

*Canadian Ida
and
English Nell*

Mazo de la Roche

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Canadian Ida and English Nell

By Mazo de la Roche

ILLUSTRATED BY
MARY ESSEX

“Do you mind the old days in Kent when we first met? Do you mind the warm, soft evenings and the nights when the pickers dawned?”

I.



he small, eager face of the girl peering through the rain-splashed window of the railway carriage and her tense grip on her little belongings showed her an unaccustomed traveler, though her weary eyes and wrinkled dress suggested that the journey had been long. When the brakeman, swinging down the aisle, pronounced with stentorian precision. "Acford! Acfor-r-d West!" she rose with nervous haste, and, clutching her bundles a little closer, hurried to the door, where she clung, swaying, while the other passengers craned their necks to see the traveler who was so keen to be at her journey's end.

Her dress showed her to be English, a working girl one would say; but she carried her small dark head with more spirit than most of these, and a Welsh mother had given her a pair of fine blue eyes.

With a final jolt the train drew up, and in a moment more the girl had stumbled down the wet steps and was on the station platform. She threw back her head and drew a deep breath of joy, for at last! at last! she breathed the very air that Albert breathed.

Very muggy air it was on this November morning, and heavily freighted with the smell of the tanneries, to which Acford owed its being. But to the girl it was as wine and brought a flush to her cheek, for this was Canada, this was Acford, and yonder was a freight car being loaded with hides which Albert himself might have handled! She sniffed joyously and did not feel the rain that drenched her hair.

A yellow 'bus stood at the platform's edge, and the driver, lounging on a wheel, eyed her sarcastically.

"A fine morning it is for star-gazing," he said.

"I see a 'ole ship o' stars," answered the girl.

The man considered this a moment, but could make nothing of it, so he asked:

"Are you the new girl for the Acford House?"

“Is that where Albert boards—Albert Masters? If it is, w’y, I’m for there all right!” She laughed, happily.

“Albert Masters?” repeated the driver. “Ah, one of them little Cockney fellers! Sure! He boards there, or did. What’s he to you?”

“Oh—a friend,” she said, still smiling. “And I think I’ll get in if you don’t mind. I’m awfully wet.”

“And I’m awfully dry,” said the man, “so that’s a good reason for both of us to hike for the Acford.”

He mounted his seat and by loosening the door strap made it possible for her to enter and occupy one of the moist leather seats, where scattered crumbs of cake told tales of an infant passenger.

The ’bus pitched fearfully, and the seat was so slippery that one of her bundles was constantly on the floor, and she was obliged to brace her feet on the opposite seat to maintain her own balance.

Gone to sleep in there?” asked the driver, pushing his head in at the door. “We’re here, because we’re here, because we’re here——”

“And I’m better here than there,” laughed the girl, clambering out. “Wot’s the price?”

“Nixie, when you’ve got a pair of eyes like them,” he answered. “You tell Albert I said that. I ain’t afraid of any Cockney!”

The Acford House had a deep stone porch, leading to a low hallway. The sound of men’s laughter came through a shutter-like door.

The ’bus driver tapped on this and called, “Bill!”

The door swung open and a young man appeared, shirt-sleeved, with a cigar between his teeth.

“Say. Billy,” said the driver, “this young lady wants to see Albert Masters. He boards here, don’t he?”

“Not now,” replied Bill, “but he’ll be in at noon, sure. What’s he to you?”

His eyes were bold, and the teeth that gripped the cigar very white, so the girl dropped her lids and said, demurely.

“Oh, a forty-second cousin, if you like.”

Billy laughed and took her traveling bag.

“Well, you just come up to the ladies’ parlor with me, and I’ll pinch Albert for you all right.”

It was a quarter to twelve by the clock on the mantelpiece. In fifteen minutes more the tannery would close for the dinner hour. She rubbed a clear space on the misty pane and looked out. On the opposite corner of the street was a tailor shop. She could see the tailor sitting cross-legged, stitching placidly. No youthful bliss awaited him in fifteen minutes! In a window across the way a baker’s wares were temptingly displayed—rows of shiny buns and jam tarts. She was very hungry, but—what a meal when Albert came!

