

**NEIGHBOURS  
ON THE GREEN**

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# Neighbours on the Green

# MY NEIGHBOUR NELLY

## CHAPTER I

THEY were both my neighbours, of course: but to apportion one's heart's love in equal shares according to the claims of justice is a very different matter. I saw as much of one sister as the other. And Martha was an excellent girl, quite honest and friendly and good; but as for Ellen, there never could be any question about her. One did not even think of discriminating which were her special good qualities. She was Ellen, that was enough; or Nelly, which I prefer, for my part. We all lived at Dinglefield Green in these old days. It is a model of a village, in one sense of the word; not the kind of place, it is true, to which the name is generally applied, but a village *orné*, as there are cottages *ornés*. The real little hamlet, where the poor people lived, was at a little distance, and gave us plenty of occupation and trouble. But for Dinglefield Green proper, it was such a village as exists chiefly in novels. The Green was the central point, a great triangular breadth of soft grass, more like a small common than a village green, with the prettiest houses round—houses inclosed in their own grounds,—houses at the very least embosomed in pretty gardens, peeping out from among the trees. None of us were very rich; nor was there anything that could be called a 'place' in the circle of dwellings. But I believe there was as much good blood and good connection among us as are rarely to be found even in a much larger community. The great house opposite, which was separated from the green by a ha-ha, and opened to us only a pretty sweep of lawn, looking almost like a park, belonged to Sir Thomas Denzil, whose pedigree, as

everybody knows, is longer than the Queen's. Next to him was Mrs. Stoke's pretty cottage who was—one of the Stokes who have given their name to places all over the country: the son is now General Stoke, a C.B., and I don't know what besides: and her daughter married Lord Leamington. Next to that—but it is needless to give a directory of the place: probably our neighbours, in their different habitations, may appear in their proper persons before my story is done.

The sisters lived next to me; my house lay, as their father said, athwart their bows. The Admiral was too much a gentleman to talk ship, or shop, as the gentlemen call it, in ordinary conversation; but he did say that my cottage lay athwart his bows; and the girls admitted that it would have been unpleasant had it been anybody but me. I was then a rather young widow, and having no children, did not want much of a house. My cottage was very pretty. I think myself that there was not so pretty a room in all the green as my drawing-room; but it was small. My house stood with its gable-end to the green, and fronted the hedge which was the boundary of Admiral Fortis' grounds. His big gate and my small one were close together. If the hedge had been cut down, I should have commanded a full view of the lawn before his house, and the door; and nobody could have gone out or come in without my inspection. They were so friendly, that it was once proposed to cut it down, and give me and my flowers more air; but we both reflected that we were mortal; circumstances might change with both of us; I might die, and some one else come to the cottage whose inspection might not be desirable; or the Admiral might die, and his girls marry, and strangers come. In short, the end of it was that the hedge remained; but instead of being a thick holly wall, like the rest of my inclosure, it was a picturesque hedge of hawthorn,

which was very sweet in spring and a perfect mass of convolvulus in autumn; and it had gaps in it and openings. Nelly herself made a round cutting just opposite my window, and twined the honeysuckle into a frame for it. I could see them through it as I sat at work. I could see them at their croquet, and mounting their horses at the door, and going out for their walks, and doing their capricious gardening. Indeed it was Nelly only who ever attempted to work in the garden; the other was afraid of her hands and her complexion, and a hundred things. Nelly was not afraid of anything—not even of Mr. Nicholson, the gardener, who filled me with awe and trembling. Perhaps you may say that there was not much fear of her complexion. She was brown, to begin with; but the prettiest brown—clear, with crimson flushes that went and came, and changed her aspect every moment. Her eyes were the softest dark eyes I ever saw; they did not penetrate or flash or sparkle, but glowed on you with a warm lambent light. In winter, with her red cloak on, she was the prettiest little figure; and the cold suited her, and made her glow and bound about like a creature of air. As for Martha, she was a great deal larger and whiter than her sister. I suppose, on the whole, she was the prettier of the two, though she did not please me so well. They were their father's only children, and he was very fond of them. Their mother had been dead so long that they had no recollection of her; and the girls were not without those defects which girls brought up by a man are so apt to have. They were rather disposed to think that anything could be had for a little coaxing. Perhaps they had more confidence in their own blandishments than is common with girls, and were more ready to use them, knowing how powerless papa was against their arts. They were badly educated, for the same reason. The Admiral was too fond of them to part with them; and he was one of the men who fear reports and rumours, and would not have a lady, not even

