

Secret Gales

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NELLIE'S ILLUSIONS, AND HOW THEY WERE REMOVED

If ever there was a happy, bustling, comely little woman, it was Ellen Fairfield, when the first time for twelve hours she seated herself beside her bright hearth, and looked into the clear fire, with a positive certainty that everything was done, everything prepared for the eventful morrow.

Ellen—no, let us call her Nellie at once, for that was her pet name, and no one ever said Ellen after a single day's acquaintance—Nellie was now at housekeeping; it was the first Christmas Eve she had ever spent in her own house, the first Christmas dinner she had ever prepared for on her own responsibility. This was being married indeed; and there was that husband of hers, sitting on the other side of the fire, reading away unconsciously as if there was nothing in it, as if any one was equal to such a task, as if Christmas puddings came down from heaven ready made, and mince pies grew in the garden.

But Nellie was too dignified to chat to-night she felt that even her husband was unworthy a confidence—he could so little appreciate; no one but a woman could sympathize in all the conflicts and triumphs of that day; many of them must die unrecorded, but others to-morrow would show what they were; and then Carry and Margaret would be there; they were not like Robert, they knew what it was! She had a clear half hour before the coach brought them, however, and, as there was nothing more to be done, she seated herself as we have said, and gradually fell into a musing review of the last two years of her life, and the circumstances that had combined to fix her happy lot in that pleasant, simple home.

There are few memories that are not sad ones; for if they are of pleasant hours, those hours are gone forever; and if of sorrow, there is a scar upon the heart, which burns afresh when touched.

To judge by the cloud gathering over that smiling brow, by the gradual closing of lips generally parted, as if the heart within were ready to disclose itself, the drooping of lashes on the round rosy cheek, Nellie's memories are very sad ones indeed. We have a right to know them, Nellie—what are you thinking of?

The old, old home, where the first prayer was whispered at a mother's knee; the dear spot hallowed by such sweet childish memories, remembered always in an atmosphere of Spring; sunshine, and flowers, darkened only by the thought of death, when they who made it home were hidden from the orphan's gaze in the tomb—the old, old home, when they parted from it, never to behold it again, conscious that strangers' footsteps would wear out the tracks they had trodden, and sweep away traces mingled with their dearest love.

Two large tears gathered slowly in Nellie's lashes, an offering on that happy evening to the beloved dead, to the sacred past.

Now comes another phase, a memory of one who wronged her young heart, won its love and flung it idly by; the warm proud flush dries the tears, and a flash steals out from the downcast eyes. Nellie, the heart that is so angry still, is hardly healed of its love wound! She thinks the thought as she fled from him—In fancy she leaves again the wealthy home where he had crossed her path, rejects dependence on rich relations, for harder dependence on a grudging, poor one; that was a hard trial, Nellie, but it was bravely borne, and it has led thee here. Those long solitary walks of thine, intended to drive away the bitter thoughts that thronged the heart's still chambers, how little couldst thou dream, when they were first crossed by that strange, thoughtful-looking man, that he would be all to thee one day, the consoler of the past, the object of the present, the guide of the future.

A strange thing is life, Nellie; and it is well sometimes for the proudest and happiest even, to lay a small round ob in the palm of a soft white hand, and ponder on it as thou art doing now. It was those primroses did the mischief first; (that such innocent-looking flowers should so demean themselves!) didn't they grow in such an unobtainable spot, that when Nellie had climbed up there, she could not get down again, but was obliged to accept the extended hand proffered by Mr. Fairfield.

thought with such an old gentleman it could not matter; and so she suffered him to walk by her side that day, and many other days when they met, until she discovered suddenly that he was not so old after all, and that her walks were very lonely when she did not happen to meet him.

