

The Storyteller

A HASTY JUDGMENT.

Nancy drew from a morocco case a slender gold chain glittering with pearls, and held it up with an air of dissatisfaction.

This is Uncle Edward's present to our stall, she said. 'It's a great deal more than I expected from the cranky creature. No doubt he gave it because he knew we should have some difficulty in finding a purchaser. Who on earth buys jewellery at a bazaar? I would rather have had hard cash.'

'Hush-sh!' warned Mrs. Wilson, for there was danger of the individual thus obliquely censured being within earshot, and on no account must he be offended.

Years ago Edward Wilson had gone to America young and poor; he had returned middle-aged and rich, on which latter account alone his widowed sister regarded him with open arms. That she and her children would eventually reap the harvest of his toil and thrift she did not for a moment doubt, arguing that there was no one else with any claim upon him. Whilst he toiled she had ignored the very fact of his existence, but she fondly hoped that her later policy would obliterate her past, and also appear to him in the light of absolute disinterestedness.

'He wants me to call on those O'Briens,' she remarked—and Bernard, her good-looking good-humored son, suddenly bent his head over the cat stretching, scooping paws to the warm blaze. He met them at church the other day, and, it seems, recognised a former acquaintance in the old man. Anything to please him, of course. They might give me something for the bazaar, too.'

'Oh, you can't take up people like that,' declared Nancy, crossly. 'What do you know about them, except that they are hopelessly shabby?' Uncle Edward's early acquaintances were not very choicé, if all accounts are true. I dare say the girl has been deliberately flung in his way, for reasons sufficiently obvious.

'Heigh-ho for the charity that thinks no ill!' said Bernard. 'Come, Nancy, you should be glad of the opportunity of doing a double kindness—pleasing Uncle and breaking, if ever so slightly, the monotony of Miss O'Brien's life. I should have made her acquaintance long ago if I had been a girl.'

'Then thank goodness you are not.'

'That is exactly what I have been doing ever since I knew her.'

'Pray when or how did you come to know her?' asked Nancy, sharply and suspiciously.

'In my own sweet way, through the medium of a treacherous "babe." She and her father came to my assistance when it played me false. You can take my word that shabby or not, she is a thorough little lady.'

'If so, why don't you introduce her to me?'

'If you must have the truth, my pretty Nancy, it is because you can be so intensely disagreeable to people you don't like, and I feared she might think it a fairly boring,' he replied, which retort rang down the curtain so to speak.

By 'those' O'Briens, Mrs. Wilson meant a fragile old man and his pretty daughter who lived on the borders of 'villadom' in a most secluded and unpretentious style. That they had known better days was apparent to the most superficial observer. They were certainly not in Mrs. Wilson's set, but at present her energies were devoted to the promotion of a bazaar, and she was so anxious to secure the triumph of her own stall that she was disposed

to extend temporary patronage to any possible contributor. Into the O'Brien's case there now entered the stronger motives of humoring Edward and of circumventing any designs Nellie O'Brien might have on him. Therefore a few days later Mrs. Wilson called on them. She informed Miss O'Brien that all the bazaar gifts and fancy work would be on view at her house on a certain day, and she graciously invited the girl to come and inspect them.

'I can't help it if you are annoyed, my dear,' she said, on confessing this crime to Nancy. 'Mr. O'Brien gave me a donation, and it would have been very mean of me not to invite his daughter as well as the other ladies.'

'You are playing right into the O'Briens' hands, mother, that's all. You know very well why they want to get a footing here.'

'Hadn't you better chain up Uncle Edward?' suggested Bernard. 'It might be more prudent to secure him in some way whilst Miss O'Brien is on the premises.'

To which Nancy, who was at least thorough in her prejudices, answered: 'I shall not be at all surprised if some of our valuables do disappear.'

On the appointed day, Mrs. Wilson's friends and acquaintances gathered to inspect the future contents of her stall, which were displayed to fine effect in her drawing-room—overflowing tables, chairs and cabinets, and even dangling from the curtains. Tea was served, the small talk and the kettles hummed in tune. But after the hostess' hurried hand-shake and perfunctory 'Pleased to see you,' no one had paid much attention to Miss O'Brien.