At five minutes to twelve a whistle blew shrilly, and a flock of little children, the smallest of the school, scampered down the street, hurrying home out of the wet. “Dear little things!” thought the girl. Perhaps some day she and Albert would send a little kid to school.

A great bell clanged, and, with a start, she perceived that the hands of the clock pointed to twelve. She ran to the mirror to tuck some stray locks beneath her hat. How sallow her face looked after the seasickness, and how blue below the eyes! Her little white hat, too, was soiled and mussed. She rubbed her cheeks to give them a color, and twitched a fold of the pink silk handkerchief about her throat into view.

The front door banged. Softly she crept half way down the stairs and leaned over the rail. A dozen men had entered. The smell of hides rose from them. Albert was not among them.

Again the door banged. Three Englishmen, mere boys, passed in chanting a London music-hall song. It was coarse, but it brought the tears to her eyes. Would Albert never come?

The noise increased, and other men entering saw her, and some called to her.

Again the door opened and closed, more gently this time, and a man entered alone. She knew the step before the thickset figure appeared. She leaned toward him and held out her arms.

“Albert! Oh, Albert!”

He stopped with a jerk of the head as though struck, then he saw her, and his face went white.

“’Eavins ’elp me!” he gasped. “Nell!”

She reached down and caught his face between her hands and kissed him.

W’y, Albert,” she whispered, “ain’t you glad to see me?”
He freed himself and pointed fiercely up the stairs.

“Out o’ sight,” he said, hoarsely; “get up there quick or they’ll see you!”

With a fearful look at the door, he ran stealthily up the steps behind her, and the girl, stumbling ahead of him, sobbed now in dread. He closed the parlor door behind them, locked it, then turned to face her with an accusing frown.

He had round childish eyes, with a slight cast in one and wide-spaced teeth which gave his smile an almost infantile look of candor, but they were set now in a desperate effort at self-control.

“Well,” he growled, “you ’ave made a bally mess o’ things! You ’ave.”

“Oh, Albert,” she wailed, “I thought you wanted me! You said the money was the only hindrance—and I earned it all myself—honest, too—and I’ve ten pound left for furnishing—and——. Oh, Albert, don’t you love me no more?”

“Blarst the money!” he said. “Wot the dickens do I care for your ten pounds? And you promised to obey me, and now you comes over ’ere, as chipper as you please, arter me a-tellin’ you perticular to stop ’ome! You’re a nice, dootiful wife, now, ain’t yer?”

As he called her wife, his face softened. He came and put his arms about her trembling form.

“Aw, Nellie,” he said hoarsely, “I’m in a ’orrible fix, and I orta be arskin’ your forgiveness instead of runnin’ on yer. Don’t you cry, ducky! I do love yer, but—but——. I s’y, Nell, daon’t you look at me thet w’y. I cawn’t tell you——.” His voice broke, and he hid his face on her shoulder.

“Go on, Albert,” she said gently. “I’ll try an’ bear it.”

“Oh, it’s orful!” he moaned. “I didn’t go for to do it—but she just chivied me inter it, an’—an’—I married ’er six months ago!”

He raised his eyes to look into hers, but the sight of her white agony made him hide them again.

“Oh!” he whined, “I wish I’d never seen ’er ugly red ’ead, I do!”

“Red ’ead,” she repeated dully. “I cawn’t ’ardly believe it. Wot did you s’y ’er nime was?”

“Ida.”

“Canadian?”

“Yus. And a baggage she are, too.”

Of a sudden Nell pushed him from her.

“Oh, you—you—brute,” she cried fiercely, “an’ me eatin’ my ’eart out in old London for you!”

“That’s orl very well *in* old London.” He wagged his head resentfully. “But it’s another story *’ere*! Wot wiv the bloomin’ climate, an’ the stink of the vats allus in a feller’s nose, an’ ’is ’eart cryin’ out for ’ome, ’e ain’t responsible for wot ’e does! An’—an’ I thought I’d find a w’y out of it, I did!”