Nellie would have repulsed him angrily, had he made love to her. The wounds in her heart were too recent, and fancy's ideal still too vividly engraved there, to be displaced quickly, and by such a man, too; as Robert Fairfield; but he contrived to get possession of everything else, if he had not love; he opened the rich stores of his mind for her improvement; he won her confidence, her esteem, her friendship; and at last, when she had accompanied his mother, such a dear old lady as she was, to the lonely cottage he inhabited; and saw how desolate it looked for want of a woman to take care of it, and set it to rights, pity finished off the business, and Nellie suffered Robert to take her hand in his, and promised at the altar to be a true and loving wife.

She had never once repented of it. Busy, merry little creature that she was, she not only seemed to be making honey all the day long, but always had a quantity on hand for immediate consumption; and the prettiest cottage in the village had become, thanks to her clever hands, the neatest and most tasteful. Robert said so, and his mother said so, and so did the neighbors, and as strangers always stood and peeped in as they passed by it is to be presumed they were of the same opinion.

Nellie had just reached this pleasant consumption of her reverie, and had regained the same bright glad look with which she had started on it, when wheels were heard at the garden-gate—a sure sign that the coach was come in and the sisters at hand.

Nellie ran out in the dark, but Robert stayed to light a candle. A great confusion, a rush of cold air from the frost, a smell of damp straw from the luggage; an odor of fustian from the guard's coat, a general confusion from every one's talking at once, and thinking money in unison, and then a cheery 'Merry Christmas to you, sir.' 'Health, ladies,' from the man, as he drained the glass Nellie had filled for him, and he was gone, the door closed; and the three sisters stood together again for the first time for three long years, the first time since they bade adieu to their early home, and their mother's grave.

The memory comes thronging to Nellie's heart, it rises in her voice, and swims in her bright eyes; but she forces it back with words and smiles of welcome.

'Dear Carry, how handsome you have grown! I can see that, though you're blue with cold.'

A quieter, tenderer greeting for Margaret, who is already seated in the easy chair, close to the fire, with that dear, clumsy Robert trying to get her out of her wraps—he does it too. Nellie would never have believed him capable of such a thing; and Margaret's quiet eyes raised to thank him—she is too tired to speak; but they seem friends already, that is pleasant! Now to see him great Carry; he turns to her with frank kindness, a little awkward perhaps, but brotherly too, and imprints a paternal kiss on her cheek, which she accepts with a certain hauteur, for Carry prefers distant homage.

Nellie has no time to think what she feels; but her quiet eye remarks this, she does feel something.

Margaret must have some tea, and go to bed, that is quite clear, she is so pale and tired.

What is all this care for Margaret? why do their voices sink to guttural, more caressing tones, when speaking to her, and their actions shadow her round with another atmosphere than that of ordinary life?

Margaret is an invalid, doomed never to know the blessed meaning of health and strength; there is no hope for her, only a long, lingering life of pain, perhaps; but this sad certainty, and the mystery of her patient suffering, make her a holy thing to those two kindly natures. Robert has taken off his spectacles, and forgotten to replace them in his anxiety about her; and had Nellie time, she suspects she should detect tears in those eyes, so occupied with her invalid sister.

But it is all bustle (quiet bustle though, for Nellie is never noisy) till Margaret has had her tea, and is safely stowed away in her warm room, too weary to admire its neat cleanliness, or to say more than a faint 'God bless you, darling,' to her attentive sister.

And now they three draw in their chairs round the fire, and prepare, as Nellie says, for a nice chat. Who is to begin? Carry sits on one side very upright; tired, but refusing to own it, handsome too—a showy beauty, a fine bust, quick flashing eyes, wanting softness it may be. She is beautifully dressed also, for she lives with the wealthy relatives whom Nellie left for solitude and a maiden aunt; and her silk dress fits nicely, and has an evident self-consciousness of being in the newest fashion. It was not a dress she need have apologized for at any rate, as a travelling one, especially to Robert, who never knows even what his wife wears, less his knowledge of silk

or satin, but calls everything stuff, whatever its texture. But when Carry had made the apology, which had been on her mind ever since her arrival, and Robert had begged her to take home it, and Ellen had smiled at her innocence, the conversation, so really began, came to another dead stop. Why didn't Robert begin? He sits looking through those dreadful spectacles of his at the fire, thinking abstractly, when he ought to be talking instead; one of his funny stories now would set them all off, if he would but tell it.

