

Aunt Berta's Story

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"A STORY! Very well, girls, but first let me turn on the light and put another stick of wood in the fire-place, then my little blue-eyed Verna, curl yourself up in this armchair beside me, and you Doris, Marguerite and Lillian make yourselves comfortable on the couch while I tell you a story about Berta Nelson, while yet 'far from sunset and evening star' felt the chilling shadows that filled her 'glen with gloom.'

"You know, girls, that my grandfather lived on a farm. He was one of the wealthiest and most influential farmers in the neighborhood of Carville. My grandmother was a gentle, loving woman who had a kind word and a good meal for everyone who came to their large brick house. They had a large family, but one by one the children had flitted out of the old home nest into nests of their own, until only Berta was left to be a comfort to her parents in their declining years. Her mother almost idolized her and grandfather was more lenient with her than he had ever been with his other children.

"When Berta was about nineteen years of age she became acquainted with Wesley Nelson, and in a short time they were engaged to be married. Her brothers and sisters who lived in the neighborhood, begged her to have nothing to do with the young man, for they had heard that he worshipped at the shrine of Bacchus, and they feared the result of such a marriage. But she laughed at their fears and was sure her Wesley never tasted the horrid stuff. She had never seen him do so, neither had they, and she wasn't going to listen to any mean reports about him. Wesley loved her too much to deceive her. If he drank he would tell her, she knew that all right. However, she would ask him just to satisfy them, and ask him she did, and received a flat denial and a 'Can you not trust me, darling? That was sufficient. Trust him! Trust Wesley! How could she do otherwise! She worshipped him—and Wesley was satisfied.

"But her brothers were not and they warned her repeatedly, but she always said, 'Wesley says he does not touch liquor and I believe him. If I see him taking it or smell it on him then I'll believe, but not before.'

"Then she would go to her mother begging her to make the boys stop saying such mean things about Wesley and the mother who had no idea of the real character of the man was willing to do anything to keep the tears out of her Berta's hazel eyes.

"Her brother Grant knowing that Wesley Nelson would conceal the fact of his drinking from Berta until it was too late, resolved to make a final effort to save his sister from a life of misery. But he seized a very inopportune time. One evening he met them taking their usual stroll and without returning Wesley's courteous bow, seized Berta by the arm and said, 'Say good-bye to me for ever, Berta. I'd rather see you dead at my feet than have you marry that beast.'

"Berta's indignation knew no bounds. Her eyes flashed lightning and words poured from her lips like a volley of hot shot. 'Sae would marry Wesley Nelson. She would never give me up—no matter what they said about him.

"So they were married, and 'merrily rang the bells,' but to Grant they sounded like a death-knell. How joyful she looked in her bridal attire! Joy beamed in her eyes her heart was full of sunshine and severa. of the guests

whispered a prayer that it might be always so.

"To a careless observer Wesley Nelson looked handsome, too, but a judge of character could not have failed to notice the shifting glance of the eyes and the weak, drooping lips. The first time I saw him, when only a child of ten, Berta asked me how I liked him and I innocently said, 'I do not like him; he looks as if he had done wrong and was afraid of being found out.' I truly believe she never forgave me for that childish remark.

"After the wedding-trip, they settled in a cozy brick house which Berta's father had given them. It was about fifteen miles from the old homestead and when grandfather died, soon after his child's marriage, his house was sold and grandmother went to live with the young couple.

"For nearly two years Berta lived a



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life of bliss. No cloud, as yet, marred her serene sky. But one night Wesley was very late in coming home. She waited and watched but still he did not come. What had happened! He had never been so late before. Something must be wrong! She coaxed her mother to have her tea alone. Eight! Nine! Ten! Eleven! Cuckooed the little clock on the wall and then, Twelve! Would he ever come!

"But what was that outside? Was he ill, and were some men carrying him home? No, he was alone—but what! Oh, what and happened! She gazed upon him in mute despair. Could it be! No, she was dreaming. The idea for such a thought to enter her head! But no—yes, it was so after all—he was drunk. That was the right word—he was drunk. Her Wesley was dead drunk. Thank God her mother was not there to see him.

"Every day Wesley grew more careless, but Berta hid her pain as the Spartan boy hid the fox that gnawed his vitals. Had he struck her or shot her down dead, he would have been more kind. As it was, his treatment of her was worse than murder. He was subjecting her to a living death. He spent his evenings at the hotel with his best friends, while the wife he had promised to love and protect passed the weary hours at home—always alone, for she did not wish her mother to see Wesley drunk and always managed to coax her to bed before he arrived.

"When little Merrill was born she thought for his sake he would turn over a new leaf but 'habits are soon assumed and when we strive to strip them off 'tis like being stayed alive.' Wesley Nelson did not turn over a new leaf. He went from bad to worse. Berta never reproached him, unless with that sorrowful look in her eyes. She confided in no one, and no one dared whisper, in her presence, a hint of his woe. He was her all in all and she would be true to him if it cost her her life.

"And it did. Day by day she grew weaker, but no one would have known how much she really had suffered had she not divulged the truth in her delirium.

"'Wesley, Oh, Wesley, won't you stay with me to-night? I am so lonely, so lonely. Oh, Wesley, you are breaking my heart, but I love you, dear, Oh, Wesley, Wesley, I love you so.'

"Again and again this heart-rending cry rang through the house, then, in her calmer moments she would beg for little Merrill and hug him closely to her breast, she would burst into a passionate fit of weeping.

"'Oh, my baby, my little blue-eyed baby, what will become of you when I am gone. Oh, Wesley, my Wesley, come back to baby and me. Oh, Wesley, I love you so.'

"And where was Wesley? Why, at the hotel, with his refined (?) friends. He could not bear to hear Berta's dreadful shrieks—he was so sensitive, so finely organized. Again and again, when they thought she was dying, her brother Herbert had to go to the hotel to bring him home.

"One Tuesday morning, in April, Berta became very delirious.

"'Wesley, Wesley, come back! I'll never tell you are killing me. Come back, Wesley, and stay with me to-night. Stay with baby and me. Oh, Wesley, Wesley, I cannot bear it. O God, help me!

"Over and over again she shrieked these words, until her mother and sisters were nearly crazed with grief.

"The next morning Berta's troubles were over. She was at rest. The young wife whom Wesley had promised to love and protect had gone where God would wipe away all tears from her eyes.

"The broken-hearted mother and baby Merrill went to live with Berta's favorite sisters in the village of Eimdale.

"Merrill was a beautiful baby but his father had bequeathed him a dreadful disease. The town doctors could do nothing for him, so he was taken to the Sick Children's Hospital and finally to the Home for Incurable Children, where he lived only for a few months. The poor child who had been so grievously sinned against was now with his mother and we were thankful.

"Berta's mother never recovered from the shock of her daughter's death and to day is an invalid.

"As for Wesley, the less said about him the better. He is roaming at large in our great prairie country—a plague spot wherever he goes. If he had small-