a middle-aged governess, in his house. He had expensive masters for his girls, and the girls did what they pleased with those excellent gentlemen, and grew up with the very smallest amount of education compatible with civilization. I rather liked it, I confess, in Nelly, who was very bright, and asked about everything, and jumped at an understanding of most things she heard of. But it did not answer in Martha's case, who was not bright, and was the sort of girl who wanted to be taught music, for instance, properly, and to practise six hours a day. Without being taught, and without practising, the good girl (for Nelly, as she explained, had no taste for music) thought it her duty to play to amuse her friends; and the result was a trial to the temper of Dinglefield Green. We had some very good musicians among us, and Martha heard them continually, but never was enlightened as to the nature of her own performance; whereas Nelly knew and grew crimson every time her sister approached the piano. But Nelly was my favourite, as everybody knew; and perhaps, as a natural consequence, I did her sister less than justice.

We led a very pleasant, neighbourly life in those days. Some of us were richer, and some poorer; but we all visited each other. The bigger houses asked the smaller ones to dinner, and did not disdain to pay a return visit to tea. In the summer afternoons, if you crossed the Green (and could hear anything for the noise the cricketers made) you would be sure to hear, in one quarter or another, the click of the croquet balls, and find all the young people of the place assembled over their game, not without groups of the elder ones sitting round on the edge of the well-mown lawns. When I settled there first, I was neither young nor old, and there was a difficulty which party to class me with; but by degrees I found my place among the mothers, or aunts, or general guardians

of the society; and by degrees my young neighbours came to be appropriated to me as my particular charge. We walked home together, and we went to parties together; and, of course, a little gossip got up about the Admiral—gossip which was entirely without foundation, for I detest second marriages, and indeed have had quite enough of it for my part. But Nelly took a clinging to me—I don't say a fancy, which would be too light a word. She had never known a woman intimately before—never one older than herself, to whom she was half a child and half a companion. And she liked it, and so did I.

There was one absurd peculiarity about the two girls, which I shall always think was the foundation of all the mischief. They never called each other, nor were called, by their names. They were 'the Sisters' to everybody. I suppose it was a fancy of their father's—he called them 'the Sisters' always. They called each other Sister when they spoke to or of each other. It annoyed me at first, and I made an attempt to change the custom. But Martha disliked her name. She had been called after her grandmother, and she thought it was a shame. 'Martha and Ellen!' she said indignantly. 'What could papa be thinking of? It sounds like two old women in the alms-houses. And other girls have such pretty names. If you call me Martha, Mrs. Mulgrave, I will never speak to you again.' When one thought of it, it was a hard case. I felt for her, for my own name is Sarah, and I remember the trouble it was to me when I was a girl; and the general use and wont of course overcame me at last. They were called 'the Sisters' everywhere on the Green. I believe some of us did not even know their proper names. I said mischief might come of it, and they laughed at me; but there came a time when Nelly, at least, laughed at me no more.



It was in the early summer that young Llewellyn came to stay with the Denzils at their great house opposite. He was a distant cousin of theirs, which was a warrant that his family was all that could be desired. And he had a nice little property in Wales, which had come to him unexpectedly on the death of an elder brother. And, to crown all, he was a sailor, having gone into the navy when he was a second son. Of course, being a naval man, it was but natural that he should be brought to the Admiral first of all. And he very soon got to be very intimate in the house; and indeed, for that matter, in every house on the Green. I believe it is natural to sailors to have that hearty, cordial way. He came to see me, though I had no particular attraction for him, as cheerfully as if I had been a girl, or alas! had girls of my own. Perhaps it was the opening in the hedge that pleased him. He would sit and look—but he did not speak to me of the sisters, more's the pity. He was shy of that subject. I could see he was in real earnest, as the children say, by his shyness about the girls. He would begin to say something, and then rush on to another subject, and come back again half an hour after to the identical point he had started from. But I suppose it never occurred to him that I had any skill to fathom that. He went with them on all their picnics, and was at all their parties; and he rode with them, riding very well for a sailor. The rides are beautiful round Dinglefield. There is a royal park close at hand, where you can lose yourself in grassy glades and alleys without number. I had even been tempted to put myself on my old pony, and wander about with them on the springy turf under the trees; though, as for their canterings and gallopings, and the way in which Nelly's horse kicked its heels about when it got excited, they were always alarming to me. But it was a pleasant life. There is something in that moment of existence when the two who are to go together through life see each other first, and are mysteriously

