HIS SECOND WIFE

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THIS STARTS THE STORY

Ethel Knight and Amy Lanier are sisters; the latter married and living in New York with her husband. Ethel is country-bred, idealistic, and utterly unsophisticated. Their father's death forces Ethel to make her home with Amy. The new home and her sister's elaborate manner of living surprise Ethel. They dine in a cafe. Amy dies from an attack of ptomaine poison. Ethel takes up the cause and keeps house for Joe, devoting her time to Suette, the child. Joe talks to her of his business and they go to the theatre together. As time goes on they become chummy, and finally they marry. The first months pass swiftly. Joe's prosperity has increased. They receive a visit from Fanny Carr.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

AND Ethel thought to herself in dismay: "How much more attractive Fanny is! Was my first feeling about her all wrong or is it that I'm getting used to these New Yorkers? I thought she was just hard—all brass! She isn't! She's—she's dangerous! What is she poking 'round here for? What does she want? Is she married again? No, her name was the same on her card. Still single—yes, and looking around—for somebody with money!"

By the questions Fanny was asking, plainly she was trying to find what friends Ethel had made in New York. And although the girl on the bed talked of the town in glowing terms, in a few moments Fanny was saying:

"I'm afraid you've been rather lonely here."

"Oh, no!" And Ethel laughed merrily. "If you knew how my time is filled—every hour! My small boy—" and she went eagerly on to show how full her life had become.

"Oh, you darling!" Fanny laughed. And then with an envious sigh she said: "You make me feel so old and forlorn. With all your beauty, Ethel Lanier, and youth—your whole life starting—well, you've just got to let me in and take you about. Oh, I know, I know, it's so wonderful here, and fresh and new and you're quite contented and all that. But after all, it's a city, you know—a perfectly good one, full of life—and people you'll like—old friends of Joe's." She went on in a crisp gay tone to paint the pleasures of the town. And meanwhile glancing at Ethel she thought: "What a perfect devil she thinks me, poor child, a bold creature on Joe's trail—when all I want is to take her around and help her spend her money. I need it badly enough, God knows!"

At last she rose.

"I mustn't tire you. Good-by, dear. You'll let me come again, of course."

"Oh, yes, do." At Ethel's tone, Fanny smiled to herself, as deftly she adjusted her furs. She turned to look in the mirror and her eye was caught by the photograph of Amy over on Joe's chiffonier. She moved a step toward it, paused, turned back and with a good-by to Ethel went out.

Ethel's eyes went back to the photograph. How strong and alarming, all in an hour, Amy's picture had become. As she looked it seemed to take on life to be saying, "Money! Money at last!" And with dismay she told herself:

"Now they'll come in a perfect horde!"

"Shall I tell Joe? Most certainly."

But she did not tell him all, that night. She did not say, "One of Amy's friends was here today, and she's coming again, and more are coming—and I hate them, every one!" She simply remarked:

"Oh, Joe, dear—Fanny Carr was here today."

"She was, eh?" He gave a slight start. "Where has she been all this time?"

"Abroad." And Ethel answered his questions. "She'll be here a good deal, I fancy," she ended. Joe looked annoyed and uneasy. But he did not speak, that evening, of the memories rising in his mind. For on both the old spell of silence was strong. Subtly the spirit of the first wife came stealing back into the room, pervaded it and made it her own. But her name was still unspoken.

The next day brought an exquisite baby's cap with Fanny's card tucked inside. And in the fortnight after that, Fanny herself came several times. She talked in such a natural way, and her smile and the look in her clever gray eyes was so good-humored and friendly. "She's doing it beautifully," Ethel thought. But she pulled herself up. "Doing what beautifully? What do I mean? One would think we were millionaires, and Joe a perfect Adonis! Is she trying to eat us? And aren't you rather a snob, my love, to be sure you hate the woman before you even know her?"

At such moments Ethel would relax and grow pleasantly interested in Fanny's talk of Paris and Rome, or of New York. In each city Fanny seemed to have led very much the same existence. In each there had been Americans and hotels, cafes and dances, motor trips and lunches, gossip and scandal without end. But she told it all in a humorous way that made it quite amusing. And it was a good deal the same with the two women, Amy's friends, whom Fanny brought to tea a bit later. Their gossip and their laughter, their voices breaking into each other and making a perfect hubbub at times, their smart suits and hats and dainty boots, their plump faces, lively eyes, all were quite exciting to Ethel, when she threw off her hostility and the uneasiness they aroused. It felt good to be gossipy once more.

