

THAT FLIRTING NELLIE!

"So you have invited that odious little Nellie Jervas to spend the rest of the summer with you!" exclaimed Priscilla Relton, as she was saying her good-byes after a long morning call. "I was so surprised when I heard it!"

"Why?" queried Alice Edney, trying to speak coolly, though she was hot with indignation. "Have you heard anything to the discredit of our old schoolfellow?"

"Oh, my dear Alice, why pretend ignorance? Doesn't everyone know that she flirts atrociously with every member of the male sex who happens to come in her way?"

"Very impartial of her, I am sure, to distribute her pleasant looks and smiles to all alike," laughed Alice. "If you had accused her of angling for two or three lovers, and favoring each in his turn, I might agree with you and call Nellie a coquette; as it is, I believe that she likes to be liked, and so do I."

"Ah, but you are quite a different character. You have been, as mamma often says, so carefully brought up, while we all know that the Jervases are—"

The sentence was finished with a shrug and a sneer; but Alice Edney refused to see either.

"I have never heard any harm of Nellie's relations, except that they have been unfortunate; and neither you nor I can ever forget that, when we were ill with low fever at school, it was Nellie's mother who used to come and see us daily, bringing us fruit and flowers, and the most delicious of jellies and custards."

"Well," said Miss Relton, preparing to depart, "all I have to say is, that if I were engaged, as you are, to a light-hearted, handsome young fellow, who is not insensible to admiration, I should think twice before I exposed him to the wiles of an accomplished flirt like Nellie Jervas."

Alice bit her lip to keep back an angry reply. It was no use entering on the defense of her friend, or declaring that nothing should induce her to doubt the constancy of her lover, so she wisely kept silence.

Priscilla Relton was one of those persons who always contrive to say something that wounds the susceptibilities of those they pretend to esteem; and Mrs. Edney, bustling into the room to fetch her keys, was not very much surprised to find her daughter in tears.

"What a goose you are!" she cried, kissing her, and giving her a little shake. "What a goose to make yourself unhappy over that girl's silly speeches! What has she been saying? You know she only talks for talking sake."

"I am not unhappy," responded Alice; "but angry with myself for having allowed Priscilla to see that I was vexed. She will go away, telling the next person she visits that I have admitted that I am doing a foolish thing in having Nellie here, and that I am awfully jealous already."

"Pooh! What signifies? Come and help me tie down my preserves, and don't trouble your head about what the gossips chatter. Or, if you really do doubt the prudence of having Miss Nellie Jervas here, forbid Merric Granard the house till she has gone away again."

Seeing that her mother was laughing at her, Alice laughed too, and would not confess even to herself that for a brief period a dread had really seized upon her that Priscilla Relton's predictions might be verified. If Merric, dear Merric Granard, whose wife she was to be as soon as her parents could be induced to think her old enough, should be lured from his allegiance by the wiles of pretty, attractive Nellie Jervas—how would she bear the misery of losing him?

But for that hateful Priscilla, no such thoughts would have troubled her peace, and they vanished altogether when Nellie jumped out of the railway-carriage into her arms.

She was such a bright little creature! Not all her home troubles—and they were many—could ever cast more than the briefest shadow on her pretty face. It was someone's duty, she would aver, to look at the sunny side of the sky; and as it was a pleasant duty, she would make it her's. So Nellie's silvery laughter rang out at every opportunity, and she carried sunshine wherever she went.

"Don't make too much of me," she cried, struggling out of Alice's embrace. "My visit is not to you, but to your mother. I shall never be in her way, I know, while you—oh, you recreant! you false-to friendship individual to give yourself away to a male!—you would find me in the way whenever he drew near. What is he like, Alice?"

"Who, Merric? You shall see for yourself presently," replied the blushing bride-elect.

"Much obliged—at least I ought to be; one must make some sacrifices to gratify one's friends, but do not ask me to admire the young man. Of all the individuals I detest, first on the list stand other girls' lovers!"

And so Nellie rattled on or talked gaily to the two lads who had escorted their sister to the station, extorting bursts of laughter from them till they reached Mr. Edney's house; and Mrs. Edney came into the hall to give the guest a motherly welcome, and warn Alice that the meat tea would be on the table in twenty minutes.

Soon after the meal had been despatched Merric Granard arrived, a little curious to see the school-friend of whom his betrothed talked so enthusiastically.

It was with a touch of latent uneasiness that Alice seized the first opportunity of whispering to him:

"Well, did I exaggerate when I said that Nellie is exceedingly pretty?"

"Am I to answer politely or frankly? The latter? Then my dear Alice, I do think you exaggerated very much. Miss Jervas hasn't a regular feature to boast of; she looks thin and worn, and certainly has no pretensions to be called a beauty."

"She is thin, but her smile is just as sweet."