attracted towards each other, and forswear their own ideal and all their dreams, and mate themselves, under some secret compulsion which they do not understand—I say there is something in such a moment which throws a charm over life to all their surroundings. Though it be all over for us; though perhaps we may have been in our own persons thoroughly disenchanted, or may even have grown bitter in our sense of the difference between reality and romance, still the progress of an incipient wooing gives a zest to our pleasure. There is something in the air, some magical influence, some glamour, radiating from the hero and the heroine. When everything is settled, and the wedding looms in sight, fairyland melts away, and the lovers are no more interesting than any other pair. It is perhaps the uncertainty, the chance of disaster; the sense that one may take flight or offence, or that some rival may come in, or a hundred things happen to dissipate the rising tenderness. There is the excitement of a drama about it—a drama subject to the curious contradictions of actual existence, and utterly regardless of all the unities. I thought I could see the little sister, who was my pet and favourite, gradually grouping thus with young Llewellyn. They got together somehow, whatever the arrangements of the party might be. They might drive to the Dingle, which was our favourite spot, in different carriages, with different parties, and at different times; but they were always to be found together under the trees when everybody had arrived. Perhaps they did not yet know it themselves; but other people began to smile, and Lady Denzil, I could see, was watching Nelly. She had other views, I imagine, for her young cousin since he came to the estate. Nelly, too, once had very different views. I knew what her ideal was. It, or rather he, was a blonde young giant, six feet tall at least, with blue eyes, and curling golden hair. He was to farm his own land, and live a country life, and be of no profession; and he was to be

pure Saxon, to counterbalance a little defect in Nelly's race, or rather, as she supposed, in her complexion, occasioned by the fact that her mother was of Spanish blood. Such was her ideal, as she had often confided to me. It was funny to see how this gigantic and glorious vision melted out of her mind. Llewellyn was not very tall; he was almost as dark as Nelly; he was a sailor, and he was a Welshman. What did it matter? One can change one's ideal so easily when one is under twenty. Perhaps in his imagination he had loved a milk-white maiden too.

Lady Denzil however watched, having, as I shall always believe, other intentions in her mind for Llewellyn, though she had no daughter of her own; and I am sure it was her influence which hurried him away the last day, without taking leave of any of us. She kept back the telegram which summoned him to join his ship, until there was just time to get the train. And so he had to rush away, taking off his hat to us, and almost getting out of the window of the carriage in his eagerness, when he saw us at the Admiral's door, as he dashed past to the station.

'Good-bye, for the moment,' he shouted; 'I hope I am coming back.' And I could see, by the colour in Nelly's cheek, that their eyes had met, and understood each other. Her sister bowed and smiled very graciously, and chattered about a hundred things.

'I wonder why he is going in such a hurry? I wonder what he means about coming back?' said Martha. 'I am sure I am very sorry he is gone. He was very nice, and always ready for anything. What a bore a ship is! I remember when papa was like that—always rushing away. Don't you, Sister?—but you were too young.'

‘I remember hearing people talk of it,’ said Nelly with a sigh.

She was *rêveuse*, clouded over, everything that it was natural to be under the circumstances. She would not trust herself to say he was nice. It was I who had to answer, and keep up the conversation for her. For my own part, I confess I was vexed that he had gone so soon—that he had gone without an explanation. These things are far better to be settled out of hand. A man has to go away when his duty calls; but nobody can make sure when he may come back, or what he may find when he comes back. I was sorry, for I knew a hundred things might happen to detain, or keep him silent; and Nelly’s heart was caught, I could see. She had been quite unsuspecting, unfeared; and it was gone ere she understood what she was doing. My heart quaked a little for her; not with any fear of the result, but only with a certain throbbing of experience and anxiety that springs therefrom. Experience does not produce hope in the things of this world. It lays one’s heart open to suspicions and fears which never trouble the innocent. It was not because of anything I had seen in Llewellyn; but because I had seen a great deal of the world, and things in general. This was why I kissed her with a little extra meaning, and told her to lie down on the sofa when she got home.

