

A Disappointed Bridegroom.

"THERE ain't any use o' talkin', I hev sed ye should marry John Fairbanks, and ye shall, if there's a power in this 'ere world to make ye." And old Farmer Wilkes laid down his gleaming scythe, which he had been using vigorously all the forenoon, and removing his broad-brimmed straw hat from his gray head, he proceeded to wipe the sweat from off his sun-browned forehead, as coolly as if he had not, a moment before, by his cold and cruel words, caused the heart of his pretty daughter Nellie to sink like lead in her bosom, and a half resolve to spring up within her, to leave her home, the home of her childhood, and go away, anywhere, rather than marry a man whom every feeling of her sensitive nature shrank from with a feeling of utter loathing.

She sank slowly to the ground, and, burying her face in her hands, she burst into a passionate flood of tears, while her father, with a scornful "umph," turned on his heel and strode towards the farm house standing in the distance.

And now for an explanation of our story.

When Nellie Wilkes was two years of age her gentle mother died, leaving her petted child to the care of her daughter Emma, who was at that time only 15 years of age. The death of Mrs. Wilkes was sudden and unexpected, being caused by heart disease. To all appearance as well as usual in the morning, at night she lay a corpse. Stricken by his great grief, Eben Wilkes changed from the kind father to a cold, calculating man of the world, and in about three years he married an old maid, who at once proceeded to make his home a perfect torment to his three children, Emma, Alfred and Nellie, so that when Emma's father told her that he had selected a husband for her, she quickly acquiesced, and immediately married. Luckily for her, her husband proved good and kind, and in time she learned to love him.

His second wife had born to Eben Wilkes one child, a boy, who was, at the time our story opens, about 13 years old. Burt Wilkes, strange as it may seem, was a laughing, roughish, but withal a loving, tender-hearted boy. He seemed to worship Nellie, and his affection was warmly returned.

Time passed on. When the war of the rebellion broke out, Alfred Wilkes was among the first to enlist, much to the anger of his father, who wanted his work on the farm. He was also among the first to fall. His sister mourned bitterly for him, but the only remark the old farmer was ever heard to make was, "It served him right. He had no business to have gone."

While Nellie's grief, caused by the death of her brother, was at its height, she accidentally became acquainted with a young man named Theodore Burton, and there sprang up between them a friendship which soon ripened into love. Young Burton was stopping at the village of C—, five miles distant from Nellie's home, and his visits were very frequent, notwithstanding the coldness and evident dislike of the old farmer toward him. At length he ventured to ask for the hand of the gentle Nellie, and was, as he feared peremptorily refused, and forbidden ever to enter the house again. But the young and ardent couple met very often after this, although so cautious were they in their meetings that they were unknown and unsuspected by any one except the fun-loving Burt.

At length, after having used every argument in his power, but in vain, to persuade Nellie to elope with him, Burton was startled by another call for men, and he met her for the last time for the present, perhaps forever, in the grove at the foot of a long hill at the back of the old farmhouse.

Poor Nellie! When she heard that her lover was about to leave her for the perils of the terrible war, she stood gazing at him with wild agony depicted on her pale face, and for a time, with tears rolling down her cheeks, besought him not to go; but a natural patriotic heart prevailed, and at length she bade him adieu with an almost cheerful voice, and returned to her duties with the consciousness that she had done aright.

Time fled. They could not exchange letters, for of course they would have been intercepted, and a year passed ere she heard a word of her absent soldier.

At length, in an old paper, which was accidentally left at the farm-house, she learned that he had been promoted to the rank of colonel as a reward for his bravery. A few weeks afterward, Nellie received an invitation to visit her sister. Much to her delight, her father gave his consent, and she departed for her sister's quiet home with a lighter heart than she had known for months. But, alas! soon came the news of a terrible battle, and among the list of missing soldiers she read the name of Colonel Theodore Burton.

A violent brain fever followed, and when she arose from her bed of sickness she was changed indeed. Never was a smile seen on her lovely face, and when her father came to carry her home, she bade her sis-

ter good-bye, and returned to the old drudging life without a murmur, but with an inward prayer that she might die. But her trials were not yet ended. About a week preceding the time our story opens, she was summoned to the kitchen, where sat her father, with his usual forbidding countenance, and her step-mother, with a triumphant look on her ugly features, which told Nellie that something unusual was about to transpire.

