

CHAPTER IV.

THERE was a full muster of guests at the dinner-table that evening, and as the rain was falling heavily, there could be no strolling out of doors in the moonlight. Miss Elce had a powerful and well-trained voice, and she had used it on several occasions for the benefit of the home circle at Wrayford. On this occasion, however, she refused to sing, rather abruptly, and retreated to a cosy corner at a distance from the piano. Her host followed to try his powers of persuasion, and Nellie Hope volunteered as usual to act as accompanist.

"I prefer not to sing this evening," said Miss Elce. "Really I feel that I have monopolised the music too much, especially as you have professional talent to fall back upon."

"Professional! I do not quite understand you," said Herbert in a hesitating voice, looking round the while, as if in search of some concealed new comer.

"I was alluding to Miss Hope, who is, I believe, a music-teacher," said Miss Elce.

She spoke so distinctly that her words were heard by everyone present; so was Nellie's reply.

"Yes," said the girl with a pleasant smile. "I do give lessons on the piano. I must do something, and I can do this and live with my own people. If I were fortunate enough to possess such a lovely voice as Miss Elce has, I should be only too glad to teach singing also."

Nellie's tribute was honestly paid. She greatly admired Miss Elce's singing and had found peculiar pleasure in playing her accompaniments. At the same time, she felt that the heiress had alluded to her need for bread-winning in no friendly spirit.

Miss Elce was not to be entreated, so Mrs. Fraser turned to her girl friend and said—

"Then you must sing for us, Nellie dear. If we cannot have the best, we must be grateful for next best."

Nellie rose at once and went to the piano. Only Herbert Fraser and his wife knew that she could sing at all, so everyone else was surprised to hear her voice ring out, pure, sweet, tuneful, and wonderfully even all through. It was not so powerful as Miss Elce's, but that it and her mode of using it sufficed to give great pleasure, was evidenced by the attention of the listeners and their entreaties for more.

Nellie's face flushed with pleasure. She was a born musician, and when either playing or singing, forgot herself in the exercise of her gift.

"I never heard you sing so well, Nellie," said Mrs. Fraser. "Have you been taking lessons on the sly, to surprise us?"

"Not in the sense you mean, Mary, but I have Miss Elce to thank for having unconsciously taught me a great deal. How could I hear her sing so charmingly and learn nothing as I listened?"

Despite her selfishness and determination to hold the first place, even Miss Elce could not help being touched by Nellie's generous acknowledgments. She knew well that the last thing she would have wished would have been to benefit this girl, whom she regarded as a rival, whilst professing to look down upon her. It cost her an effort to look at the glowing face which Nellie turned towards her, as she spoke of her indebtedness, and to say that she was glad if her singing had been of use in such a way.

Then she added, "If I sang better than usual, as I surely must have done to merit the praise of Miss Hope, who can so well appreciate good music, I was greatly assisted by her exquisite style of accompanying me."

Everybody was pleased after this, perhaps Nellie most of all, though Frank Fraser did insist that Miss Elce could not again refuse to sing, and led her, not unwilling, to the piano.

More than one pair of eyes looked out early on the following morning, and more than one owner of the same turned away disappointed at sight of dripping trees and still falling rain.

"No riding Lucy Grey to-day," said Nellie to herself.

"No going out on horseback as Nellie Hope's guard and cavalier," sighed Frank Fraser.

"How provoking! When I had planned out everything so perfectly for Nellie!" said Mary Fraser to her husband.

"I saw that there would be no chance of my riding the pretty mare to-day; but I have had a good turn, and if I cannot have the use of her, neither can anybody else," said Miss Elce, as she returned to her pillow and a prolonged sleep.

But the rain did not last all the day, and after luncheon, stout boots were donned and some of the party prepared for a walk. Not Miss Elce. She buried herself in an easy-chair with a pile of new novels within reach of her hand. Nellie was fidgeting a little, on the score of the green cotton umbrella lent by her acquaintance of the day before.

