and escape before a possible explosion. He consequently backed towards the door for an emergency. But he was again at fault. That unaffected stoical fortitude in acute suffering, which was the one