

The Frustrated Plot

By Mrs. Emily Thornton

“Dearest mother, when shall we sit together again? Never in this dear old room!” and Nellie Russell laid her head upon her mother’s shoulder and wept.

Those were indeed sad hearts that throbbed so near each other that beautiful August evening—the last they would ever spend in the parsonage they had so long called home. Here Nellie had first seen the light of day, for to this spot the pastor of the Presbyterian church of that village had brought Nellie’s mother, a fair young bride, twenty-two years before. In the room in which we found them sitting, so sadly weeping, Mr. Russell had suddenly breathed his last, about six weeks previous to the commencement of our story. On the morrow they were to bid farewell to this cherished place—Mrs. Russell to live at a brother’s in a pretty town nearby, supported by an annuity settled on her by the attached people of her husband’s charge, while Nellie was to fill the situation of a governess in a pious nobleman’s near ———shire, England. I will not linger upon those farewell scenes of the morrow, nor picture the smothered sighs and bursting tears as, clasped in each other’s arms, they breathed their long adieus.

“Put your trust in Jesus, daughter. He will support you in every trial,” Mrs. Russell whispered, pressing a last kiss upon Nellie’s pale lips.

“I will, mother; He shall be my only refuge now. Farewell!” Then dropping the heavy crape veil over her tearful eyes, she passed from the door down the gravel walk, with its high green hedge on either side, separating it from the beds of early flowers beyond, and entering the stage, was soon whirled away from the spot to the cars that were to bear her to her distant home.

“Is this Miss Russell?” asked a liveried coachman, a few hours later, as she stood confused and bewildered in the depot at —. On her answering in the affirmative, he led her to a stylish carriage, in which a sweet little girl of seven was waiting.

“This is my little pupil, I suppose,” said Nellie, kissing the smiling lips that greeted her. “Dear child! I hope you will love me!”

“Oh, I know I shall, you are so pretty! Not a bit like Miss Brown. She had grey hair, wore spectacles, and was so cross.”

Nellie’s heart beat very nervously as the carriage entered the beautiful grounds of Lord Ashleigh’s residence; and when, after winding around, passing lovely groves and beds of autumn flowers, it drew up in front of a stately and splendid mansion, she was almost faint with excitement.

“This is Miss Russell, papa,” said little Ella, as following her young guide, she was ushered into a large and spacious library.

A finely-formed, splendid-looking man, about thirty-eight years of age, arose, extending his hand in welcome as he approached.

“I am so happy to see you, Miss Russell, my little one so sadly needs attention. I trust you will soon feel quite at home with us.” Then, ringing a bell, he added: “you must be weary, Rosa will show you to your room to lay aside your wrappings, after which I would be glad to see you again in the library.”

Nellie was surprised to hear these gentle words, and to see the pleasant smile that accompanied them. She had been told that Lord Ashleigh, although an excellent man, was cold and stern, and extremely hard to please, and the dread she had consequently felt, at becoming an inmate of his house, was anything but a pleasant feeling. Poor child! One kind word and smile now, in her lonely and new undertaking, was of priceless worth, and was treasured as a gem of rarest value.

When she descended to the library, Lord Ashleigh entered into a long conversation with her in reference to his daughter, explaining to her the course he wished her to pursue in regard to studies and recreation, and also assuring her that as Ella was a delicate, although uncommonly precocious child, he wished her to be restrained, instead of pressed, in her desire to learn, and therefore her duties would not be arduous, nor did he think she would find them unpleasant.

As Lord Ashleigh had assured her, she soon became domesticated and pleased with her new position, and as she found her pupil a loveable and obedient child, it greatly lightened the labor of her charge.

After the hours allotted to study had passed, they would ramble out in search of amusement in the beautiful haunts around Ashleigh Hall, or taking her sewing, or a book, she would seat herself in one of the many summer arbors that adorned the grounds, and pleasantly occupy herself, while the child frolicked around in a thousand girlish plays and amusements. One afternoon, Lord Ashleigh was walking around the flower garden, when, nearing a beautiful rose bower, he heard voices, and parting the thick vines he saw Miss Russell and Ella, and was much pleased with the conversation he overheard, while they were unaware of his presence. Miss Russell was employed upon some fine needlework, while Ella sat at her feet, arranging an apron full of flowers she had gathered.

“Miss Russell,” said Ella, “what do you call this flower that droops so prettily from its stem?”

“That,” said Miss Russell, “is the lovely lily of the valley, and that larger white flower is the white lily, and is an emblem of purity. Do you remember, Ella, in the chapter we read together this morning, how beautifully our Savior spoke of lilies? ‘Consider the lilies of the field how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin; and yet I say unto you, that even Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of these.’ See how vain is worldly ornament and dress! Solomon was the richest of earthly monarchs, yet our Savior pronounced all his gay attire and splendor as nothing when compared to the pure beauty of God’s lilies.”