"Wall, Nell," said her father, at last, "I have found a man that will be just the one for you. He is rich, owns a good farm and lots of cattle;" and here the old man peered at Nellie through his old spectacles while the newspaper which lay in his lap, slid to the floor.

"Yes," joined in Mrs. Wilkes, "he is a real good man; you could not do better;" and with the last word proceeded to take a pinch of snuff, as if to enforce her remark.

Nellie stood as pale as death, glancing from one to the other. At length she said, "Father, do not urge me to marry at present. I am young yet, and I do not wish to marry for many years to come, and besides mother needs my help about the house."

The old man burst into a hearty laugh. "Ah! I see," said he; "You can't pull the wool over my eyes just yet. I want ye to marry John Fairbanks, and I mean ye shall, so no more words about it. If ye are so willing to help yer mother, ye can go about it as soon as ye please. I don't want to hear anything about that Theodore Burton. He is dead, I hope, and it is just as well, for you should never have married him if he had lived. In just three weeks ye shall be the wife of John Fairbanks. Now go. Not a word!"—as she was about to speak—"we have said all that is necessary on the subject. So go about your work."

Poor Nellie! She wept herself to sleep that night, and for many nights succeeding. But the subject had not been renewed until the day our story opens, and the reader already knows what had been its termination.

As Nellie sat, weeping bitterly, among the new-mown hay, she suddenly heard a step beside her, and in a moment an arm was thrown around her neck, and a tender voice—Burt's voice—said, "Dear sister, what troubles you? Tell me, that I may help you; surely, you used to trust me."

Nellie drew closer to his side, and said, in a voice broken by her sobs, "It is impossible for you to help me, brother; but, nevertheless, I will tell you." And in a few words she explained all.

Burt was silent for several moments. At length he said, "Come, Nellie, dry your tears and come in to dinner. You shall not marry that horrid man, for I will carry you away, and hide you first." And the devoted boy assisted Nelly to her feet, and led her to the brook which flowed along a short distance from where they had been sitting. After bathing her flushed face, they walked slowly toward the house.

A long July day was drawing to a close. The sun had just gone out of sight behind the western hills, the terrible heat of the day had subsided, and a cool, gentle breeze had sprung up. Nellie sat by the sitting room window, with her head leaning on her hand. In less than a fortnight, if nothing happened to prevent, she should be the wife of a man she despised. A shudder passed over her frame, and the tears rolled slowly down her cheeks. Suddenly, a loud, hoarse voice broke on her ear, and the words, "All right, farmer Wilkes, I'll find her," and in a moment more John Fairbanks strode into sight. He was very tall and slim, and his shoulders were much inclined to *embonpoint*. His hair and long coarse whiskers were of that detestable color called red. He was dressed in a long farmer's frock and a slouching broad-brimmed hat adorned his head.

As Nellie saw him coming, she sprang up, and would have left the room, but Mrs. Wilkes quickly arose and went out locking the door after her. She immediately unlocked it, however, admitting John Fairbanks. Nellie sank bank into her chair and neither looked up nor spoke, or in any way intimated that she knew he was there.

"Wall, Nell, how air ye to-night? I tho't I'd come round and spark ye a little." Mr. Fairbanks drew his chair to her side, and endeavored to put his arm around her waist, but she sprang quickly to her feet, and in a quick, angry voice commanded him to leave the room. John arose quickly, while a look of amazement overspread his face. It soon passed away, however, and he grasped Nellie by the arm and re-seated her, at the same time saying, "Hey-day, and pretty miss, and what does all this mean? It stands you to be a little more civil to me, for I suppose you know that I am to be your husband in just about a fortnight."

Nellie's eyes flashed fire.

"Now, my dear little gal," resumed John, "be kinder calm, and enjoy the few minits I will stop with ye this evenin'."—And here he put on such a look, which was doubtless intended to be exceedingly tender, that Nellie, sad as she felt, could not refrain from laughing. This, John evidently considered a favorable change in her demeanor towards him, for he drew his chair closer to her side, and once more endeavor-

ed to embrace her; but she quickly sprang from her seat, darted past him, and seated herself at the window opposite, where she sat quietly watching the gathering shadows of the approaching night.

