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## THE SECOND WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

I was married. The final vows had been spoken, and I was no longer Agnes Park, but Agnes Fleming. I was the wife of a widower of thirty-eight and the step-mother of three small children! Not the first chosen, first beloved bride of a young and ardent lover, such as my girlish dreams had pictured; only a second wife!

The reflection was not sweet; nevertheless, it was the thought with which I took my seat in the carriage which was to convey me to my new home. The short wedding tour was ended and we were homeward bound. A long ride was still before us, for the village in which Captain Fleming resides was twenty miles from the last railroad station; but he had caused his own carriage to meet us there, so I began to realize that we were nearing home.

The road over which we journeyed was level and smooth, and for a long time wound close to the bank of a large river. Fields lay on one side, stretching far away, until they were skirted by low woods and hills; here and there a white farmhouse stood; looking cheerful and almost gay in the afternoon sunshine. The whole prospect was rural and very beautiful.

My gloom began to pass away, soothed by the sweet influences of the Summer landscape, and visions of future usefulness began already to float through my brain. I had ample opportunity to indulge in these day-dreams; for Captain Fleming, tired with the long ride, was half asleep by the side of his new wife. I was weary of taking the lead in conversation, and concluded to leave him to his meditations, as he had left me to mine. After weaving for myself a very profitable future, I looked, for a little, upon the past.

Oh that past! Mine had been no gay and pampered childhood; but looking back, I saw, on the contrary, years of loneliness, of weariness, and of sorrow. For four years I had watched a young, beautiful, and gifted brother, as stricken with consumption, he had wasted gradually away. We two were orphans, the last of our race, and all in all to each other.

But, at last, I saw him laid in the coffin, and all my love and hope were long buried with him. Not that I became sad and misanthropic. No; life and duty were not dead; and, looking forward, I saw that there was yet much for me to do, perhaps suffer; so I planned sweeter and violet on Harry's grave, and then went out to act and strive with the rest of the striving world.

About a year after my brother's death I met Arthur Fleming. I had been so shut out from the world by Harry's sickness that I had no lovers, and very few friends, and I hardly believed I could ever again feel an interest in any one; but Arthur Fleming's kind, genial manner and delicate attentions warmed my heart to a new life. Unconsciously, my whole heart, all the more ardent for its long stillness, was given to this new friend. It was with bitter disappointment that I learned he had already been once married, for I could not bear the thought of a rival, living or dead; yet I loved him, and when he asked me to become a mother to his motherless children, I accepted his hand, feeling sure that I would win from him in time an affection as deep and steadfast as my own. His house was lonely, his children poorly protected, and he needed a wife; I had been recommended to him as one who would keep his house in order, and be a suitable companion for his children; after a brief acquaintance he had proposed in due form.

"Almost home!" exclaimed Capt. Fleming, rousing himself to look out of the carriage window. The words sent a thrill through me and I looked eagerly out, through the twilight shadows, to the house we were approaching. It was large, and stood at a distance from the village street, and it seemed to me in rather a desolate situation. Great trees swung their branches over the gateway, and, as we rode between them, the wind made a sighing sound among the leaves. But the lighted lower windows shone cheerfully in the darkness, seeming by their brightness to welcome me home.

Jane Fleming, my husband's sister, who had been his housekeeper since his wife's death, came to the door to meet us. The moment her cold fingers touched mine, I felt that there would be no sympathy between us; and when we had entered the lighted parlor, and I had scrutinized her face, I was sure of it. Without a word she stood beside me, while I took off my

bonnet and gloves; she carried them away, then as silently walked into the room again, leading the three children.

The three ran into their father's arms, and embraced him affectionately, and, as he caressed them in return, I perceived that there was a fountain of warmth in his heart which, could I reach it, would be enough to shield me from cold and darkness for ever. This show of passionate fondness made me glad, and, going to his side, I tried to win the notice of the children to myself.