“They are indeed lovely, and I shall always think of Jesus, now, when I see them.” Here Ella made a cluster of lilies of the valley, with a small white lily in the centre, and twined them in her teacher’s hair, half hiding them with her beautiful brown curls. “There, dear Miss Russell! Those white flowers contrast sweetly with your black collar and dress. I think you are like the lily yourself—just as pretty and pure.”

Nellie Russell was a very beautiful girl. Her skin was nearly as soft and white as the pure lily beside it, and her eyes were those full, deep, blue ones that seem ever overflowing with thought and emotion. But the crowning beauty of the young girl was the wreath of light brown hair that was always so gracefully brushed back in natural waves, and confined in a black band of ribbons behind, from whence it fell in long ringlets, and Ella’s lilies greatly added to her lovely appearance. Lord Ashleigh seemed to think it a pretty picture, for he stood perfectly still for some time, admiring the scene, before he moved softly away.

Miss Russell was in the schoolroom with Ella about a week after the above occurrence, when Lord Ashleigh sent a servant to invite her to bring Ella to the library.

“Excuse me, Miss Russell, for disturbing your hour for study,” said his lordship, as she entered with her young charge, “but I was so weary with my own books, I thought to amuse myself with my daughter awhile. I find the study of Greek, which I am engaged in, a serious matter; I have tried to translate a difficult Greek passage this morning, until, through weariness, I must resign it.”

“Perhaps if you will allow me to see the passage to which you refer, I may assist you, sir,” said Nellie, blushing timidly as she made the offer.

“You!” said he, with a look of amazement. “Can you read Greek?”

“My father was a splendid Greek scholar, my lord, and he taught me all I know of the language,” replied Nellie, as she approached the table, glanced at the passage he pointed out, and, without a moment’s hesitation, freely translated it.

“It is astonishing, and so young!” exclaimed Lord Ashleigh. “I think he had no cause to be ashamed of his pupil’s advancement. I cannot express my thanks for your assistance, Miss Russell.”

“I am delighted to have been of service. Any time when I can assist you, I should be pleased to do so.”

“And could you translate that page?” said he, turning to a yet more difficult passage. “I gave that up in despair months ago.”

Nellie smiled as she again glanced at the book, then rendered it in English as rapidly as before.

“I cannot tell what I would not give to understand the Greek language like that,” said the gentleman. “I am afraid I shall often trouble you now, since I find you the possessor of such valuable information.

“It will be no trouble. I love the language, and therefore easily acquired the knowledge.”

So very often Nellie Russell assisted Lord Ashleigh with his Greek in the library, while Ella sported around the room or upon the green lawn before the library door. So were they thrown together, that English nobleman and the young governess, until she hardly knew why her heart throbbed so wildly at his approach, or why she watched so eagerly for his appearance.

There was one inmate of Ashleigh Hall who has not yet been mentioned—one that Nellie looked upon with suspicion and distrust. This was a Mrs. Johnson, who had been Lord Ashleigh’s housekeeper about six months. She was a tall, dark-complexioned woman, about forty years of age, cross and overbearing, and were it not for her, Nellie Russell would have had a delightful home. But here, in a thousand different ways, did she find deep annoyances. So exceedingly unpleasant was she in her deportment, that the many servants of the establishment disliked her, and Nellie wondered why Lord Ashleigh retained her in his employ. But Nellie noticed, after awhile that the woman appeared gentle and excellent *always* in his presence, thus sustaining two distinct characters. Nellie had been confined to her room one day, quite late in Autumn, with a severe headache and cold. Feeling a little better about three o’clock, she arose and sat beside the window. A few moments she thoughtfully looked forth, when she noticed a villainous-looking man coming towards the house, with peddler’s goods to sell. Mrs. Johnson and the servants gathered around to see the contents of his package, but Nellie was surprised to see him slyly slip a small bit of paper in the hand of Mrs. Johnson, who immediately left the group and re-entered the house. The desperate appearance of the man, the sly manner in which the paper was passed into the housekeeper’s possession, together with the looks of secrecy that passed between the two, awoke an uneasy feeling in Nellie’s mind, and caused her to think something wrong was transacting. How to unravel this mystery was what perplexed her. She sat revolving this question over and over in her mind, when a knock at her bedroom door aroused her. It proved to be Mrs. Johnson, who came to inquire if she wished anything, and how she felt. As the woman stood speaking, Nellie saw the torn fragments of the paper in her hand, which she almost unconsciously threw upon the grate, in which no fire was lighted, as it was only needed morning and evening as yet, although it was all prepared for the match. After the woman’s footsteps had died away in the distance, Nellie sprang to the door, and fastening it, proceeded to pick every fragment carefully out, and then seated herself to the difficult task of placing them together. A full half hour of tedious study and patience passed before she succeeded in deciphering the writing upon them. They read, when joined together, as follows:

DEAR MOLL:— I am clean out of tin; must have some more of the needful. The last you gave me is all gone. My mind is made up to do the job you proposed. So help yourself to all the junk you can find about the old fellow’s traps, and bring it to the cast iron gate at half-past seven to-night. I will be there. If you can get hold of one of his prime revolvers, bring it along. It would perhaps settle the chap, and make our fortune. Keep dark.