Had Nellie written a description of Robert at that moment, and Carry another, how different they would have been! Nellie would have said, that it was the dearest, kindest face in the world; that the spectacles concealed the mildest, most beaming eyes, that ever a manly soul looked through; that the scanty hairs on his nearly bald head, covered the most clever, sensible brain. And Carry would have said in three words, what a queer, old-fashioned looking husband poor Nellie has got!

But the evening that promised to be so cheerful was going by, and they were all speaking in monosyllables. Nellie made a dash: she began upon their childish days—Carry let it drop; she had a bad memory, and wasn't sentimental, she said. Nellie talked of the town she lived in; Carry grew communicative on the score of society, gossip, and the fashions. Robert showed great signs of weariness, and looked wishfully at his books.

Nellie had made a great effort, forced him into the conversation, and at last into one of his best stories. But alas! just at the very best part, where the interest was greatest, Carry gave most evident signs of being bored; Robert saw them not, but deliberately pursued his way; Carry yawned behind her hand. If he would but talk a little faster, and not laugh at his own jokes; no—he is fairly off. Poor Nellie was greatly troubled; were it possible to hurry him, or too interested; she begs his pardon just as he reaches the very point of the whole matter, and asks what time it is, for she really thinks she must go to bed. Robert, not a whit disconcerted, answers her questions; but Nellie blushes forward to; and she marshals Carry up stairs to her room.

The visitor's room, par excellence, with a broad old-fashioned lattice casement, half overgrown in summer-time by scented flowers, with a cheerful fire in a modern grate, picture-covered walls, and a white dimly-covered bed, the essence of cleanliness, and inviting comfort.

Carry throws herself into an easy chair, and yawns again.

'How do you contrive to breathe, Nellie, in these rooms?'

'Very well, dear; why not?'

'They are so low, they quite suffocate me. Nellie had never found it out.'

'You are accustomed to such grand doings, you see, Carry.'

'How could you leave the town for such a place as this, Nellie, is what puzzles me; and then to fix yourself in it by marrying! Why did you not wait till I was settled? and then you could have come to me, I would have found you some one worth throwing yourself away for.'

The words implied something distasteful about Robert, and Nellie colored violently.

'I am quite happy, Carry, she said, 'I do not wish to change my lot.'

'Quite happy! Nonsense,' said Carry, 'do you mean to persuade me that any one can be happy without society, mewed up the whole day long in small rooms, with a husband in spectacles, who tells long stories and laughs at his own jokes?'

'Oh, Carry, he is the best—'

'My dear, I don't say he isn't, for I'm sure he's all that, but you can't deny, and I'm sure it's no disgrace to him, that he does wear spectacles, is very prosy, and old-fashioned.'

'Never mind, when he is kind and good,' said Nellie.

'No more than he ought to be, with a young pretty wife like you, Nellie dear; but still I do maintain that you ought to have married better. Fancy the fun that would be made of him if he were introduced at N. in our set! It would be impossible. But there, don't be angry, it's no use talking now, it's done; you must come without him—say you want change of air, and leave him at home. I shall expect you very soon, my dear; for I'm expecting to be married; and when I've a house of my own, I hope often to have my sisters with me.'

Nellie forgot everything else in her joy at the news.

'Dear Carry, are you really engaged? Oh, tell me about it!'

'I really am; and who to, of all the men in the world?'

Nellie shook her head.

'Why, Charles Sewell.'

'Back, back, wild throbbing heart! what have you to do with this? Back, back, hot blood! painting tails that should never be told on the blushing cheek. Should Robert Fairfield's wife start thus, at a name connected with husband and wife?'

umphant pleasure blinded her eyes to its extent. 'We shall be married early in the summer; we have chosen our house, and when I return, shall begin furnishing.'