"It is your new mother," said he. "She has come to take care of you when I am gone to sea again. Ellen and May, go to your mother."

May, a pretty blue-eyed child of ten, came shyly toward me, and kissed my cheek; but Ellen, the eldest, merely gave me her hand. Ellen seemed to have imbibed something of her aunt's icy manner, for she sat aloof and watched me coldly. The little boy now lifted his head from his father's shoulder, and, seeing that May stood by me unharmed, ventured to approach me.

"Come to me, Harry," said Miss Fleming with a frown.

Was his name Harry? I caught him to my arms and held him closely, so that he could not escape to his jealous aunt; and I thought, in my secret heart, that I would make him like the Harry I had lost. In an instant, the feeling that I was a stranger had vanished, my heart warmed so toward the little one whose auburn head nestled in my arms. My husband looked pleased and smiled, giving his sister a gratified look; and I observed the shadow of a smile on her lips, but it faded again as she glanced at Ellen. When the clock struck nine, Miss Jane rose and led the children to their chambers. I bade them good night as they went out, but I noticed that Ellen made no answer.

The next morning I made a business of going over the house and examining its conveniences. The first step upon the broad gloomy staircase chilled me; but when, after visiting every room, I sat down in the parlor again, I was almost discouraged. Such a dreary, disordered house I never saw. In every chamber the curtains hung over the windows like shrouds, and the air was cold and damp as a dungeon. There was dust on the walls, on the windows, and the furniture; there was gloom in every corner. The parlor, which might have been a delightful room, seemed like a sepulchre. The furniture, as well as the pictures, were covered with canvass. A locked bookcase stood in a recess, and a locked piano was by the opposite wall. I asked little May, who had kept close by me all the morning, why this was so.

"Aunt Jane doesn't like music," she said; and she keeps the bookcase locked, because she says we must not read books until we are older."

"And why is the furniture all covered?"

"The parlor is scarcely ever opened," answered May. "Aunt Jane wants to keep it nice."

"Well, May," I said, "go now and ask Aunt Jane for the key of the bookcase. I want to see the books."

She ran quickly, and returned, followed by Miss Jane, who delivered up the key to me with a dubious kind of grace.

"I hope you will lock the bookcase when you have examined the books, ma'am," said she. "I don't allow the children to spend their time in light reading."

"What are they now reading?" I asked.

"They learn their lessons," she replied shortly.

She disappeared, and I opened the bookcase, which I found to contain a most excellent selection of books. The best poets, the best historians, the best novelists and biographers, were there, making a library small, but of rich value. It was the first really pleasant thing I had found in my new home, and I sat an hour or two, glancing over one volume after another, and re-arranging them on the shelves. Suddenly, Miss Jane looked in, and in a moment her face was pale with indignation, for there sat little May on the carpet, buried in a charming old English annual. Miss Jane took two steps forward, and snatching the book out of the child's hand, threw it on the table, then led her by the shoulder out of the room. I was mute with amazement at this rough government at first, then I sprang up and would have followed her, had not the fear of an outbreak restrained me.

"Selfish creature!" I exclaimed, "you are trying to make these children like yourself; ruining them for all good or happiness in life. In Ellen's sullenness and coldness I see the fruit of your labor. Was Arthur Fleming blind when he left his children in your keeping?"

jealous of them. But my better spirit prevailed over me. "They are mine now," I thought, "for I am their father's wife, and all his are mine. Their interests must be mine."

After dinner, Miss Jane and the children repaired immediately to the chamber which was used as a schoolroom. In a few minutes I followed them, and quietly took a seat at the desk. She was drilling them in Arithmetic, sending one after another to the blackboard and talking all the time in a loud, petulant tone.

"Ellen, if you make such awkward figures, I'll put you back to the beginning of the book. May, will you stand straight, or be sent to bed? Decide now!"

"I cannot understand this sum, Aunt Jane," sighed May.

"Sit down then until you can."

