



# The Wife's Secret, OR A BITTER RECKONING

By CHARLOTTE M. BRAEME

## CHAPTER I.

I know how silly it is of me to fret over this separation of a few weeks, Jack, but I'm suffering from that most feminine of all feminine ailments—a presentiment. I have a horrible dread that you will not come back to me just the same as you leave me."

Jack Dornton knew this was all very foolish. He loved pretty Ethel Mallett very dearly; so, instead of putting his thought into words, he kissed the tearful face and lovingly comforted her with vows of eternal constancy.

"You know I needn't stay down there until the pictures are finished," he said. "As soon as I have the sketches well forward, I shall come back and complete the larger pictures from them at home; and, though I shall be working very hard, that will not prevent you from coming every day to watch my progress and cheer me up for an hour or so in the afternoon."

Ethel smiled—it was rather a pitiful attempt—and turned resolutely to the breakfast table.

"It was good of you to think of coming to breakfast with us, so that we might see the last of you before starting," she said bravely, as she busied herself with the coffee cups. Mr. Mallett came down a few moments later, and breakfast was gone through with due decorum, in deference to "papa's dislike to emotion."

Shortly after the meal Jack was tramping away—his portmanteau in one hand and a portable easel in the other. He had been engaged to Ethel Mallett for two months, and they were to be married as soon as he could provide a suitable home for her. A fortnight after he had obtained the reluctant consent of Mr. Mallett to this arrangement, a certain Lord Summers, attracted by two water colors of Jack's in a fashionable gallery, had found him out and offered him a liberal commission to execute a series of six pictures, the subjects to be selected from the immediate neighborhood of his lordship's place in Exbridge-shire. Jack had jumped at the offer, seeing that it would enable him to place little Ethel in a home of her own two months sooner than he anticipated.

So here he was, after a two hours' run, hard at work in the woods of Mallingford, skillfully and rapidly filling in the leading features of Mallingford House and its surroundings. While his fingers were thus busy, he was recalling the conversation he had had with Lord Summers upon the place of his first subject.

"Would you wish me to begin with Summerfield?" Jack had asked, when taking his final instructions from his Lordship.

"No; I should like to be at Summerfield myself when you are there. I think you had better make Mallingford House your first subject. It is about ten miles from Summerfield, and you can work your way toward there. I shall be down by the last week of July, and hope to have the pleasure of showing you some hospitality."

Jack bowed his thanks.

"You will be delighted with Mallingford," his lordship went on. "It is a noble place, and I have a rather peculiar interest in the property. The late owner, Sir Paul Malling, was a most eccentric man, with a very exalted notion of his own importance as head of the house. He had never married, and was mortally offended with his brother Geoffrey because he took unto himself a wife at the age of thirty-eight without first consulting him. Poor Paul! He was a great friend of mine; but I'm bound to confess that he was of a most unforgiving disposition. Would you believe it, Mr. Dornton? He was so unjust as to disinherit Geoffrey and leave the whole of his property to his only sister's only child, Pauline Lufton. I will confirm his reputation for eccentricity, for he made even her inheritance conditional; first, upon her taking the name of Malling, and, secondly, upon her not marrying under the age of twenty-five without her guardian's approval and consent. A very awkward thing for the guardian. I am that not-to-be-envied person. So, you see, should the young lady in question happen to fall in love with some poor beggar of a fellow, I could not consistently give my consent, and she would have to give up either her love or her position as owner of Mallingford, one of the finest seats in the county."

"In which case?" Jack said, interrogatively.

"In which case the disinherited brother would have his own. But I am glad to say that my charming ward will be twenty-five in September and will then be in a position to please herself in her choice of a husband—for which I am devoutly thankful, as it relieves me of a serious responsibility."

"I can quite understand that."

"I was in hopes at first that I should not be called upon to exercise my guardianship at all. When Sir Paul died, Pauline was away with her father in Italy. He was a sad reprobate, and spent his time chiefly in gambling houses, leaving his motherless girl among all kinds of people. Well, as fate willed, this Lufton died just a month before Sir Paul, and, though we made every effort to find his daughter, we could obtain no tidings of her. We traced the father and daughter to Naples, where the former died; but after that we could hear nothing of her. We sent out agents,

we advertised, we did everything we could. At last, after five months of fruitless inquiry, and just as we were losing heart, and wondering whether we should not begin to hunt up poor Geoffrey, she appeared suddenly at my solicitors' offices. She looked wretchedly ill, said she had been working her heart out as a teacher of English at a Spanish school, and had only recently seen one of our advertisements. She was nineteen then—and that is nearly six years ago."

