

The Hidden Life

by Sallie

The wind and rain of a cold night in early winter were sweeping through the streets of the city.

Very few were astir, for the hour was past midnight, and all had sought shelter from the cold and driving rain.

A way up in the third story of a tall brick tenement a bright light burned, and every few moments a woman's face would be pressed against the shutterless pane, as if looking for and expecting some one.

At length the weary watcher turned from the window with a sigh, and seated herself before the bright fire, evidently kept burning for the person she was watching for.

"It is useless to try to sleep," she murmured half aloud.

"I wonder why Henry does not come."

Alas! how many hearts bleed and are tortured, watching and waiting, wearily waiting for those who are all unconscious of how heavily the hours go by when they are absent.

At length the footsteps of a man walking rapidly echoed through the silent street, and in a few moments a tall, handsome man came in.

"Why, Hattie, not asleep yet?"

"Have I not often told you never to wait for me?" he exclaimed.

"That I could not come early, but would be here the moment I could leave."

"Yes, Henry, but I could not sleep, and so have been listening for your footsteps."

"What can be the cause of your staying out, night after night?"

"Have I not already told you, Hattie, that I never know when I can get away from my business?"

"But, see, Henry, every one has long ago deserted the streets; it is past one o'clock; and why does your business alone require your attention when all others have retired?"

"I am too much fatigued now, Hattie, to discuss the matter; I will explain all that now seems so mysterious when I can; until then, let the assurance that I am doing nothing wrong satisfy you."

Without a word more he fell asleep, while his wife lay with open eyes, thinking—thinking, until brain and heart seemed nearly bursting with grief.

Two years before, Hattie Taylor, one of the belles of Louisville, married Henry Prentice, with the full consent of her uncle, her only living relative. Soon after the marriage, the young couple had come to New Orleans—their home for the future.

Her modest fortune was placed in Henry's hands, with his own, to enable him to start in a business that promised to be very profitable.

For a year, all went well. Fortune seemed to smile upon them and Hattie was happy. Now, everything seemed changed. The neat cottage, where the year had passed so swiftly, yet so pleasantly, was given up; a second rate boarding-house was selected, and in it the young wife, alone and friendless in the great city, passed the weary hours, and night after night found her waiting at the window for her husband. She had no idea of what detained him, and to all her questions there was the same reply.

“I am doing nothing wrong. Hattie will one day know all.”

But who can picture the tortures of mind she endured; the thousand vague and improbable ideas that presented themselves. She was a woman of rare personal attractions; tall and symmetrical, with large brown eyes and a calm, pale face, that did not index the fiery spirit she possessed. Life to her had been all sunshine. Until the past year she had never known a care. She arose next morning fully determined upon finding where her husband spent his time after office hours; and also his motive for so carefully keeping her in ignorance of his proceedings.

The first step was to obtain money. As soon as she could leave the house unobserved she found a pawnbroker who willingly advanced her all she needed on the elegant watch and chain and diamond ring she offered him.

She then employed a skillful detective to watch her husband after he left his office, see where he went, and then come to her for instructions.

All through the weary day she never faltered, and only on reaching her room, her assumed courage gave way, and tears and sobs gave evidence of the humiliation to her proud spirit to thus become a spy upon the one who was dearer to her than life. Once she determined to go away and not seek to know anything; then her better judgment told her to see for herself; then make her plans for the future accordingly.

Two days passed without any news from the officer, and on the evening of the 3d, he made his appearance.

“Madame, I have followed your instructions. If you would see how your husband is employed, you must come with me instantly.”

She arose without a word, put on her hat, and muffling her face in a thick veil, prepared to follow him. A carriage was waiting; he handed her in and followed her, after a low spoken word to the driver.

On they went. Street after street [was] passed, and still they went swiftly forward. At length, after what seemed hours to the excited woman, they stopped before a quiet house, almost hidden by the trees that surrounded it. No one seemed near. Not a sound broke the stillness but the rustling of the leaves overhead as they walked up the graveled walk. The officer tried the front door, and it yielded to his touch, admitting them to a dark hall. He passed up a flight of steps, softly opened a door, and Hattie paused as if spellbound on the threshold. It was a small room, plainly but comfortably furnished, and over a bed on which lay the form of a woman no longer young, but evidently once beautiful, Henry Prentice was bending.

The death damps had already gathered on her brow. Life for her was nearly over. With every struggling breath the soul was going out into the dread unknown world, yet into the presence of One who is more compassionate for our frailties than man. Soon a deep silence fell over the room as the last breath of the weary wanderer floated out on the evening breeze.

A nurse, who had been standing on the other side of the bed, came forward, and, on Henry's raising his eyes, full of blinding tears, he saw Hattie standing in the door, from which she had not moved.

"Hattie!" he exclaimed, "you here?"

"But it is for the best, perhaps, that you should know all;" and, taking her hand, he led her up to the bed.

"This, my wife, whose eyes are closed in death, is your mother."

"My mother died, Henry, years ago, and my father followed her long before I can remember him, how can this be my mother?"

"'Tis a sad tale, dear one, which I never intended you to know.

Your mother was very beautiful and possessed a haughty, jealous spirit, that was impatient over even the slightest control. Your father did not rightly understand her peculiar temperament, so unfortunate misunderstandings were frequent between them. A cousin to whom they had given a home was the cause of much of the trouble, and at length made your mother believe that your father no longer loved her, so without waiting to know whether it was true or false, she fled from him in a fit of anger, leaving you a helpless infant never to see you again on earth. Your father lived but a short time, for her leaving him was proof to him of guilt, so he settled down into despair, never tracing her or making any effort to find her.

Before our marriage, your Uncle thought it his duty to inform me of all this; and on confiding the story to me, said he had traced her to New Orleans, but there had lost sight of her, he urged me to leave no means untried to find her; but exacted a promise that you should be kept in ignorance of

all this, as he knew you would never consent to marry any one did you know of this unfortunate fate of your mother. He had led you to believe her dead, and so she must always be to you.

Last year, while passing a police station, I saw a woman taken in for drunkenness, that I felt convinced must be the object of my search; I went in and spoke to her and found her perfectly insane, but not under the influence of liquor. I said: 'Is your name Hattie Taylor?'

'That was once my name years ago, now I have none.'

She was suffering from want of proper clothing and food. I brought her to this quiet house, hired a servant to care for her, but to do this I have had to work late and give up our dear little home and leave you alone and wretched many hours.

She never rightly understood who I was, yet at intervals I learned her many struggles to earn an honest living; how she for a time succeeded until she learned from some stray paper that your father was dead, then all hope seemed to go out of her life. She had long believed the tale told her false, but now he had died without knowing her motive for leaving him, so she gave up to despair, and sunk lower and lower, until she became a common vagrant.

'No God, no religion, no home or friends,' said she, 'it is hard for a poor frail woman to fight against these contending ills, and my heart broke when I left my baby.'

I have watched by her for a year, and, thank God, have seen her penitent and prepared for the great change that to-night has called her, let us trust, into rest and peace."

[Hattie] was sobbing long before he had finished.

"And oh, Henry! to think I was prepared to find you in a den of forgers or thieves, for I employed this officer to help me find you."

"And now, Madam, I will bid you good night," said he with grave courtesy, and left them alone with their dead.

A quiet spot received the remains of the poor frail mother, another victim of pride and a hasty temper.

So they returned from her grave sad but consoled, that for all her care was over. For themselves they had many happy years, and Hattie Prentice remembers as a long ago sorrow the day she found the secret of her husband's hidden life.

The Daily Picayune [New Orleans, LA], August 1, 1869