"Do you not explain what they cannot understand?" I asked.

"All that is necessary," she replied. "May could understand her sums if she attended to me."

An hour passed, during which May silently hung her head over her slate, and played with her pencil, Miss Jane offering no explanation. Harry alternately counted, with his fingers, the buttons on his jacket and marks of a knife upon his desk. Ellen, whose strong mind received knowledge almost intuitively, studied her lesson quietly and without difficulty. Presently she gave her book to her aunt, and recited her lesson perfectly.

"Very well, Ellen," said Miss Jane. "You may go into the garden and amuse yourself."

"Do they not play together?" I inquired, with astonishment, not pleased with the idea of solitary, mindless exercise.

"Not unless they learn their lessons equally well," she answered. "Harry! if I live the boy is going to sleep! Stand in the corner, Harry, until you are awake."

Harry colored, and went to the corner, rubbing his eyes. I felt disgusted at the total lack of system, order, and justice, which prevailed in this meek school. I was growing frightened at the work before me, fearful that Jane Fleming had sown more tares than my weak hands could ever root out.

Seeing that Harry was crying, I went to him in his corner.

"Go away!" he sobbed, when I laid my hands on his head. "Go away. You are not my mother!"

I made no reply to this, but asked him why he cried.

"Because I am tired," he answered, "and you and aunt Jane won't let me sit down."

"Yes, and Aunt Jane, Harry?"

"Yes," he sobbed out. "Aunt Jane says you are come here to live always, and will make me mind you."

"It is not true, Harry," I whispered. "I love you, and want you to love me. Won't you love me, darling?"

But he only thrust out his little hand sullenly, and turned his face away from me. Jane now came forward and I turned from the child with a sigh of disappointment.

"But I will be patient," I said to myself. "They have been taught to fear and dread me; I cannot at once make them love me."

The next morning Captain Fleming left for a six months' voyage in his new barque, the May Fleming. His parting with the children was most tender and affectionate, even tearful—with me it was kind. After he was gone, I stole up to my room, and spent the morning in bitter weeping and sadness: What would become of me, if I should fail in trying to make myself beloved by his children—if their hearts were irrevocably steered against me?—Would not his own grow gradually colder and colder toward me? Fearful prospect!

CHAPTER II.

I heard a soft tap at my door, and little May entered. She, too, had been crying, and, when she saw traces of tears on my face, she came gently up to me, and crept into my lap.

"Do you love father, too?" she asked, in her frank, simple manner.

"Yes, darling, I love him," I answered, "and I want to love you all, and be loved by you. Now he is gone I am very sad and lonely. Will you not love me May?"

The child kissed me gravely; but did not reply to the question.

"Aunt Jane sent me to call you to dinner," she said, slipping from my arms.

When we had finished this lonely meal, and the children and Jane had gone up stairs to the afternoon lessons, I visited one or two rooms which had attracted my observation the day before. One was the attic chamber, where I had noticed a heap of old packages which I wished to examine. In one corner stood a pile of old pictures, some soiled, some with broken frames, but which, on examination, I found worthy to be rubbed up and newly framed. One especially won my admiration. It was a portrait of a young and beautiful woman. The soft auburn hair and hazel eyes were very lovely, and the features, though not expressive of any great energy or depth of character, were faultlessly regular.

I heard some one passing in the hall, and opened the door to ask some questions about these pictures. It was Ellen.

"Are you busy, Ellen?" I asked. "If not,

I wish you would come here a moment." Ellen looked surprised, but followed me without any reply.

"I want to know something about these pictures. Some of them are very fine, and it seems to me strange that they should hang here out of sight."

"They got injured," said Ellen, "and Aunt Jane did not have time to get them mended."

"Here is a beautiful landscape," I said. I knew by the quick dilating of Ellen's hazel eyes, as she looked at the picture, that she could appreciate its excellence, and I regretted that she had been so long debarred the privilege of cultivating her naturally artistic taste. I resolved to help her to make up the lost time.