And now, as Jack Dornton stood in the shady wood, with the noonday sun making little patches of white here and there wherever it could pierce the thick foliage above, and with a buzzing of insects in his ears, he was weaving all sorts of romantic fancies concerning the owner of all the beauty surrounding him.

## CHAPTER II.

From behind the bole of a large tree Jack Dornton was being narrowly scanned by a young lady, who seemed well pleased with the inspection. She watched him at work for some minutes with a decided look of admiration in her eyes. She turned from her survey presently, and stooping down, crept away slowly among the brushwood, making a detour with the evident intention of reaching the spot again.

In the meantime Jack, stretching himself after his spell of work, noticed a small natural mound covered with soft velvety grass. The more he looked the stronger became the temptation to take ten minutes' rest. He yielded at last, and found the mound an excellent pillow. Before he had enjoyed two of the allotted ten minutes' rest, his open locket, containing a portrait of Ethel, dropped from his hand, and a myriad of gnats buzzed and whizzed in happy freedom round his head. Jack Dornton was fast asleep.

At that moment a woman came gliding in full view of the easel. She was a woman of surpassing loveliness, tall, stately, with mass of golden plaits coiled round and round her head, full melting brown eyes and ripe red lips, a skin rivaling the peach in its delicate coloring, and a carriage queenly in its every movement. Her dainty cambric gown, cunningly made to "more express than hide her form," trained carelessly among the ivy roots and brambles behind her. Her simple straw hat she carried in her hand, and her whole air suggested the pretty "maiden meditation fancy free."

She gave a well-feigned start when she had come well in view of Jack's easel. It was not pleasant to watch the swift change that came over the beautiful face as she marked the vacant seat and thought herself alone. It revealed unmistakably the defects of her character as indicated in the cruel little curves at the corners of the mouth, which were generally concealed beneath the pretty confiding smile that from long practice had become habitual with her.

Advancing cautiously, she glanced around, and soon discovered Jack's whereabouts. She went quickly to the easel, and critically examined the morning's work. Turning aside, she remarked to herself, "With such decided talent and such an appearance, he would be sure to succeed if he were properly taken up." She then walked on tip toe to Jack, and scrutinized him quite as critically as she had scrutinized his work, and evidently with as much approval. Then her quick eye detected the open locket by his side.

She looked carefully at the sleeper and having assured herself of the soundness of his slumbers, went down upon her knees by his side, the better to examine the portrait.

She started visibly when her eyes fell upon the sweet face smiling at her from the tiny trinket. She rose quickly and walked away a few yards.

"So she is this landscape painter's 'village maiden!'" she muttered vindictively. "Surely there is some fatality in his coming here! I can't be mistaken, it is the same insipid babyishly pretty face that Lord Summers pointed out to me in the park the other day. And she loves this Apollo, does she? And perhaps he thinks he loves her. Well, we shall see what we shall see!"

There was a significant glitter in her fine eyes, and an instantaneous tightening of the red lips seemed to tell of a hard, cruel heart beneath the fair exterior. But the expression of her face changed as if by magic when Jack rolled over on to his side and showed signs of waking. She had posed gracefully before the easel, and awaited him.

"I believe I've been asleep," he murmured drowsily, raising himself on one elbow, when his eyes fell upon the dazzling loveliness of the girl so earnestly regarding his picture; and in the first glimpse of Pauline Malling, Jack's senses and artistic perceptions were alike roused, and, springing to his feet he went toward the easel.

"I beg your pardon for the liberty I have taken in examining your picture," murmured the woodland nymph melodiously. "I hope I did not disturb you. May I be allowed to continue my inspection?"

Jack, hardly awake even yet, muttered something about "too much honor."

"You are Mr. Dornton, are you not?" she continued, still looking at the picture, and giving Jack time to pull him-

self together. "Lord Summers told me he was going to ask you to make a picture of my house."

"It was Miss Malling then, and no woodland nymph, after all. Jack felt disappointed, though he could not tell why. "I suppose you will remain here for some days. May I offer you a little hospitality during your stay? The village inns are, I believe, wretchedly uncomfortable, and I should not like a friend of my guardian's to be driven to their shelter while I am at home. We are two lonely women just now; and but dull company, I fear; but we will do our best to make you comfortable for this week at least. Next week I am off again until the end of the season, and shall have to leave you to the mercies of the servants. Say you will come."