But how they chattered! How they stayed! Joe would be coming home soon now, and she wanted them to go. But they did not go, and Ethel guessed that it was Joe they were waiting for. She was sure of it when he appeared. The way they all rushed at him with little shrieks of laughter, talking together, excited as girls! "Though they're all years older than I am!" Ethel angrily exclaimed, as she sat there, matronly and severe. She eyed her husband narrowly, and at first with keen satisfaction she saw how annoyed and embarrassed he was. But the moments passed, and he grew relieved, more easy and more natural, his voice taking on its usual tone, blunt and genial. And she thought, "He's going to like it!" For a moment she detested him then. "They'll flatter him, make a tin god of him! No, I mean a money god! That's what they want, his money!" She positively snorted, but no one seemed to notice it. Now they were turning back to her and she was in the hubbub, too. And how amiably she smiled!

When they were gone, there fell a silence which was like a sudden pall. "He can break it! I won't!" she decided viciously. He had gone to their room, she had followed him there, and he was not having an easy time. He washed and dressed without a word. But at last he came to her.

"Look here." His arm was about her, she jerked away, but he would not release her. "You're the most adorable little wife that ever made a man happy," he said. "But you're young, you know——."

"Is that a crime?"

"No, it's something those other women would all give their eyeteeth for."

"Go on."

"But you're human, you know, and you've got to grow older—and as you do you'll find, my dear, that it takes all kinds to make a world."

"How original!" He went on unabashed:

"And if you are to get any friends, you've got to get out and meet all kinds—many you don't like at all—and then little by little take your choice." He paused, and although he did not add, "After all, they're Amy's friends, and you might at least give 'em a chance"—Ethel knew he was thinking that, though he only ended gently, "But I guess I'll leave it all to you. Do as you like. I'll be satisfied."

"He won't be, though," she told herself. She knew he would be distinctly annoyed if she did not enter in. "No, I've simply got to be nice to them. There's no keeping them away!"

And in this she was right. Flowers and gifts for the baby came, and several more women friends; and one of them brought her husband. Nearly always they stayed until Joe came home; and in his manner, with dismay, she saw the hold they were getting. It was not only flattery they used, they appealed to his loyalty to his first wife.

"Don't drop us now," they seemed to say. "We were your friends when you were poor—when she was poor. If she had lived, just think how welcome we should be."

Early one evening when Ethel and Joe were dressing for dinner, Emily Giles came in with a long box of roses. Ethel thought they were for herself.

"No," said Emily, "they're for your husband."

"For me?" Joe laughed. "There's some mistake."

"No—there's no mistake," said Ethel, in a low unnatural voice. In an instant she had grown cold. What a fool to have forgotten that this was Amy's birthday! Inside the box was Fanny's card and on it she had written, "In memory of the many times I helped you buy a birthday gift."

Ethel went quickly out of the room. It was an awkward evening.

Fanny gave a dinner soon after that to celebrate Ethel's recovery. It was in a hotel grill room, and it was large and noisy—and noisier and noisier—till even above the boisterous hubbub at the tables all about the noise of their party could be heard. At least so it seemed to Ethel's ears. And what were they saying? Anything really witty, sparkling? No—just chatter, peals of laughter! They were just plain cheap and tough! How red were their faces, warm and moist their lips and eyes!

"You're not vivid enough, that's the trouble with you! You've got to be vivider!" she thought. "You ought to have taken that cocktail!" She drank wine now, a whole glass of it, and tried to be very boisterous with the man on her right, who was smiling back as though he could barely hear her voice. "He has had too much!" she told herself. "Oh, how I loathe you—loathe you all!"

But later, when they began to dance, she found with a little glow of relief that she could do this rather well. Thank Heaven she had taken those dancing lessons a year ago; and she was younger than most of these creatures, and more lithe and supple. The men were noticing, crowding around her. She caught a glare from one of their wives. And that glare helped tremendously; it came like a gleam of light in the dark. She caught Joe's admiring glances. She danced with him, then turned him down for somebody else, kept turning him down. She threw into her dancing an angry vim; but joy was coming into it too. This was not so bad, after all. "You may even grow to like all this!" But most of her thinking was a whirl.

She went home in a taxi, in Joe's arms. She thought, "This is how he and Amy came home. Never mind, I'm not half so weak as I thought. I can play this game——"

And play it she did.