Just then the door was unlocked and Mrs. Wilkes entered, bearing a light.—Nellie tried to spring past her, but she was too late, and was once more obliged to re-seat herself and listen to her lover's conversation. Suddenly, the door was again opened, and this time Burt entered breathlessly, hat in hand.

"Oh, John! I can see a great light right over in the direction of your house, and I do believe your house and barn are all on fire!"

The alarmed man sprang quickly through the open window and was out of sight in an instant. To Nellie's surprise, Burt burst into a hearty laugh, which, however, was instantly checked, and bade Nellie go to her room at once. Nellie was not slow to obey, and was soon safe in her own chamber.

Meanwhile John Fairbanks came walking furiously back toward the house.

"Is it a fire?" innocently asked Burt.

"No, you little imp o' the evil one; it's the moon rising. I wish you were thrashed within an inch of your life." The infuriated man strode back into the sitting-room, but stopped short when he saw his bird had flown. Evidently, he had been outwitted, and with this comforting conclusion he left the house, not, however, without an inward resolve to make Burt suffer for his impudence.

A week passed slowly away; slowly to all except Nellie. It seemed to her that the hours flew. At length it wanted but one week of the intended wedding. If our poor friend Nellie did not intend to marry John she must mature a plan of escape.—But where should she go? Alas! she did not know, and at times she was nearly frantic.

On the day in question, Burt had gone to the village of C—, and Nellie was looking anxiously for his return home—why, she did not know. She little thought he would bring tidings of him whose remains she supposed were lying on a Southern battle-field. She sat by the window, watching, for a long time. At length, Mrs. Wilkes entered the room, and, coming to Nellie's side, rested one hand on her shoulder, saying, in the first kind words she had addressed to her for a long time. "Nellie, won't ye come out and help me a few minutes? I am real tired, and I want to finish your new gown to-night."

Nellie shuddered, for she knew that the dress in question was intended for her wedding. But she arose, did her stepmother's usual work without a murmur, and then returned to her seat by the window.

At last the old bay mare was seen toiling slowly up the hill, finally stopping in front of the house.

"Nellie, come out here and hold old Kitty while I take out my grist," said Burt.

Nellie arose with a sad smile, for the idea of old Kitty's running away was utterly preposterous, and she knew at once that Burt had something of importance to communicate.

As she appeared in the door-way, Burt continued:

"I never saw the beat of old Kit. She is certainly growing young, for, if you will believe it, mother, she has run away from me twice."

"That's strange," said Mrs. Wilkes; "It won't be safe for you to drive her after this."

Nellie stood patiently holding poor old Kitty until Burt had taken out the grist, and then he approached and handed her a folded paper, telling her to go to her room before opening it. It was with difficulty that she managed to conceal her anxiety for her stepmother, but she succeeded, and at last was at liberty to retire. Once in her own room she quickly opened the note, for such it proved to be. One glance at the contents, and with a glad cry she sank fainting to the floor.

When her senses returned, Burt stood over her, bathing her temples. "What has happened?" said she, at length; but as she spoke a remembrance of the precious note came slowly to her memory, and she endeavored to spring from her bed. But Burt laid her gently back, and taking the note, read as follows:

MY OWN NELLIE.—Doubtless you will be very much surprised to receive this, and I hope you will be very glad. I have not time to write much, but please meet me to-morrow, at three o'clock, at our old trysting place. I remain, as ever, your devoted lover.

THEODORE.

"Where did you see him, Burt?" enquired Nellie.

"After I got my grist, I thought I would go to the station to see the cars come in. I stood on the platform until the cars had started again, and was just thinking of starting myself, when a hand was placed on my shoulder, and a familiar voice said, 'Burt, my boy, have you no welcome for me?' I looked up and a soldier stood before me. I did not know him, but I held out my hand, which he immediately grasped. 'My dear sir,' said I, you have the advantage of me. What does this mean?"

"Don't you know Theodore?" said he. And then, oh, Nellie, I was so glad that I

could not help jumping up and down for joy!"

"But is he then changed so much?" asked Nellie, sadly.