"Thank you very much," Jack began hesitatingly; "but I did not anticipate—in fact, I made no preparation—"

"Is that the only difficulty?" she interrupted gently. "Pray don't let that stand in the way. Mrs. Sefton and I will shut our eyes to the enormity of a morning coat at dinner, and will promise to think no less of you on that account. We dine at half past seven, so that we may have an hour or two of these lovely summer evenings in the gardens."

Jack raised his soft felt hat, and watched her graceful figure as she glided away down the dim leafy vista of the wood. He wished that she had stayed longer, that he might still be looking into her glorious eyes, watching the ever changing lights that came and went as rapidly as scudding clouds across a summer sky. When at last a curve in the path hid her from view he turned again to his work with a heavy sigh, wishing it was already half past seven.

## CHAPTER III.

"Now you are to consider yourself quite at home, Mr. Dornton," Miss Malling said, as she rose from the table. "Stay and meditate here in solitude, or come out on the terrace, as suits your inclination."

The moon came out by and by, throwing from behind a curtain of tender gray clouds a soft, silvery, shimmering light over the landscape.

After Mrs. Sefton had gone indoors, Pauline led the conversation in a manner that quite entranced her companion. The witchery of the evening, the beauty of the woman, and the spell of her fascinations wrought upon Jack's impressionable nature, and his dreams that night were of lovely women with golden hair and liquid brown eyes.

A week later, Jack Dornton stood at the breakfast room window, apparently absorbed in the calm, radiant beauty of the scene before him; yet his breast was torn with conflicting passions.

Pauline Malling was returning to town by the midday train, and the pain that her proposed departure had caused him had also opened his eyes to the hateful truth that he had been unfaithful to his little Ethel's memory.

"What a blind fool I have been," he told himself, wrathfully, "to stay here day after day, and not see my own danger! Miss Malling has been very kind and gentle; but I dare say she looks upon me as belonging to a very inferior class to her own; and I, to show my gratitude, must return her womanly kindness by presuming to fall in love with her! Apart from my supreme conceit with regard to Miss Malling, I have behaved shamefully to Ethel," he went on; and a flush of self-condemnation crept over his handsome face. "I've been away from her a whole week, and only one short note have I sent her."

He seated himself at the writing table in the window and seized a pen. He nibbled the penholder, as if in expectation of receiving inspiration from the act. Before he had quite made up his mind as to the wording of his overdue love letter he heard a rustle at the door, and Miss Malling entered in her elegant traveling costume.

"How I shall miss your pleasant little morning chats, Mr. Dornton"—with a gentle sigh—"our happy sketching expeditions, and our delightful evenings!" "You cannot miss them as I shall," Jack returned.

"You think not?" raising her eyes slowly to his and dropping her voice mournfully. "That shows how little you know and appreciate your gain in possessing the hearty love and esteem of a few true friends, instead of the monotonous adulation of a horde of mere fashionable acquaintances. You cannot understand, because you have never experienced it, how the emptiness of our lives sometimes palls upon us butterflies, and what we would give at such times to have a real object in life; how we long for the affection of one disinterested creature!"

Here Jack would have precipitated himself bodily into the yawning chasm she had so conveniently opened for him, but for the entrance of Mrs. Sefton, who proceeded to dispense the comforts of the breakfast table in her own inimitable manner. The carriage was at the door before the meal was properly over.

"Good-by, Mr. Dornton," said Pauline, as she stood with one dainty foot upon the step. "I shall hope to find you here when I return; and I fear," she continued, again lowering her voice dangerously, "I shall not be able to endure much of London's rapid society after the intellectual intercourse we have enjoyed lately. I shall be back in a fortnight. You will not forget me in that time?" (To be continued.)

## Putting Him Wise.

Her Father—What are you and young Shortleigh going to live on in case you marry?

His Daughter—Well, if you must know, papa, go look in the mirror.

## Quite Likely.

Little Willie—Say, pa, what does this paper mean by "des of blood?"

Pa—Must be a new shade of red neckties, my son.

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"Do you know, Miss Clara," said young Singleton, the other evening, "that your face reminds me of a perfect mirror?"

"Does it?" she queried. "And why, pray?"

"Because," he answered, "it reflects nothing but the truth."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, in a tone that savored of disappointment, "I thought the answer would be altogether different."

"What did you expect me to say?" he asked.

"I thought," continued the blushing maid, "that it was because every time you looked in my face you saw your own."

And the next morning she announced her engagement at the breakfast table.

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