Nell threw up her chin defiantly.

“She ain’t your legal wife, any’ow.”

But Albert shook his head dolefully.

“You daon’t understand a little bit, old girl. W’y, if I tried to cut loose, she’d ’ave the lor o’ me, an’ I’d get a term for bigamy, an’ you’d be disgriced. Oh, I couldn’t bear ter ’ave *you* disgriced in this bloomin’ country! But a thought *’as* come to me.” He took her in his arms again and rubbed his cheek on hers. “I’d clean forgot wot a little beauty you was, Nellie!” (No need to rub her cheeks for color now, and her eyes—how blazing!) “I allus loved a black-haired lass—well, I was sayin’ as ’ow it come to me that if you’d tell you were my *cousin*——”

She laughed bitterly.

“Yes. I told the ’bus man that—for a joke!”

“You did? Good! Now, we shall s’y, old girl, that you’re my little cousin, wot ’eard there were a kitchen girl wanted ’ere. You can easily get the job an’ earn good money. I’ll see you every day, an’ then, some’ow, we’ll find a w’y out of this fix. But just keep dark for the present, won’t yer? I cawn’t stand a row.”

“You coward!”

“Call me orl the nimes you will, Nell. It’s yer right to do it. But I cawn’t bear to see you disgriced. Aw, Nellie!”

Two tears rolled down his cheeks.

Then the poor girl, being very tender for him, promised, with a sinking heart, not to disclose their real relationship until Albert should “find a w’y.”

So it came that the eager passenger of the West-bound train found herself at her journey’s end more lonely than when she had been in old London dreaming of a little home with Albert in far Acford.

II.

Albert made all the arrangements for his sad-eyed little cousin, even to the wage, the largeness of which amazed Nell, though, with Cockney shrewdness, she concealed her surprise. She was handed over to the cook, Mrs. Sye, a Surrey woman, whose husband, Old Tommy, was the porter and of much less importance than she. There were two other maids, both Canadians: Edith, the dining-room girl, who had once, for a night, been on the stage in vaudeville, and who ever since had worn the most beautiful boots and rolled her eyes amazingly; the other was the chambermaid, little brown-eyed Annie, who, Nell soon discovered, loved the shirt-sleeved young man, Bill.

They were all very kind to her, and Old Tommy stood so long questioning her, with a bucket of water in each hand, that his wife had to order him about his business.

There came a great rush at dinner time. Nell was set to fill dishes with cabbage, stewed tomatoes and potatoes, the three for each order. At first she was much confused between the cook’s excited face and Edith’s rushing out, calling:

“One on beef, rare!—Two on pork!—Beef, on a side!—Soup and fish for a traveler!”

But she tried to imitate Annie’s coolness, and served so well that when it was all over, Mrs. Sye, mopping her face, said that it took an English girl to get onto the racket without any fuss, whereupon Edith and Annie gave their heads a toss.

When they had eaten their own meal—in spite of her trouble the soup tasted good—great stacks of dishes must be washed; and that over, she was set to scrub the dining-room, and later she had an hour in her bedroom, but not alone. She was to share a room with Edith and Annie, and they lounged on their bed, watching her unpack and teasing each other about Bill and a boarder named Sandy.

They told her about Ida, whose place she was to fill. “The way she ran after your cousin Albert was a fright,” said Annie. “Every noon hour, no matter how we was driven in the kitchen, she must mop the upstairs hall, so as to meet him. She used to carry hot water to his room for his shave, too. Didn’t she, Ede?”

“Sure,” affirmed Edith, who was easing her feet after two hours of the beautiful boots. “And often, when I had the tables set, she’d slide into the dining-room and lay a serviette at his plate. The tannery boarders ain’t allowed serviettes, you know, Miss Masters.”

At the name Nell dropped her head lower over a drawer she was filling. Then Annie changed the subject.

“Look here, Ede,” she said sternly. “Bill says that if you don’t quit shutting the dining-room door when he’s eating he’ll complain to the boss.”

The discussion thus started, lasted till Mrs. Sye called up the back-stairs:

“Come along, girls, do! There’s five early teas on!” Which sent them all scurrying to the kitchen.