SAM JOHNSON.

Poor Nellie placed her hand to her brow, as if to wipe away those strange words from her brain, but it would not do. She felt that some deed of guilt was about to be transacted at the instigation of that dreadful woman, and her head whirled as she tried to unravel what course to pursue. Long she pondered, until a more calm expression settled over her face, and one might know, from her determined look, that some course had been laid out for her to follow. Seven o'clock came, and a dark, cloudy, cold evening it proved to be; but notwithstanding the darkness, a female form crept silently and softly down the stairs, out of the open door, and holding her black shawl around her head, stole swiftly toward that part of the premises known as the East Iron Gate. Avoiding the path, or gravel walk, the figure crept around behind the massive hedge that lay each side of this pathway. As she neared the gate, she parted a thick clump of bushes that grew by the side of this fence, and creeping behind them, she carefully placed the branches back in the opening she had made, thus concealing her presence from view, even had a stray moonbeam shone upon the spot. As it was, the darkness effectually hid the trembling form. Nellie Russell, for it was she, hardly breathed, as she lay waiting the coming of those for whom she watched. At length a step approached and paused by the gate: it was the housekeeper's. A moment passed, and then a man came up the road, and halting, gave a slight, low whistle.

"I am here," said Mrs. Johnson.

"All right, Molly. Did you bring any tin?"

"Yes; here is one hundred pounds; I found it in my lord's private desk—and here is his revolver. You got my note, I see, and are ready for the job. All is as I told you; if you meet him and put a bullet in his head to-night, you will have four thousand pounds, to pay for your trouble."

"Jerusalem! How do you know that, girl? Such a haul would make us comfortable for a spell, I vow."

"Well, listen to my plan: Yesterday a gentleman came to see Lord Ashleigh, and as I listened from a good hiding-place, I overheard their conversation. It seems that Mr. White—for that was his name—owned my lord this amount, and agreed to pay to-night, if he would call a little after eight at his residence, No. 7 West street, in the city. Lord Ashleigh promised to go there, after making another business call, and awhile ago I saw him start alone on foot. He took the road that leads by the hollow elm tree, as it is the nearest route, and without doubt will return the same way. As it is so lonely, very rarely traveled, it will be the very place to dispatch him. He told me he would be home by nine, so if you are waiting by that tree at half-past eight, all will be right. Now if you shoot him, secure the money and then make for home as fast as possible, where, after a few days, I will meet you."

"Aye, aye, Moll, I'll fix him off soon, and then we will have a good time."

These desperate creatures separated after a little more conversation, and Nellie was again alone. After she was certain they were safely out of sight, she parted the bushes and stealthily wended her way to the house and with trembling steps regained her own room unperceived. Here throwing off her shawl, she fell on her knees, and burying her pallid face in her hands, she

implored the aid of her Heavenly Father, in this hour of sore distress. To think of the danger to which that noble man was exposed was fearful, and the anguish of her mind at his situation revealed what she knew not before, how dear he was to her heart. One wild and fervent prayer she offered, then starting up, she looked at her watch and found that it was a quarter to eight. Catching up her shawl and jockey hat, she paused but to lock the door of her room carefully on the outside, to make it appear as though she had retired, placing the key in her pocket; and again softly leaving the house, she started, in the thick darkness, and with fleet steps rushed through the grounds into the road beyond; but she took a different route to the one in which stood the hollow elm tree. It led to the city, but was a somewhat longer distance. On she ran in the darkness, for she had a mile and a half to pass over and her utmost speed was necessary, or he would start for home. She knew the road pretty well, but twice in her haste and in the darkness did she stumble over objects in her path, but only to spring up and press frantically on. Often would she tremble as the slightest noise reached her ear; but noise nor timidity could stay her footsteps, for Love was urging her forward, and Love proved stronger than either. At length the lights of the city rose before her, and panting and breathless, the tired girl hastened through street after street, until finally she drew near the house in which she expected to find the object of her care. As she approached a glad cry burst from her lips, for she saw by the light of a street lamp that Lord Ashleigh was just descending the steps. Turning at the unusual sound of her voice, what was the nobleman's surprise to see Nellie Russell's white face and drooping form, whom he had left at home in a sick room a few hours previous.