"He was taken prisoner, and he is awful thin, but as soon as he told me who he was, I could see for myself that it was him, and no mistake. I told him all about your trouble, and the tears rolled down his cheeks. After a while, he concluded not to let any one know that he had returned, and that is all I can tell you about him, but he will tell the rest to-morrow. I must go now, or the folks will think strange of my staying up here so long."—And kissing her fondly, he left the room.

Nellie rose early the next morning, and Burt could scarcely believe his eyes, when he saw her bright, happy face and rosy cheeks. Her mother saw the change and inquired the cause.

"Oh, I have concluded to be happy once more, get married and be an obedient daughter, since I cannot change father's opinion about John," returned Nellie. But as she afterward declared she never felt so despicable in her life as she did in thus deceiving her old stepmother.

Three o'clock came at last, and Nellie stole away to the old trysting place. Theodore was not there, and she seated herself to await his coming. A half hour passed, and then she heard a step beside her, and in a moment she was clasped in Theodore's arms.

I will pass lightly over the meeting. At last they arose from the bench where they had been sitting and walked arm in arm toward the village. They walked in silence for some minutes, but at length Theodore said, "Nellie, you will not hesitate to elope with me now, will you?"

The girl blushing laid her head on his shoulder and murmured, "No, dear Theodore; I have no choice between that and a life of misery."

"Then," said he, pressing a fond kiss on her brow, "meet me to-morrow night at nine o'clock. It will be best that Burt should accompany us as a witness; and he can assist you to enter the house when we return."

They talked a few moments longer and then he accompanied her back as far as the grove, where they departed.

The next day passed as usual. Nellie told Burt the whole of the plan, and he readily promised to assist them.

Night came at last, and at nine o'clock Nellie and Burt stole quietly to meet Theodore. They found him at the appointed place with a light buggy, in which were soon whirling rapidly along to the village of N—, some ten miles distant.

There was but one clergyman in the village of C—, and he had been engaged to unite John and Nellie. As the young couple wished the preparations for that interesting ceremony to go on, it would simply spoil the whole affair to acquaint him with the change to be made in the bridegroom.

Their business at N—, was soon accomplished, and Burt and Nellie, or Mrs. Burton, arrived home without their absence being discovered.

The next day was a rainy, disagreeable one, and in the afternoon John came over to see Nellie. She treated him respectfully, but declined his company for that evening on account of her work.

The days passed quickly away, and at length the day, or rather the evening arrived, which had been appointed for the wedding. Emma and her husband came late in the afternoon, and were agreeably surprised to find Nellie looking so happy. At eight o'clock John and the minister, Mr. Leland, arrived, and in a few moments Nellie entered the room, dressed in pure white leaning on Burt's arm. After a few moments' general conversation, the minister arose, and announced his readiness to perform the ceremony.

John arose and approached Nellie. She gave him her hand, and they stepped before the minister. The usual preliminaries were passed through with, and the usual question, "Wilt thou take this woman to be thy wedded wife?" &c., was addressed to John. He responded, in a loud voice, "Yes, sir."

Then the minister turned to Nellie, and asked, "Wilt thou take this man to be thy wedded husband?" &c. To the astonishment of all, with the exception of Burt, Nellie withdrew her hand from John's, and, stepping back, said, in a loud clear voice, "Excuse me, sir, but I am already married. It will be impossible for me to answer your question otherwise than by 'nay.'"

It seemed for a moment as if all present were struck dumb. Mr. Wilkes was the first to recover his self-possession.

"What is the meaning of this?" he cried, springing to his feet.

"It means," said a low, deep-toned voice, its owner entering the room as he spoke, "that Nellie is my wife, and that you have been outwitted." Then he turned to Nellie, "Come, Mrs. Burton, are you ready to accompany me to my boarding place?"

For an answer she took the hat and shawl which Burt handed her, and before the party recovered from the new surprise of seeing him whom all supposed long since dead, the happy couple had left the house, and were on their way to C—.

We will pass over the chagrin of Mr. and Mrs. Wilkes and John. It can be better imagined than described. John returned home not quite broken-hearted, but furious at his disappointment.

Mr. Wilkes has never forgiven Nellie. She cannot lay his anger to heart very much, however, for safe within the home which Theodore has provided for her, she passes the days in quiet happiness.

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