

The Flower by the Doorstep

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Author's Note: *Will Tarrant, my grandfather, found a box of old hand-written manuscripts that had been left in a drawer in his store. They were fragments of stories that had been collected by an unknown author who had attempted to capture interesting and important events from my hometown's past. This box was passed down to my mother and finally to me. I have written a previous story about pioneer times, when bloodshed between the Indians and the settlers was narrowly averted. Unfortunately, in another event outlined in an unfinished story among the manuscripts, blood was spilled in a sad romantic triangle. I will do my best to reconstruct the story from the fragmentary notes that were left. The names in the following story are fictitious.*

The time of the story "The Flower by the Doorstep" seems to be around 1880. The area surrounding my hometown, Versailles, Illinois, was more populated then than now. At that time, there were three roads leading east from the town into the countryside. Now there is only one, the LaGrange Locks Road. Traces of the other roads are still faintly visible, and I have traveled them in my youthful rambles, but the farm houses and buildings that once stood along them have long since been torn down. Along one of those old roads, about a half mile outside of town, stood a large hotel that was a health resort. There were mineral springs at that location, and people would come there from distant places to partake of the healing waters. All that is left of the hotel now are mounds of dirt and an ancient well.

When I was a boy, I heard the story that a large catfish had been put in the well, and I tried several times to catch it with my fishing pole, but I didn't even get a nibble. I was fascinated by the place. It had a strange, almost eldritch, feeling about it. On summer days I would explore around the mounds looking for any treasures I could find. I tried to imagine what the hotel had looked like, and one night when I was hunting, I thought I could hear Christmas music coming from the place where the hotel had stood.

I remember one spring day when I was a boy, I was hunting morel mushrooms, and I came by the place and I noticed what appeared to be a stone doorstep for a house that no doubt had once stood there. Nothing else was left of the house except for one lonely reminder. Beside the stone step a single flower was blooming. When I bent down to pick it, I was overcome with an eerie feeling, a sensation that made me stop and look around. Nothing was amiss and certainly no danger seemed present, but I decided not to linger there. And I left the flower untouched.

According to the manuscript, a couple from New York had come to the hotel for the mineral waters. Their names were Wilmer and Nellie Fairbanks. Wilmer was somewhat older than Nellie, who was, according to the description, a beautiful and charming lady. But the guests noticed that she always seemed unhappy. It was no wonder because Wilmer was loud and boastful with a perpetual scowl on his face that would have turned the Medusa to pebbles. He was a man with a lot of hard bark on him. Understandably, the other guests did not want to spend time in his presence. The gossip was that it had been an arranged marriage.

There was a local young man named Jacob Northern, who worked at the hotel as a gardener and handyman. He was probably the most handsome man in the county, with his wavy black hair, his cleft chin, and his winning smile. He was enthusiastic and joyful, the kind of person one always looks forward to encountering because his presence itself improves the quality of the day. Many young women in the community dreamed of winning his heart. They were probably encouraged by their mothers because Jacob could make all female hearts flutter. People wondered why he had never

married because he could have had any young woman he wanted.

Jacob also had a wonderful singing voice and would sometimes entertain the guests in the evening with songs such as “Don't You Remember Sweet Alice, Ben Bolt?” and “Barbara Allen.” Of course, he was frequently asked to sing Robert Burns’ songs, especially “My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose.”

In addition, Jacob would drive the omnibus to convey the guests to town or to picnics at the Illinois River, two miles away.

One day, Jacob was helping the ladies into the omnibus. He took Nellie's hand and she felt a sudden thrill. She looked at him. He looked at her. It was a case of love at first touch. Nellie blushed of course, and Jacob felt as if he had been touched by an angel. From that moment on they could not keep their eyes off each other. That night Jacob sang a very special song for the hotel guests, but it was directed especially at one person:

*In the night the bright stars glittered;
In the sky the pale moon shone.
It was from Aunt Dinah's quilting party
I was seeing Nellie home.*

Jacob and Nellie managed to have several hurried conversations, thinking that they had not aroused Wilmer's suspicions. Nellie surely told Jacob how miserable she was and how she had longed for a knight in shining armor to come riding by and take her away from all this. Doubtless, Jacob responded that she was the angel he had been waiting for. Both had felt the glorious mystery of love.

One evening as Jacob was leaving work, a hotel maid handed him a note and said she had been asked to give it to him. The note was unsigned, but Jacob knew it was from Nellie. The note read: “*Dear Heart, Life gives us but one chance for happiness, and we had better take it or lose it forever. I am yours if you want me.*”

The next day Jacob encountered Nellie at the well and told her that they should leave and find a place where they could be happy. Nellie smiled and said, “I was hoping you would say that. I only know I can't let you go now that I have found you. But how can we get away safely?”

“I will arrange to get us to Beardstown, where I'll book passage on The Golden Eagle to St Louis. From there we can decide where to go. We have to act fast because The Golden Eagle leaves early tomorrow morning,” Jacob explained.

They agreed to meet at midnight by the caretaker's cottage to run away. Nellie assured Jacob she could slip out after Wilmer was asleep.

Shortly after midnight the hotel guests were awakened by two pistol shots. Upon investigation, they discovered the bodies of Nellie Fairbanks and Jacob Northern lying by the doorstep of the caretaker's cottage. Nellie's note was discovered in Jacob's pocket, explaining what otherwise would have been a mystery. Wilmer Fairbanks disappeared into the night and was never brought to justice, though a search party was sent out the following day, but Wilmer had carefully concealed his tracks.

A few years later the appeal of taking mineral waters had gone out of fashion, and the hotel, no longer profitable, was torn down, leaving only the caretaker's stone doorstep, mounds of dirt, and an old well

as mute reminders of the place that had once seen happy days and the dashed dreams of what might have been.

For some mysterious reason which I could not have explained at the time, something told me not to touch the flower, and, now that I am older, I understand why I did not pick the flower growing beside the doorstep.