Then followed a list of the furniture, useful and ornamental, which would be absolutely necessary; the catalogue was unheeded by Nellie though she seemed to listen attentively, but Carry was startled when she rose at length and putting her arms around her sister's neck, said, with a short, quick sob—

'God bless you, dear Carry, and him too; I hope you will be very, very happy.'

Not another word spoke poor Nellie that night in any mortal ear; but when, some hours afterwards her husband drew aside the curtain and looked on the sleeping face of his young wife, he found it was flushed as with unquiet slumber and the long lashes that rested on it wet with recent tears.

They all said it was a pleasant Christmas day; even Carry allowed that certainly every one seemed merry. There was old Mrs. Fairfield, with her quiet, dignified ways, making her look respected; even Carry was awed into trying to win a golden opinion from her. There was Margaret, so delighted with everything around her, praising their country fair and habits at every turn; never tired of hearing how all looked in summer, and what were the pleasures they tasted then. Robert, too, continued to keep clear of all long stories, devoted himself chiefly to Margaret, and renounced spectacles for the day. Why he ever wore them no one can understand. It was not for the sake of looking professional, for he was a man of small but independent fortune; nor, because he was near sighted, or had weak eyes—no, but he had formed the habit, and although he could see much better without them than even Nellie's coaxing could procure more than one day's intermission of the odious things.

'Your marriage is not quite so much a mystery to me as it was last night, Nellie,' said Carry, smiling archly, when they found themselves alone again.

'Oh!' said Nelly triumphantly; 'you begin to do him justice then?'

'Do you justice, you mean, you demure little hypocrite; however, you might have been frank with me. How much a year has she?'

'Who?'

'Why Mrs. Fairfield of course.'

'I have no idea,' said Nellie. 'Why?'

'Oh! I dare say you have no expectations,' said Carry, satirically; 'you are quite superior, you and Robert to any thing of the kind.'

'My dear Carry,' said Nellie, with wounded amazement, 'Mrs. Fairfield lives on an annuity that dies with her.'

'Then I am more in the dark than ever,' said Carry.

She stood looking musingly at the fire a few moments.

'But there, go to bed, Nellie, do,' she added, giving her a cold-kiss; 'I think, after all you're just a fit wife for that dear, slow old Robert of yours. Good night, Nellie; good night.'

Nellie had a puzzled look on her face when she left the room; it wasn't as bright and cheerful now as on Christmas eve.

'Dear, slow old Robert,' murmured Nellie as she laid her hand on the handle of the parlor door, 'after all I may as well go to bed at once, I dare say he doesn't care for a gossip; and softly withdrawing it, she went up stairs again.

'Look to it, Robert; for a man with spectacles, you are slow indeed if you cannot see that there is a veil waving between your heart and your little wife's. The night smile has been worn for show to day, and the cheerful voice made an effort to be cheerful—neither came straight from the heart; look to it, dear slow old Robert; or throw away your spectacles, and live in blindness evermore.'

Carry was gone to see a poor relative who had been Nellie's proteetress; Robert was spending an hour with his mother, as his custom was every morning. Nellie brought her work, an embroidered collar that Carry had designed for her, and sat down beside the sofa on which Margaret lay reading. The book was laid aside at her sister's first attempt at conversation.

'Well, Peggie dear you haven't told me how you like Robert?'

There was no need for it, Nellie—who can help liking so kind and gentle a man?'

'You don't find him so very old-fashioned then?'

'I like old-fashioned things, Nellie; did we not agree yesterday that there were no songs, no books, no flowers, like old-fashioned ones?'

'And do you then think Robert old-fashioned?'

'It is such a strange epithet to apply to him I hardly know. What does it mean?'

'Why that he is so prosy and odd, not like the young men of the present day.'