Nancy ignored her, the rest of the company did not extend their courtesy beyond a casual remark. She was left stranded, whilst a tide of conversation, unintelligible and therefore uninteresting to an outsider, flowed through the various groups. True, Uncle Edward gave her a kindly nod, supplemented by a smile that was positively beautiful in its tenderness, but he was never at ease in a fashionable crowd and on this occasion he was rather handicapped by an inability to distinguish between poker-work and crystaline. 'Thanks to Mrs. Wilson's adroitness, he was soon safe behind a barricade of bedspreads and cushions. From this retreat he beheld his nephew enter the room and make his way to Miss O'Brien's solitary corner, with a happy expectancy in his dark eyes that revealed much. Uncle Edward's brown hands closed fast upon each other, his half-cynical, half-humorous expression subsided into a sad sterness.

After the departure of the guests, Mrs. Wilson remonstrated with Bernard for having, as she said, singled out Miss O'Brien for special attention.

'Well, really, mother, I did not intend the spectators to think me more than ordinarily polite. It may be that their incivility threw my civility into rather prominent relief. Miss O'Brien seemed to be in quarantine, and I thought that a display of fearless composure on my part would reassure the others, and induce them to address her.'

'It's nothing to take about, Bernard. I am very seriously annoyed with you.'

'I am seriously distressed if that is so, mother, but I don't see why you should be.'

'It is neither right nor proper to compromise a girl so very far, your social inferior by meaningless attentions, which she is sure to misunderstand, and which expose her to very unkind criticism.'

'Now I should like to hear what you have to say for yourself,' chimed in Uncle Edward.

Bernard looked from one to the other with a touch of defiance.

'I am sorry if I should be the cause of the scandal-mongers of the neighborhood using Miss O'Brien's name as a peg on which to hang their gossip,' he said, 'but I am not sorry for this opportunity of declaring that I hope one day to make her my wife.'

Mrs. Wilson gasped: Nancy sneered, from Uncle Edward proceeded a sound whereby a laugh entered partnership with a groan.

'What are you going to marry on?' he asked. 'Your expectations?'

'Well—yes, my expectations; or, to be exact, my faith that Providence will preserve my health and strength so that I can continue to work as I am doing, and harder if need be, for the girl I love. Of course I understand what you are hinting at, Uncle Edward, but you must pardon my saying that you are too tough to die within a reasonable period, and even if you were not, it does not follow that you would leave your money to me. Why should you? I am quite capable of making my own way in life, I assure you; and I can say without vanity that Nellie likes me for myself.'

'So far as I am concerned, there will be nothing else that you can be liked for,' said Edward, dryly. 'I never had the most remote intention of leaving my money to you.'

'We shall not be worse friends for that, I hope,' said Bernard, cheerfully. 'It certainly does not make me other than I am, and such as I am she has chosen me.'

Mrs. Wilson was sobbing hysterically, declaring that the foolish boy was ruining all his prospects for the sake of a little nonentity—when Nancy, who had been covering the more delicate of the bazaar trophies with tissue-paper, her attention scornfully abstracted from her brother's love affairs, gave a sharp cry and turned round, her face quite pale with excitement.

'I knew something unpleasant would happen!' she exclaimed. 'There has been a thief amongst us. Uncle Edward's beautiful pearl chain is gone!'

'Nonsense, child!' cried Mrs. Wilson, aghast.

'Indeed it is not nonsense, mother. Case and chain were in this box, and it is empty now,' said Nancy, holding up a cardboard box with hands that trembled in harmony with her voice.

'You had better ask the maids if they know anything about it,' advised Mrs. Wilson. But Nancy tossed up her chin, retorting, with significant emphasis:

'I believe our servants to be quite above suspicion, mother.'

'And are not our guests?' asked Bernard, considerably nettled.

'I am not familiar with the antecedents of every person who was here to-day, and I can quite understand that that valuable chain would be a source of temptation to—a poor girl in want of a trousseau.'

Bernard was as pale as his sister.

'Take care, Nancy! When you insult Miss O'Brien, you insult me,' he said.

'That is your business,' she answered angrily. 'Mine is to inform the police of what has occurred, and to ask them to take whatever steps they think necessary.'

Uncle Edward had stood quietly and silently through the storm of words, looking from one person to another as if he scarcely comprehended what the commotion was about. Now he spoke, addressing Bernard:

'I believe that before you are much older you will find that Miss O'Brien has possession of that identical chain.'

'There!' cried Nancy, triumphantly. 'Uncle Edward sides with me!'

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