The next morning they slept very late. They had breakfast in bed, and when Joe had gone she lay thinking. Her mind was marvelously clear, it went swiftly over the night before. Yes, most of it had been simply disgusting, the eating and drinking, those warm moist eyes. "The way the men looked at you, held you! This is no life for you, Ethel Lanier!" The dancing was all she cared about. She wanted that, but with other men whom she liked to be friends with—"men who would treat you as something more than a, than a—I don't know what!" Yes, she must get away from these creatures, and get Joe away, too; but to do it she must show him first that she was really willing to do her best to like them all. The next thing was to ask them here. "It's the only way to break their hold. Show him you're no jealous cat. And how do I know that among them all, as I go about, I won't find a few that aren't so tough? And through them I'll find others."

But she put off entertaining Joe's friends, for she had her hands full now in managing just Joe alone. Amy's husband was coming to life in him. Of that there could be no mistake. Under the spell of his success, and still more perhaps through his pride and delight in his handsome young wife, Joe was showing his love for her as Amy had taught him long ago. He showered gifts upon her. He delighted in surprises. One was a smart little town car, and this was a very pleasant surprise. But in it he insisted upon her shopping busily. No more wearing last year's clothes! And when she was a bit slow to move, to her dismay he went himself with Fanny Carr, and bought for Ethel's birthday a costly set of furs and a brooch. He nearly bought pearl earrings, too, but Ethel took them back at once. "Fanny knows as well as I do myself that I can't wear pearls!" she thought angrily. She exchanged them for opal pendants. And then, in order to put a stop to Fanny's detestable attempts "to make me look like a perfect fright," Ethel did start in and shop. And as soon as she got well into it, what a fever it became! Sternly eyeing herself in the mirrors of shops, she studied and made mistakes by the score and corrected and went on and on. "I'll look right if it kills me!"

One night she learned what Fanny Carr had had in mind when she came "poking into our lives!"

For Fanny was poor—she had long guessed that; and Fanny had a house on Long Island, and only by a hairsbreadth now did Ethel keep her from selling it to Joe as a surprise for his wife.

"Well, Fanny, what next?" thought Ethel that night. She had been awake for hours, perfectly still and motionless, not to disturb her husband. "For you are not through yet, Mrs. Carr. So long as we're rich and you are poor and have no immediate husband, you're going to act like a ravening wolf—aren't you, my own precious. You mean to break my hold on him by keeping him thinking of her, of her! Now what am I to do about it?" She frowned. She knew that she ought to talk frankly to Joe, and get over this silly habit of never mentioning Amy's name! She grew determined, but then weak. For what could she say to him about Amy? What did she really want to say? "Do I know poor Amy was anything bad? Wasn't she good to me? Would I care to try to talk against her? No. And even if I did, you see, it would only hurt me with Joe—as it should."

So she went on in different moods. And now she saw her sister's face smiling out of clear violet eyes, and again she felt a small gloved hand on her husband drawing him gently back—back and back into the past. Why was Amy so much stronger now? "Because Fanny Carr has been clever enough to take me out of the life I was making and pitch me into Amy's life, where her hold on Joe was strongest. I'm in her setting. That's the trouble!"

But she had Amy's friends to dine one night, as in her calmer moods she knew was the only sensible course. And as they began arriving, by swift degrees amid the buzz of talk which rose, Ethel could feel the room each moment change and become Amy's home. And it was Amy's dinner, too. No cooking of Emily's that night, for Joe had suggested a caterer. "The one we've always used," he had said. And so the cocktails and the wines and the food in many courses, the two waiters in evening clothes, and the talk and the shrieks of mirth, were just as they must have been before so many, many times in this room. Ethel sat affably rigid there.

And later at the piano Joe was not Ethel's husband. Nor was it her room when they stripped up the rugs and began to dance, nor her photograph their eyes kept seeking from time to time! She even thought she could hear them whisper about the hostess who was dead!

And when very late they had departed, and last of all Joe had gone with Fanny downstairs to put her in her taxi, Ethel, left alone in the room, turned to her sister's photograph.

"I won't be like you," she tensely declared. "I won't live in your home—with your husband——"

The picture smiled good naturedly back.

"All right," it seemed to answer, "then what do you expect to do?"

By the next day she had made up her mind to look for another apartment. The move had several points in its favor. It would not only take her away from this place where she felt the spell so strong; it would also give her something to do. "And I need it, heaven knows!" she thought. And besides it would provide an excuse for not seeing Amy's friends. "I'll be worn out every evening," she decided with grim satisfaction.

She found Joe more than ready for the change. He himself had suggested it, some weeks before, and Ethel made the most of that. "I've been thinking over your idea of moving," she began one night. And in the talk which followed the intent little glances she threw at him made her sure that in her husband's mind was a half conscious deep relief at the idea of getting away from these rooms and their memories.

(CONTINUED TOMORROW)

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