"Now, here is one in which I am still more interested," I said, taking up the portrait. "Who is this, Ellen?"

Ellen started, and then the color rushed to her cheeks, as she answered, in a low voice, "It is my mother."

I had suspected as much. The resemblance was striking between the pictured face and little Harry.

"Is this the way that you preserve your mother's portrait?" I asked.

"Aunt Jane put it away before—"

"Before I came, Ellen?"

"Yes," was the brief reply.

"Well, I shall take better care of it in future. I am not come to stand between you and your mother, Ellen. I wish you to love and honor her memory above all others. I shall try to make you wiser and happier than ever, instead of gloomy and sad."

There was a slight quiver about Ellen's firm lip as she turned and left the room. I began to feel encouraged. That evening I had a fire made in the parlor, the piano was unlocked, and I took my music from my trunks. In the gloaming, before there was any light in the room, save that of the tremulous fire-light, I sat down to play. They were all there—Jane at croquet work in a corner, and the children seated silently at the fire.

I found the piano an excellent instrument, and after playing a variation, which drew a sigh from the depths of Miss Jane's bosom, and a shout of delight from my little Harry, I began to sing. It was an old, plaintive, Scotch song that I chose; something to melt and touch the heart.

May and Harry were standing on each side of me, when I ended, and their glowing faces expressed their delight.

"I like that," said Harry, "I wish Aunt Jane wouldn't keep the piano locked, so that nobody can touch it."

A loud warning cough from his amiable aunt made him shrink a little closer to me.

"Do sing another, please!" whispered May, and I sang Goethe's "Miller and the Brook," that wild, merry old song.

What do I say of a murmur

That can murmur be?

'Tis the water nymphs that are singing,

Their roundelay under me!

May was in ecstasies. "Oh, will you teach me to play?" she asked. "It would make me so happy!"

"I will, certainly, if you wish it," I replied. Both Ellen and you may take lessons as soon as you please to begin. I do not wish you to be confined wholly to arithmetic."

I turned from the piano and sat by the fire, after having lighted the lamp. May and Harry were dancing about in the middle of the room, and even Ellen smiled at their playful rudeness. Jane, seeing that they took no heed of her dreary coughs and sighs, rose and left the room. I took quick advantage of her absence.

Going to the bookcase, I selected an interesting volume, and sat down with it near the lamp. "You have heard of Joan of Arc, have you not, Ellen?" I asked.

"I do not remember that I have," she answered. "Who was she?"

"Her story was a very wonderful one. I will read it, if you would like to hear it," I answered.

"Is it true?" cried Harry, leaving his play.

"Yes, Harry. It happened many years ago, in France. Shall I read it?"

Harry and May were already eager to hear it, and Ellen looked interested, though she said nothing. I took Harry in my lap, and began to read the strange, thrilling story. All listened with the deepest attention.

By and by Ellen interrupted me, saying—

"If you are tired, let me read it awhile, mother."

I was tired, and gave it up to her gladly; she had called me "mother!"

At nine, Aunt Jane came and called them to bed.

"No, no, aunt; we'll come as soon as we find out what became of poor Joan!" cried May. "Shall we stay, mother?"

"Let them stay a little longer, I said, to Miss Jane. The door closed, and Ellen proceeded with the story.

"Sing us a little song!" said May, when the story was ended. I complied willingly, and sang "Let us love one another." When I had finished, May sprang up and gave me a good night kiss. Harry followed her example.

"I want one more," I said turning to Ellen, and with a grave smile, she kissed me and bade me good night. That night my pillow was haunted with happy dreams.

Much of the ensuing week was spent in re-arranging the rooms in order to give them a more cheerful appearance. I took down the portrait of the first Mrs. Fleming from its garret corner, and hung it over the mantel in the parlor. I reframed the beautiful landscape, and it adorned a little room opening from the back parlor, which had been used as a spare bed-room, but which I converted into a miniature library. I went with the children into the fields to hunt for early May flowers, with which to fill the vases and make the rooms bright and fragrant.