At last the day was over. Nell, crouching on the foot of her narrow iron bed, watched Edith and Annie dress for an evening party. She had never seen hair so wonderfully done, and how fresh they seemed and full of spirits, while her whole body ached; but oh, it was nothing to the ache in her heart!

When they had gone, and she was left in the solitude she craved, she made her few preparations for the night and crept to the friendly shelter of the sheets, and there the dry sobs shook her as she raged against Ida, and, after a while, her pillow grew wet as she moaned his name.

Another day came, and many others like it. Nell worked so hard that she won the approval of the whole kitchen. The hard work was her only solace—the hard work and the short meetings with Albert, snatched at

noon, or beside the great range at night, while she nursed Birdie, the cook's little child, in her tired arms. She thought that perhaps the sight of her with a child would touch him.

With the same object in view she gave him her first month's wage to keep for her.

Young Albert pocketed the money, well satisfied, and urged her to bide her time in silence till he should be able to "find a w'y."

She had a fear that some day Ida would come to the hotel to see her. Ida did come. She happened to be dressing a doll for little Birdie when she became conscious that the girls' chatter in the dining-room was augmented by a new voice, laughing immoderately. At the same moment Annie appeared through the swing-door.

"Say, Nellie," she began eagerly, "Ida's in here and she's coming out directly to see you. She wants us girls to——"

With a white face Nell pushed the clinging child from her and, with an imploring look at Annie, fled up the stairs to her own room.

Annie came running after her, and, kneeling beside the bed where Nellie had thrown herself, she put her arms about her warmly and whispered:

"Oh, Nellie, I believe you're just heart-broken over some man—that makes you act so queer. I'm fond of Bill, you know, and sometimes he's awful mean to me!"

But before the month was out, Annie's friendship had given place to jealousy, and her round cheeks had grown a trifle paler, for Bill, being "awful mean to her," had turned his fickle eyes on Nell. At first, his attentions were but casual, such as untying her apron strings when he came to the kitchen to fill his sugar basin; but after a little they became more marked.

"An' onct you 'ad a hyercinth an'—it bloomed."

And when Annie saw this, her round eyes grew so wistful that Nell resolved to put an end to his familiarity.

Next morning, armed with this resolution and a mop, she was washing the oilcloth-covered floor of the reading-room when Bill entered, cigar between his teeth, and sat down near her.

Without raising her eyes she plied the mop with redoubled vigor.

“What’s the matter with you, Nell?” he asked in surprise. “Got a grouch this morning?”

“No,” she retorted, swishing the mop perilously near his patent-leather boots.

Bill moved a little closer.

“Now you just splash one drop of that dirty mess on my boots and you’re going to get into trouble, see?”

Nell’s blue eyes were mischievous. With a deft turn of her wrist she sent a spray of soapy water over the immaculate shoes, and was preparing another, when Bill uttering a growl of pretended rage, sprang across the watery space that divided them and caught her in his arms.

She would have struck him, but at that moment Albert appeared in the doorway, his jaw hanging in mute astonishment. She fixed her eyes on him and waited.

Bill took his cigar from between his teeth, grinned down at her for a moment, then kissed her on the mouth. Still Albert did not strike him.

Bill, following her gaze, saw Albert, and, with a wink at him, released her, then rattled down the stairs in response to the ever-ringing bell of insistent thirst.

Albert came so close to her that she could feel his breath on her face, but the blow she longed for did not fall. Instead—

“Nell,” with a nervous little laugh, “if Bill Goldham was to marry you, it would be a good thing for both of us, old girl.”

She gave him a long, long look, then, without a word, she raised her pail and mop and carried them to the kitchen.

That night, for the first time since she had come to Acford, her pillow was not wet with tears.

The end of January came, that time of hopeless and enduring cold. The very stench of the tanneries was frozen out. Dearly would Nell have liked to creep into bed with the two others, for warmth, but dared not because of Annie.

“One would think you two girls was starved,” complained Mrs. Sye, “you look so pasty and never a word to throw to a dog, either of you!”