"And she talks. Oh! ye gods, how she does keep talking! Cannot we make our escape and get out of sound of it for a little while? Say yes; your mother will amuse the young lady if she isn't capable of taking care of herself for half an hour."

"What do I think of Mr. Granard?" echoed Nellie, when the question was put to her, as she and Alice were brushing out their tresses that night.

"It is scarcely a fair question, *m'amie*; I do not view him with your bedazzled eyes."

"He is one of the best of men," exclaimed Alice. "Everyone who knows him congratulates me on my engagement."

"Then so will I!" cried Nellie, heartily. "But he might have spared you to me a little longer. Even you, who are seven fathoms deep in love, must own that it is very disappointing to me to lose the only girl-friend I ever made. I am not magnanimous. I don't like having to give you up to a male rival, who looks at me with disapproving eyes already. He doesn't want me here. He regards you as his peculiar property, and your guest as an interloper."

"But I should like you and Merric to be good friends," said Alice. "For my sake, you know."

"Give us time and we may learn to be civil to each other," was the laughing reply. "But you must not expect more. We are rivals in your affection, you know; he is distrustful, and I am jealous—frightfully, disgracefully jealous. Why didn't he leave you alone and fall in love with another girl?—Pris Relton for instance. By the way, how old is Pris? Does she still find out all the specks and blemishes in her friends just as she was wont? Won't I say or do something to astonish her!"

Apparently Nellie Jervas kept her word, for she had not been many days at Mr. Edney's when Miss Relton told half a dozen of her intimates in strictest confidence that this wicked little siren was angling for the new curate as well as the son of Dobbs the banker.

And we are afraid that Nellie did flirt with both these gentlemen, and that it was also her smiles and flattering speeches that brought the bachelor doctor and Squire Edlington to the house evening after evening.

"She was so jolly," the Edney boys asseverated; "so ready to sing, dance, play, or institute drawing-room games; while Alice was no use for anything now, except moping in a corner with Merric Granard."

Mrs. Edney looked rather grave sometimes when Mistress Nellie gathered her admirers about her chair and played them off one against the other, but even she was not able to resist the coaxing looks and caresses with which her gentle reproofs were heard.

"No, don't you accuse me of flirting, please!" Nellie would say. "I assure you I mean no harm. It's awfully nice to be liked, and I enjoy it, that is all!"

"At the expense of your victims, my dear?"

"Which be they?" questioned the damsel, demurely. "Not your curate, for he is engaged; nor young Dobbs, for he loves himself better than all women; nor the doctor, for he is too shrewd; and Mr. Edlington too sensible to woo a girl who hasn't a penny. Trust me, dear Mrs. Edney, these good souls may be scorched by the lightning of my glances, but they'll not catch fire. They are safe enough."

And Merric Granard?—was he safe too? was it by mere chance that he and Nellie had found themselves watching the moon rise from the same window, or sharing the same umbrella when caught in a shower?

"Poor, unsuspecting Alice!" sighed Priscilla Relton; and she made a point of calling frequently, and inquiring for Alice's health in the most sympathetic accents.

"You are quite well? You are sure?" she would murmur. "How thankful I am to hear it! But then you always are good and patient."

"What do I mean?" she would repeat. "Oh, my friend, is it possible! But don't question me—please don't! I would not be the first to draw your attention to anything that would grieve you!"

Alice laughed loudly, and teased Miss Relton till she had the satisfaction of seeing her bite her thin lips and redden with annoyance. To be so jibed at as the village news-monger, and to be saucily reminded of the sundry bits of mischief she had wrought, was too galling; and she remembered an engagement, and beat a retreat, followed to the gate by the girl's mocking laughter.

But when her tall, spare form, and nodding features, had passed out of sight, Alice flung herself on a couch and buried her face in its cushions. Alas! it was but too true; Merric was fast falling into the nets of the siren, and she was most miserable.

Twice she had come upon him and Nellie whispering together. They had started asunder at sight of her, too confused to offer the explanation she was too proud to ask. And only last evening, in the twilight, as she returned from some charitable visits in the village, she had found her friend and her lover in the avenue, not hastening to meet her, but in a less frequented path, so deep in conversation that they did not detect her approach.

Nellie was in the act of giving her companion a long lock of sunny hair, to which he pressed his lips before he hid it away in his pocket-book. Did the ears of the looker-on deceive her, or did she hear these words murmured:

"Remember, Alice must not know this until—"

Then came the reply:

"You may trust me. I will be secret and prudent until secrecy is no longer necessary."

And then they separated, and Alice rushed into the house to hide her wretchedness in her own chamber.

She could with truth plead a violent headache when her mother came to look for her; she had sobbed and cried till the pulses in her temples were beating madly, and she was burning with fever.