"Nellie! Miss Russell! can this be you? What has happened?"

Twice her pale lips moved, but no sound escaped, and Lord Ashleigh, seeing she was fainting, caught her before she fell; then, with her slight form in his arms, he reascended the steps, and rang for assistance; but, before the door opened, he could not resist pressing his lips to the sweet face that lay, so silent and still, on his bosom.

Mr. White himself answered the summons, and his surprise may be imagined at seeing Lord Ashleigh and his charge. Kindly assisting him, they bore her into a small reception room, where restoratives were promptly applied, and in a short time the long lashes were raised, and the blue eyes beneath gazed eagerly around.

"Where is he? O, has he gone? Save him! Save him!" she cried, clasping her hands in agony.

"I am here Miss Russell," said Lord Ashleigh, bending over her; and as she met those dark eyes, fixed so kindly upon hers, she first perceived that her head rested upon his shoulder.

"Thank God, then you are saved!" And the excited girl burst into tears of joy and thanksgiving.

I will not linger to describe the horror of the little group, as Nellie recounted the fearful plot that she had discovered and frustrated; but all warmly thanked the brave girl for her courage and energy. Mr. White immediately started for the police station, that was fortunately near at hand, and securing the services of two or three policemen, they proceeded to the spot, where concealed behind the hollow elm tree, they found and secured the waiting villain; then they passed on to the residence of Lord Ashleigh, and arrested the wife of the man as an accomplice and thief. Lord

Ashleigh, meanwhile, procured a carriage, and carefully assisting the nearly exhausted governess into it, ordered the driver to go rapidly to their home. As the carriage rolled along, the hand of the young girl was retained by the nobleman, and as he supported her still trembling form, he often murmured:

“Dear Miss Russell, how can I thank you? Had it not been for you, I should have been in another world at this moment, and my poor child would have been an orphan!”

Nellie had a long and severe illness after the excitement and exposure of that night; but the watchful care of her mother, who was immediately summoned, together with a skillful physician, proved successful, and she began slowly to recover.

“Nellie dear, Lord Ashleigh wishes to see you in the drawing-room this evening. Do you think you could go down?” asked Mrs. Russell of her daughter, about a week after she began to improve.

“I do not know, Mother; I am still very weak.”

“His lordship is so anxious to see you, I think I would try. You need not stay long, you know.”

“You will accompany me, Mother, will you not?”

“No, darling,” said her mother, smiling quizzically. “I imagine my presence will not be necessary. I will stay with Ella.”

After tea, when the cheerful lights were lighted, and the red curtains were drawn over the windows of that grand old house, a low knock at Nellie’s door announced Lord Ashleigh, who had come himself to assist her to the room below. Nellie had not seen him since he had borne her to her chamber that eventful night, and her heart beat fast, and her blushes came and went, as she met the tender glances he bestowed upon her, as, taking her hand in his, he drew it under his arm, whispering:

“My dear Miss Russell, I am so glad to see you once more.”

How kindly he led her down the long winding staircase, stopping one little moment on them to allow her to rest! As they stepped into the drawing-room, Nellie noticed how cozily all was arranged for her reception: the fire burning so brightly, with the lounge wheeled before it, as if awaiting her presence to complete the picture. Lord Ashleigh led the blushing girl to this lounge, and still clasping her hand, seated himself by her side.

“I have so missed you, Nellie, all these weary evenings. Ella and I have been lonely indeed. But we have you back now, and tenderly will we guard you. Dear one, I did not know how much I prized and loved you until your noble efforts saved my life. Yes, darling,” added he, passing his arm softly around her, “that night when I held you so closely in my arms, fainting and frightened, I resolved that the life you had saved should be dedicated to making you happy, if you would

only bless me with your love. Nellie, dearest, may that heart be mine? Will you be my own sweet wife?"

A slight pressure of the hand, a closer nestling to his side, was all the answer that was required; and pressing her to his heart, he called her his treasure and whispered over and over his deep love and thankfulness.

Years passed over Lord and Lady Ashleigh after their marriage, but each coming one found them more and more united and happy. Ella is growing up into a beautiful and lovely maiden, devotedly attached to her mother and grandmother, for Mrs. Russell found a delightful home with her only child.

Of the criminals little need be said; they were tried for robbing Lord Ashleigh, and also for an intent to kill, and were transported for life, a well-deserved and just punishment for their many crimes. Even now, since years have rolled between those transactions, the mention of their names causes a shudder to steal over Lady Ashleigh, as she looks toward her husband and thanks God that he was saved from so dreadful a fate—saved to crown her life with joy and happiness.

The New York Ledger, October 6, 1866