May took her first music lesson, and was already promising to sing "Let us love one another," on Christmas Day, at which time her father would be at home. Ellen had so far descended from her cold heights of reserve as to ask me to learn her crayon drawing, and I was astonished at the artist talent she already exhibited.

One morning, when I had been about a fortnight with them, Jane came to the breakfast table in her traveling dress. We were all surprised—I most of all, for I had hoped the happiness of the children would win her kindness also; but I was mistaken. "Where are you going, aunt?" asked May, her blue eyes expanding with astonishment. Miss Jane deigned no answer, but ate her breakfast in unbroken silence, then, turning to me, announced her decision.

"Mrs. Fleming, you cannot expect me to stay here content, when I see you daily undoing with all your might what I have been laboring so hard to accomplish. These girls were growing up, in my care, discreet, sober, and reasonable. I shut out the vanities and follies of the world from their knowledge. I reared them in prudence and soberness. But Arthur Fleming must bring a strange wife here, who, in two short weeks, could, by her wily softness of manner, win their foolish young hearts away from their friend and fill their heads with vanity. I will not stay where I and my teachings are objects of contempt. I leave you to your painting and playing, your singing and boquet making. I am not penniless, as you probably suppose. I have still a home to go to, now that I am driven thanklessly from this one."

My eyes filled with tears at these scornful words. The children looked wonderingly at me and at her.

"Don't go, aunt! Mother doesn't want you to go," whispered May, the sweet little peace-maker.

"I don't know who drives you from here," said Ellen, sarcastically.

"Jane, I wish you to stay with us," I said. "It is right that I, Captain Fleming's wife, should be a mother to his children, and take their care and education into my own hands. I mean to make them happy in their home, in their studies, and fit them for good and useful lives. You can help me in this work, and I will be your friend. Will you stay, Jane?"

"No, Mrs. Fleming, I will not stay where I am a mere cipher. But, children, I do not desert you. If you are ever fatherless, or in trouble, I will come to you, and you shall have your home with me again."

The stage coach, which Jane had secretly ordered to call for her, now rattled to the door, and she took her seat in it. She gave a nod of freezing dignity to me, a farewell of compassionate affection to the children, and then the coach drove away.

I was alone with home, children and peace.

CHAPTER III.

Six months passed rapidly, and how pleasantly my vivid recollection of them testifies. As the village schools taught but little, and I was fully competent to instruct the children myself, I spent three hours of every morning in study with them. Two afternoons in a week I devoted to May's music and Ellen's drawing; on the other afternoons they were free to practice at home, or to visit their village friends, and receive visits in return. Our evenings were spent in reading, and in the three months of that summer they gained more intelligence than in years before. Their interest in knowledge was aroused, and whatever they read was made a subject of free and cheerful conversation, thus fixing important facts in their memories, and training their minds to habits of active thought. Ellen adorned the walls of our sitting room and little library with several very fine crayon pictures, and May added to our evening readings the charms of her sweet singing.

At Christmas time we expected Captain Fleming. With what a glad pride I looked upon my nappy group, and thought of the gratitude he would feel when he saw their improvement and witnessed their affection for myself. I looked forward with a beating heart to the meeting.

It was a fortnight before Christmas, and we were already deeply engaged in preparation for the merry season. Green boughs, with which to decorate the rooms, were being made into festoons and garlands, and in a sly corner the Christmas tree was waiting its hour of triumph. Ellen was hurrying to finish a picture of Santa Claus to hang over the Christmas tree, and May was practising incessantly, "Let us love one another," at the piano forte, while little

Harry entered with even greater zeal, if possible, into the preparations for the festivities.

It was afternoon, and Ellen and I had been discussing the propriety of inviting some friends to enjoy our Christmas eve with us. We were now in daily expectation of Captain Fleming, and every sound of carriage wheels made us rush to the windows.