'He is hardly to be called one of them, dear Nellie; so that says nothing. As to his being prosy, I don't know; he tells long stories easily; but he is so very old-fashioned that I

self, and has such a kind intention of amusing his listeners, that, they should be the last to find them so.'

'One more question, Peggie, and I have done. Would you have married Robert Fairfield, had he asked you?'

'No, Nellie.'

'Ah! there you see, why not?'

'Because, dear, there was one and only one to whom I ever would have said, yes, answered Margaret, quietly, though her changing color revealed the emotion she tried to suppress.

Nellie kissed her caressingly.

'Forgive my teasing you with questions, she said, but Carry has put these things into my head—she does not like Robert. You see Mr. —, I mean the young man she is engaged to, is such a fine handsome fellow, she cannot help comparing her lot with mine;—and then she pitied me, buried, as she says, in the country, and leading such a humdrum life.'

'Laugh at her for her pity, Nellie; you don't need it, and if is any consolation to you, I assure you, were I compelled to choose between the two gentlemen, you would be the loser, not Carry.'

'Ah! you would take my Robert, then, and yet Charles Sewell is very handsome and gentlemanly.'

'Granted; but I prefer Robert's expressive face and genuine kindness.'

Nellie kissed her again, she felt happy and contented once more; and having aside her embroidery drew out a pocket handkerchief of Robert's that wanted hemming, and worked his initials in her own hair—Margaret smiled quietly, and resumed her book.

It is the middle of June, and a bright summer day—not your modern summers, but an old one, such as our ancestors basked in; there are June flowers in the garden, June scents pouring in at the window, and filling the cheerful rooms with their rich fragrance; and better than all, June smiles on the sunny face of Robert's little wife, as she stands beside him in a plain cotton dress, reaching up the nails he is hammering into the wall.

These are genial beneficent spirits abroad this morning to a certainty, and their influence is seen and felt everywhere; there isn't a swallow soaring round the cottage that isn't conscious of it; there isn't a saucy breeze dancing among the leaves, or dashing in at the window, to ruffle Nellie's stray curls that isn't full of the joyous certainty as it can be; the brawling brook in the meadow beside the house is singing the same thing; and the flowers nod their heads and toss them up and down, with evident conviction of the fact.

But what has all this to do with a newly white-washed room, a new cheerful paper, a husband nailing curtains, and a little wife handling them with nails? A great deal, as you will see.

The six months that have passed have not gone by without leaving some token of their presence and effects. If Robert were compelled to make a confession, though thumb screws and the rack wouldn't induce him to do it; he would own that the visitor had not left his home such a happy one as they had found it; and that every time a letter came in Carry's hand-writing, there was the renewal of the old strangeness in Nellie's tone and manner—a shadow on her face that used not to be seen there once; that very often, when his spectacles were bent on his book, his eyes were looking over them, trying to find out what something was—all to no purpose. And Nellie, oh! hers would be hard confessions, too, of various feelings when she read of Carry's gaiety, and Carry's lover, and Carry's presents; of yearnings to be fashionable whenever patterns of the newest simps were sent her; of attempts at Italian sonatas, instead of the simple old songs Robert loved. A shameful confession, indeed; Nellie, and one you may well blush to make even to us.

But it had been even worse than this since May, when Carry was married; and in truth the account of the wedding, such a wedding as it was, might well turn Nellie's simple head, and make her heart discontent for a month afterwards. And if the truth must be told, the house was smaller, the garden emptier, and Robert's stories longer than they had ever been before. It was well Carry could not marry again just yet.

About a week before the bright morning we have described, a note had come from Margaret, announcing that the aged relative with whom she had hitherto resided was no more; and she had written to Carry, asking from her the asylum she needed.

'This was natural, for Carry's husband was a rich man, and in her large establishment a nook could easily be found for her sick sister.'

But Carry had replied that her husband declined being burdened with her, though he would be happy to allow her a small annual sum, which she could eke out with needle work.

This reply was repented by Carry in her weekly letter to Nellie. Margaret was at it

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