‘You have not been looking your best for some days,’ I said. ‘You are not a giantess, nor so robust as you pretend to be. You must take care of yourself.’ And Nelly, though she made no reply, kissed me in her clinging way in return.

Some weeks passed after that without any particular incident. Things went on in their usual way, and though we were all sorry that Llewellyn was gone, we made no particular moan over him after the first. It was very rarely that a day passed on which I did

not see the sisters; but the weather was beginning to get cold, and one Friday there was a fog which prevented me from going out. Ours is a low country, with a great many trees, and the river is not far off; and when there is a fog, it is very dreary and overwhelming. It closes in over the Green, so that you cannot see an inch before you; and the damp creeps into your very bones: though it was only the end of October, the trees hung invisible over our heads in heavy masses, now and then dropping a faded leaf out of the fog in a ghostly, silent way: and the chill went to one's heart. I had a new book, for which I was very thankful, and my fire burned brightly, and I did not stir out of doors all day. I confess it surprised me a little that the girls did not come in to me in the evening, as they had a way of doing, with their red cloaks round them, and the hoods over their heads, like Red Riding Hood. But I took it for granted they had some friends from town, or something pleasant on hand; though I had not heard any carriage driving up. As for seeing, that was impossible. Next morning, by a pleasant change, was bright, sunny, and frosty. For the first time that season, the hedges and gardens, and even the Green itself, was crisp and white with hoarfrost, which, of course, did not last, but gave us warning of winter. When I went out, I met Nelly just leaving her own door. She was in her red cloak, with her dress tucked up, and the little black hat with the red feather, which was always so becoming to her. But either it was not becoming that day, or there was something the matter with the child. I don't remember whether I have said that she had large eyes—eyes that, when she was thinner than usual, or ill, looked out of proportion to the size of her face. They had this effect upon me that day. One did not seem to see Nelly at all; but only a big pair of wistful, soft eyes looking at one, with shadowy lines round them. I was alarmed, to tell the truth, whenever I saw her. Either something had happened, or the child was ill.

‘Good morning, my dear,’ I said, ‘I did not see you all yesterday, and it feels like a year. Were you coming to me now?’

‘No,’ said Nelly—and even in the sound of her voice there was something changed—‘it is so long since I have been in the village. I had settled to go down there this morning, and take poor Mary Jackson some warm socks we have been knitting for the babies. It is so cold to-day.’

‘I thought you never felt the cold,’ said I, as one does without thinking. ‘You are always as merry as a cricket in the winter weather, when we are all shivering. You know you never feel the cold.’

‘No,’ said Nelly again. ‘I suppose it is only the first chill’—and she gave me a strange little sick smile, and suddenly looked down and stooped to pick up something. I saw in a moment there was nothing to pick up. Could it be that there were tears in her eyes, which she wanted to hide? ‘But I must go now,’ she went on hurriedly. ‘Oh, no, don’t think of coming with me; it is too cold, and I shall have to walk fast, I am in such a hurry. Good-bye.’

I could do nothing but stand and stare after her when she had gone on. What did it mean? Nelly was not given to taking fancies, or losing her temper—at least not in this way. She walked away so rapidly that she seemed to vanish out of my sight, and never once looked round or turned aside for anything. The surprise was so great that I actually forgot where I was going. It could not be for nothing that she had changed like this. I went back to my own door, and then I came out again and opened the Admiral’s gate. Probably Martha was at home, and would know what was the matter. As I was going in, Martha met me coming out. She was in her red cloak,

like Nelly, and she had a letter in her hand. When she saw me she laughed, and blushed a little. 'Will you come with me to the post, Mrs. Mulgrave?' she said. 'Sister would not wait for me; and when one has an important letter to post——' Martha went on, holding it up to me, and laughing and blushing again.