“Women is kittle kattle,” said Old Tommy from his corner, “an’ no one knows it better nor me. Two wives I’ve ’ad and beant afeared on any woman; but I grant ye they’re fair mysterious, an’ if a man body but ’ad the time, they’d make a pretty bit o’ study.”

“If men bodies would study their Bible more and women less, it’d be a far better world,” said Mrs. Sye, thumping her dough.

They were all in the kitchen together. Annie and Edith polishing silver, Nell at the ironing board, Mrs. Sye baking scones for tea, and her husband in the corner nursing little Birdie.

Tommy opened his mouth for a scathing reply, but gaped in silence as the swing-door flew open and Ida, red-haired and radiant, appeared in the aperture.

“What a heat!” she laughed, showing her even, white teeth. “I’m glad I’m out of this in my own home, with a little parlor cook-stove, and just us two to do for!”

Her eyes fell on Nell and to her she came rather awkwardly, holding out her hand.

“Seems a pity we couldn’t be friends,” she said. “And you Albert’s only relation in this country.”

Nell straightened herself, still clutching her iron.

“Don’t you offer your friendship to me——.” Her voice quivered. “Don’t you dare do it!”

“Come now girls. No nasty words!” interposed the cook.

“Let ’em ’ave at it, mother,” said Old Tommy chuckling.

“This ain’t no street fight!” Nell flashed at him. “I ain’t going to pull anybody’s ’air. But don’t let ’er offer me ’er friendship, that’s all!”

“I wouldn’t be *seen* scrapping with the likes of *her*!” cried Ida, also addressing Old Tommy. “But I must say it’s a hard way to be treated. Just when I’m off to my own cousin’s funeral.” She seated herself, with an injured air, and raised her hands to her large black hat. “*Is* my hat on straight, girls?”

“Sure!” said Edith, adding soothingly, “It’s a regular beauty, and so genteel!”

Mrs. Sye asked: "Which cousin is that, Ida? Lottie?"

"No. Irene. The one learning dressmaking at Bayside. It was double pomonia. They're having the large hearse down from Milford. My married sister and I are going to drive over in McLean's cutter and stop the night. I thought I'd just drop in and tell you, expecting, of course, to find *everyone* agreeable." With an air of melancholy she adjusted a gold bangle on her plump wrist. (Oh, the scorn in Nell's blue eyes, and the way she spat on her hissing iron and wished that it were Ida!)

Mrs. Sye brought her a cup of tea and a scone, which she nibbled with little fingers curled.

"Where will Albert get his tea?" asked Annie.

"Oh, there's potatoes to fry and apple sauce," Ida replied carelessly. "For breakfast he'll just have to forage. I may be back by noon to-morrow." Then she added, in a mincing tone, while drawing on her long gloves, "I think it is extremely probable that I shall return to-morrow."

"Fool!" Nellie shot after her as her nodding plumes departed. "To show off to me!"

The ironing was done now; the ironing board stood upright in its corner; with scarlet cheeks the little ironer stole past Birdie and her dolls, up the back-stairs, and threw herself face downward on her bed.

All her bitterness toward Albert had melted since Ida's visit. How could a poor boy hold out against such a red-haired tyrant? She had forced him to marry her, and now by force she held him. Well, wit had overcome force before now, and when the wit was fed by love——. Oh, God, give him back to me!

She feigned sleep and heard Mrs. Sye bid the girls let her lie as the work was light that night. Noiselessly she slipped to her feet and removed her working dress. She would not cheapen Albert by her rags! She bathed and put on fresh white undergarments and her blue Sunday frock. Her thick black hair she coiled in many smooth braids and on them perched her little white hat. Then, with her purse in the pocket of her long gray coat, and with never a look behind, English Nell fared forth to claim her own.

The great green door snapped behind her, her nostrils curled to draw in the crisp Canadian air. Her step was light. Now the little town, which had always seemed so alien to her, spread itself in friendliness. Evening already poised with violet wings above the roofs, but every upward-curling spire of smoke was pink.