"I think, Mary, I will take it and the shawl back myself. The rain is over and the sky cloudless. I want a good walk, and I like to have some object in taking it. I am afraid the umbrella may be wanted. It is the family article. I am not anxious about the shawl, which is, I am sure, generally laid up in lavender."

"You need not trouble about the umbrella, dear. Depend on it, the old lady is the only person who uses it, and she will not be going out again to-day. But do as you like, dear."

Mrs. Fraser turned away to hide a smile as Nellie thanked her, threw the shawl over her arm and, taking the ancient umbrella in her hand, started to repeat the walk of yesterday. She was well on her way when about half a mile from Wrayford she heard a masculine

step behind her, and directly afterwards was overtaken by Frank Fraser.

"I am come to help in carrying the umbrella," he said, and before Nellie had recovered from her astonishment at seeing him, Frank quietly possessed himself of it, and with the remark, "What will keep rain out will keep the sun out also," opened the article.

It was doubtless to make the shelter doubly effectual that he drew Nellie's hand through his arm and held it there with his own disengaged one, whilst he told her a tale that had been long trembling on his lips.

It was a tale of a love that had been gradually growing in his heart, ever since the day when she as girl-bridesmaid, and he as best man, had officiated at the marriage of her friend and his kinsman. He could tell of more than love, for respect, esteem and confidence had grown side by side with it, and now he offered all together and asked Nellie to share his life and his home.

She was so silent for what seemed an age that he began to be afraid, but when she spoke it was not to say that she had nothing to give in return, only that for the sake of those who were so near and dear to her, she must refuse what she valued most of all.

"My mother and the young ones at home want me, and will want me for years to come," she said. "I cannot leave them, and I would not be so selfish as to ask you to wait for me."

She could not say another word, for the tears were not to be kept back, but under the friendly shade of the old green gamp, Frank drew her to his heart, and told her that she must not be selfish in wishing to deprive him of the privilege of helping her mother and the young ones out of his abundant means.

What more he said, how eloquently he argued, and how, at last, he won Nellie to say "Yes" to his pleading must be guessed. I, who tell the tale, was not under the old umbrella when this chapter was finished, so how can I repeat it?

Certain it is that when Nellie and Frank started on their homeward way, having restored the umbrella to its owner with many thanks, the old dame looked after the retreating pair and said—

"They'll make a handsome couple and a good one too if so be he's anything like her. May God bless them."

"How did you know where I was going, Frank?" asked Nellie as they journeyed, very leisurely, it must be owned, towards Wrayford.

"Mary told me, and as I wanted a good long walk and I always like to have some object in taking one, I could hardly have done better than follow you, could I?"

[THE END.]

COMING OF AGE.

GIRLS, according to the English law, arrive at full age when they are twenty-one years old; below that age they are minors or infants in the eyes of the law, and subject to the control of their parents who are liable for their "necessaries."

Food, clothing, lodging and education suitable to their degree and position in life, and articles of jewellery for persons of rank, have been held to be necessaries. The question as to what are necessaries is one of mixed law and fact, and the onus of proving that the articles are necessaries lies on the plaintiff.

On the death of a girl's father while she is yet under age, the mother becomes the natural guardian of the girl, either alone, if no guardian has been appointed by the father, or jointly with any guardian appointed by the father.

A girl of seven may be betrothed or given in marriage. A girl of fourteen may choose a guardian for herself, and at seventeen she may become an executrix.

When a girl is twenty-one years of age she ceases to be under the control of her parents, she may live where she pleases, she may marry

whom she pleases, and she becomes responsible for her own debts.

In France, America and parts of Germany, viz., Saxony, Bavaria, Baden and Wurtemberg, girls also attain their majority at twenty-one years of age. In other parts of Germany they do not become of full age until they are twenty-four.

The Regency Bill had the effect of making the Queen of full age at eighteen, but the law of England recognises no incapacity in the sovereign by reason of nonage.

G. D. L.