"Father is come!" cried Ellen, as the sound of wheels, instead of passing, ceased at our door, and we simultaneously sprang up and ran to the window. There indeed stood the expected coach, but who was that old lady with a green bandbox held tightly in her arms, now bundling out at the windows while the coachman took down her trunks?

"It is aunt Jane!" said Ellen, with a long sigh of disappointment, and she looked into my face inquiringly.

"It is too bad, too bad!" said May, half crying, "for her to come and spoil all, just as we were to have such a merry Christmas."

"Well, meet her kindly and give her a welcome," I said, and by that time the hall door had opened, and Jane Fleming stood in the midst of us, receiving our greetings with a kind of grim smile. The girls divested her of all her many shawls and cloaks and furs, and Harry drew a chair for her close to the fire.

As she warmed her feet at the grate, she looked around her with a singular expression of pity, mixed with triumph.

"I have kept my promise, children," she said. "I told you if anything happened I would come to you."

I started from my seat, and a shudder of terrible forebodings passed through me as I remembered the promise to which she referred.

"Jane! Jane Fleming, what do you mean?" I cried.

She wiped the corner of her eyes with her handkerchief. Then she said—

"Ah! it is as I thought. You see that I, living on the seashore as I do, get news some days in advance of you. I said to myself when I heard it, that it would be printed in your weekly paper and you would not get it before tomorrow. So I thought I had better step into the stage and ride down and prepare your minds. Poor children! Poor children!"

"What is it?" said Ellen, grasping her aunt's wrist with a kind of nervous fierceness.

This suspense was growing intolerable. Jane fixed her eyes steadily on Ellen's countenance, and answered slowly—

"Last week, in the great storm, the May Fleming was wrecked!"

A low cry escaped May's lips.

"Jane! I gasped, 'my husband—where is he?'"

She looked at me composedly.

"The May Fleming was wrecked and sunk. Save the mate and one sailor, who floated two days on a broken raft, every soul was lost!"

I could utter neither cry nor moan. I only looked into the faces of my children, who gathered about me, indaughing their wild sorrow in painful cries. Ellen only, after a brief time, seemed to comprehend my bewildering anguish. She put her young, strong arms about me, and led me, unresisting, to my chamber; there, watched by her alone, I lay silent and motionless.

But my brain was busy. "Is it to this, an untimely death," I thought, "that all I love are fated to come? My heart was wrapt in my beautiful Henry, and he laid down to die in the glory of his youth—My love rose out of the grave and gathered itself strong as life about my husband; and now, in so little a while he is gone also. Was it for this I gave my mind, my heart, my soul to his children, only that they should look up to me with their pitiful faces, and cry 'we are orphans!'"

Where was he when he was his wife and children were making Christmas garlands? We were singing and weaving the holly and cedar by the warm firelight, while he, now struggling, now failing and sinking, was smothered in the horrible waves!"

Such thoughts as these filled my brain with ceaseless horror and all day I lay as one benumbed. But suddenly as it grew dark, and Ellen brought a lamp into my chamber, I was struck by her settled expression of woe. I had forgotten that I was not the only sufferer. That thought gave me strength. I rose, took her by the hand and went down to the other children. They gathered about me, and we all wept together. Then, and not till then did I feel that I could speak to them of comfort.

The next morning our paper came, and the long account of the wreck confirmed the sad tidings. Days passed—slowly, tearfully. I was beginning to realize that we, of late such a joyful group, were now "the widow and the fatherless."

It was evening, and we all sat in the little library. The door of the parlor behind us was ajar, but there was no light in there; only one lamp burned on the piano-forte, which had been moved into the little room.

Harry lay in my arms asleep, his soft curls falling over his forehead, and half veiling his fresh, fair face. Ellen and May, one on each side of me, sat at work on mourning dresses; Jane, too, in the corner,