Oil lamps burned in some of the windows, and where the blinds were up she saw the little bobbing heads of children. The mothers were preparing the evening meal. Her man, too—her man—oh, he should have his supper!

She stopped at the shop where, inside, frozen halves of beef hung from the ceiling, and there were displayed deep platters heaped with sausages. She bought three pounds of these and a chunk of cheese.

Again outside she almost ran, and she loved the way the cold bit her cheeks. Over the railroad track, behind some dwarfed apple trees, stood Albert's house, a rough-cast cottage.

The front door was locked, but the back door yielded, whining on its hinges. The room was dark and very cold. A cat, that had been crouching on the stove hearth, scurried noiselessly into a corner. She closed the door and stood motionless a moment, alone, in Albert's house—and *hers*!

Cautiously she shuffled across the floor and touched the table, where she laid her parcels. She lifted the stove lid and discovered a few embers flickering like a forlorn hope. When stirred by the poker a tiny flame shot up and gave her from the gloom, the main objects of the poor room. A scarlet shawl dangling from a nail showed in the light like blood.

Nell lighted the oil lamp with a wisp of burning paper and set about her preparations without delay, for she knew that in a few minutes the great town bell would strike the hour that freed the factory hands and made every man a master in his home.

The thought fired her. She had learned much of the cleanliness and neatness from Annie, and now she flew so fast from table to stove, and from stove to cupboard, that the cat, which had crept back in feline curiosity, eyed her in wonder, and mewed to sniff the sausages.

Love can make a kitchen glow. The lamp was trimmed—the table scrubbed—the pot of potatoes began to boil; and the sausages, smeared with drippings, fumed in the oven. The blinds had been drawn, and somehow the red shawl had come to the floor, where the cat found it and made a bed.

The lamplight glistened now on a table spread for two; mounds of buttered toast and slabs of cheese; and two chairs, hobnobbing with an

expectant air.

A step crunched on the frozen path, some one kicked the snow from his feet before entering. The town bell must have rung unheeded in her hurry—how her heart beat! She hid her head in the cupboard.

Albert entered.

For a second there was silence as he blinked in the light, then he demanded with sarcasm:

“Well, an’ wot’s the matter wiv *you*, Missis Orstrich?”

No answer.

“Might I arsk wot brung *you* ’ome so bright an’ early, I dunno?”

Silence.

“So, you’ve turned narsty again, ’ave yer?” And he added, in a complaining voice:

“If you ’ad *some* men you’d get a good smack on the jor!”

She faced him.

Albert’s mouth widened in an astonished, even a frightened, grin. The eye with a cast turned from her as though to wink at some bystander and remark, “*Ain’t* she a corker!”

“Nell!” he broke out. “Nellie, old girl, ’ow *did you dare?* Lor’, but you’re a plucky ’un! An’ supper for the two on us! Aw, Nellie, you loves me yet, don’t yer?” He closed his arms about her waist. “Give us a good ’un now!”

“Not arf a one,” she refused, putting her hand over his mouth. “Wait till we’ve ’ad supper.”

“My eye! I thought you were Ida, sure, an’ w’en I *saw* it were *you*——.” He rocked her ecstatically in his arms.

“Wash up a bit now, Albert. Make ’aste, or the saursages will be overdone.”

“Saurages!” He clicked his tongue. “I s’y, this *is* a little bit of orl right, Nellie! W’ot does *she* give me for supper, can you guess? ’Otted-hup pertaters an’ apple sauce! Apple sauce an’ ’er *sauce*, that’s w’ot *I* get.” (He was mumbling through the towel now as he rubbed his ruddy face.) “These

'ere Colonials is orl right in their pllice, but—they cawn't appreciate a Londoner as another Londoner can, you lay your Davey on that!"

The platter was set before him now, a steaming mound of mashed potatoes, garnished with sausages—not a mean half dozen, mind you, but four-and-twenty fat ones, bubbling with grease as though they would fain burst into song like four-and-twenty blackbirds.

Albert's mouth was so full that he could not speak, but he reached across the table now and then to slap her playfully on the wrist, and anon he would shake with silent laughter.