'What makes it so very important?' said I; and I confess that I tried very hard to make out the address.

'Oh, didn't she tell you?' said Martha. 'What a funny girl she is! If it had been me I should have rushed all over the Green, and told everybody. It is—can't you guess?'

And she held out to me the letter in her hand. It was addressed to 'Captain Llewellyn, H.M.S. *Spitfire*, Portsmouth.' I looked at it, and I looked at her, and wonder took possession of me. The address was in Martha's handwriting. It was she who was going to post it; it was she who, conscious and triumphant, giggling a little and blushing a little, stood waiting for my congratulations. I looked at her aghast, and my tongue failed me. 'I don't know what it means,' I said, gasping. 'I can't guess. Is it you who have been writing to Captain Llewellyn, or is it Nelly, or who is it? Can there have been any mistake?'

Martha was offended, as indeed she had reason to be. 'There is no mistake,' she said indignantly. 'It is a very strange sort of thing to say, when any friend, any acquaintance even, would have congratulated me. And you who know us so well! Captain Llewellyn has asked me to marry him—that is all. I thought you might have found out what was coming. But you have no eyes for anybody but Sister. You never think of me.'

‘I beg your pardon,’ said I, faltering; ‘I was so much taken by surprise. I am sure I wish you every happiness, Martha. Nobody can be more anxious for your welfare than I am—’ and here I stopped short in my confusion, choked by the words, and not knowing what to say.

‘Yes, I am sure of that,’ said Martha affectionately, stopping at the gate to give me a kiss. ‘I said so to Sister this morning. I said I am sure Mrs. Mulgrave will be pleased. But are you *really* so much surprised? Did you never think this was how it was to be?’

‘No,’ I said, trembling in spite of myself; ‘I never thought of it. I thought indeed—but that makes no difference now.’

‘What did you think?’ said Martha; and then her private sense of pride and pleasure surmounted everything else. ‘Well, you see it is so,’ she said, with a beaming smile. ‘He kept his own counsel, you see. I should not have thought he was so sly—should you? I dare say he thinks he showed it more than he did; for he says I must have seen how it was from the first day.’

And she stood before me so beaming, so dimpling over with smiles and pleasure, that my heart sank within me. Could it be a mistake, or was it I—ah! how little it mattered for me—was it my poor Nelly who had been deceived?

‘And did you?’ I said, looking into her face, ‘did you see it from the first day?’

‘Well, n-no,’ said Martha, hesitating; and then she resumed with a laugh, ‘That shows you how sly he must have been. I don’t think I ever suspected such a thing; but then, to be sure, I never thought much about him, you know.’



A little gleam of comfort came into my heart as she spoke. ‘Oh, then,’ I said, relieved, ‘there is no occasion for congratulations after all.’

‘Why is there no occasion for congratulations?’ said Martha. ‘Of course there is occasion. I wanted Sister to run in and tell you last night, but she wouldn’t; and I rather wanted you to tell me what I should say, or, rather, how I should say it; but I managed it after all by myself. I suppose one always can if one tries. It comes by nature, people say.’ And Martha laughed again, and blushed, and cast a proud glance on the letter she held in her hand.

‘But if you never had thought of him yesterday,’ said I, ‘you can’t have accepted him to-day.’

‘Why not?’ said Martha, with a toss of her pretty head—and she was pretty, especially in that moment of excitement. I could not refuse to see it. It was a mere piece of pink-and-white prettiness, instead of my little nut-brown maid, with her soft eyes, and her bright varied gleams of feeling and intelligence. But then you can never calculate on what a man may think in respect to a girl. Men are such fools; I mean where women are concerned.

‘Why not?’ said Martha, with a laugh. ‘I don’t mean I am frantically in love with him, you know. How could I be, when I never knew he cared for me? But I always said he was very nice; and then it is so suitable. And I don’t care for anybody else. It would be very foolish of me to refuse him without any reason. Of course,’ said Martha, looking down upon her letter, ‘I shall think of him very differently now.’

What could I say? I was at my wits’ end. I walked on by her side to the post-office in a maze of confusion and doubt. I could

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