As for Nell, she did not laugh much, but when she smiled a determined-looking dimple dented her left cheek in a way that boded ill for Ida.

When he had done eating she drew him on to talk of Ida, and he said, while feeling luxuriously in his pocket for a "fag":

"She 'as 'er good points, you know, an' one o' them is 'er dear old father. 'E's a well-orf farmer, got a 'undred acres a mile out o' town, an' just two dorters, so I suspect that w'en 'e pops orf Albert Masters, Hesquire, will become a landed proprietor. An' w'en that 'appy d'y comes—no more tannery for this 'ere bloke!"

Nell smiled, but the dimple looked almost wicked.

The "fag" was between his teeth now, and he stretched out his hand for a match.

"Give us a light, girl, an' come sit on my knee. That were a mighty refined bit o' eatin' you gave me, an' now I wants that kiss."

She gave the cat the platter to lick and then slid to his knee, and held the blazing match to the cigarette. He eyed her keenly while he puffed.

"Wot's come over you to-night, anyw'y? You look so chipper an' somethin' besides—I cawn't tell w'ot."

"I'm just thinkin' it is like a bit of old times, dearie." Her shoulders shook a little.

Albert snuggled his cheek to hers.

"Now, don't you tyke on, young 'un, *becars* I'm goin' to look arter you in spite of 'er, an' anyw'y, don't let's begin worryin' right on top o' them saursages." He could feel her trembling, and he said to comfort her:

“Aw, do you mind the old ’op-pickin’ d’ys in Kent, w’ere we first met? Those were the times! Do y’ mind the warm, soft evenin’s, an’ the nights w’en the pickers dawnced an’ sang ’arf the night through, an’ we——. Aw, let’s ferget it!”

“No, no! Go on!”

“Will you ever ferget the nights in old London at the music ’alls, drinkin’ beer, an’ the crowd of us goin’ ’ome in the starlight singin’ the songs we’d ’eard?”

“They don’t do much singin’ an’ dawncin’ in this country, Albert.”

“Naow,” he sneered. “The song is froze in their ’earts wiv the cold, an’ the dawnce dried up in their bones wiv the work. Wot’s the use?”

“I remember. Talk some more.”

“Then there were the Bank ’Olerd’ys at ’Amstead ’Eath—lord! Do y’ mind the menageries an’ the cockshies, an’ the pianer-organs, an’ wasn’t I waxy neither w’en I caught you a-dawncin’ the mazurker wiv a Jackey?”

“Jackies allus dawnce better’n Tommies, someway.”

“That’s becars they ’ave the ’ole deck to practice on. Then there were the swing boats, an’ the movin’ pictures, an’ the shootin’ at bottles for chocolate an’ fags! An’ arter it was orl over there was our own little room wiv some ’errings an’ a bit o’ greens to our supper. An’ onct you ’ad a *hyercinth* an’—it bloomed.”

His voice had grown pensive. For a moment there was silence in the room, save for a soft rasping of the cat’s tongue on the platter.

“It seems to me to-night wot I can smell that hyercinth on your hair, Nell, an’ as sure’s fate there’s a bit on it got inter your eyes—sort o’ purple, they are.”

She sat up straight and looked him in the eyes.

“Awbert,” she said, using the old pet name, “do you mind the time you struck me that blow? And I lay in a swoond a long time an’—an’ there was blood—”

He drew her passionately to him.

“D-don’t, Nellie, d-don’t! I want to ferget wot a brute beast I’ve been to you!”

“It were just onct, Awbert, an’ you were sorry arterwards!”

“I loved you more than ever! I’ll never lay a finger on yer again, s’elp me! But w’y do you want to tark abart it, darlin’?”

Suddenly she freed herself from him and rose to her feet.

“Becars, I want you to think of it *just once more*. I’ll tell you now wot I ’aven’t before—this is our last supper together. I came to-night to s’y farewell, Albert—no, no, it’s no use tryin’ to ’old me—I’m leavin’ for ’ome to-night!”

He had caught her dress and dragged her to him. She held her arms tensely at her sides.

“You’re just tormentin’ me, Nellie!” he cried. “S’y you are! You cawn’t go ’ome wivout *me*—an’ I’m tied fast! *Oh, these women!* S’y it’s only a bluff, girl!”

She hit his shoulder with her clenched hand.
“Wot do you tike me for, anyw’y? Do you fawncy I shall drudge my life out at the hotel, wiv ’er flauntin’ ’er plumes in my fice? Do you think I’ll be jeered at by the other servants for my starved looks wiv ’er a-gettin’ fat on *you*? Do you think—Oh! ’ave you no ’eart?—that I’ll wet my pillow wiv my tears every night, an’ ’er red ’ead w’ere mine should be?” Her voice panted through the hot little room like a live thing struggling to get free. Her hands were on her heart.

“Oh, shime, I say, to the mother that bore you!”

He fell to his knees at her feet and twined his arms about her.

“Aw, Nellie, don’t look at me like that! I’m broke! I’m broke! Just give me a chawnce an’ I’ll desert ’er. I swear it! That’s wot I’ve been wantin’ to s’y orl the time, but you drowned me out!”

The sight of his round boy’s eyes, wet with tears, moved her to the tenderness always so ready for him. And she knew she was the victor. She said:

“Albert; are you sure that you *want* to leave ’er for always an’ come wiv me, for keeps? Are you *sure*?”

“Wot’s come over you to mistrust me so?” he sobbed. “Arter orl I’ve done for you! W’y, I married you on the square, didn’t I? I’m glad on it, too,” he hastened to add, “an’ I’ll foller you to the hend o’ the hearth, if you’ll let me!”

She smiled a bit sadly.

“It’s becars you’re just a man that it’s ’ard for you to understand everythink I feel. But—I love you—cruel well——. So, we’ll begin again, my dearie.”

She took him back to her heart then, unreservedly, as the tree takes back the truant bird.

They had not much time in which to make their simple preparation. Albert, all agog now, rushed about the tiny bedroom cramming his belongings in a traveling bag.

And Nell, left to herself, whipped out the rapier of her woman’s wit and gave poor Ida her *coup de grace*. She cleared one end of the white pine table and wrote on it with a charred stick. In fierce black characters she wrote the words—oh! to be there when the cast-off read—

IDA, CANADIAN IDA,
I HAVE COME AND TOOK MY OWN.
ENGLISH NELL.

With the eye of an artist she regarded her masterpiece. As she pinned on the jaunty white hat she even broke into a bit of song:

“Oh, it’s ’ome, ’ome, ’ome!
And it’s never more to roam
From our fathers’ little sea-girt isle!
Don’t you ’ear the billers roll,
And the stoker shovellin’ coal,
And our ’earts beatin’ out the miles?
Oh, it’s ’ome, ’ome, ’ome——.”

“Hello, Awbert, you ready?”

Albert, closely buttoned in his Sunday togs, waited, bag in hand. And, lest he should give one last regretful look about the room, she quickly turned out the light and pulled him to the open door, where the moon shone down.

“Look, Awbert,” she cooed, turning his face up to it, “over your left shoulder—the new moon—wish on it!”

Albert rose to the occasion.

“I wish,” he said solemnly, “that we may see the next new moon shine on Brittanier’s breast!”

They stood gazing up in silence. The cat, which had followed them, rubbed her sides against Nell’s skirt and purred loudly.

At last with a sigh they withdrew their gaze and, giving each a hand to Albert’s bag, hurried down the white street, stretched like a stainless new path before them, to the station.

When they reached the tracks she stopped him, pressing his arm closely and looked into his face.

“Tell me,” she said—“tell truly now, wot was it that made you come wiv me? Wot *one thing touched you?*”

“I think,” he hazarded, his brow puckered in thought, “I *think* as it were the saursages.”

“No,” she insisted, her blue eyes on the stars, “no, it *weren’t that*, Awbert. It were rememberin’ that *blow!*”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Because of copyright considerations, the illustrations by Mary Essex (1891-?) have been omitted from this etext.

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[The end of *Canadian Ida and English Nell* by Mazo de la Roche]