

NELLIE'S GIFT

He stood at the back of the platform, a sparse man with the habitual stoop that many tall men develop in their later years. Dark hair greying at the temples and a flourishing silvered moustache and mutton chop side boards framed a heavily lined face. Round rimless spectacles did nothing to conceal the deep sadness in his faded hazel eyes. For the umpteenth time that day, Hector John Honeywell pulled his fob watch on its finely linked chain out of his waistcoat pocket. How he loved the way it nestled perfectly in the palm of his hand. He tilted it so that the sun reflected on the golden surface of the cover and ran his fingers over the delicate pattern encircling his initials before opening it to expose the timepiece within. He checked it against the railway clock. Perfect as usual. It had never missed a beat since his dear Nellie had presented it to him on their wedding day almost fifty three years ago.

A wave of emotion almost overcame his determination to get through today without looking like the sentimental old fool that he really was. With a lump in his throat, he turned it over and read the inscription on the back.

'To My darling Hector, now you will never be late returning to my arms at the end of the day. With all my love forever. Nellie'

The huge silver foil wrapped bunch of red roses that he clutched to his chest quivered as he fought to quell the tears that threatened to betray his grief. Carefully he replaced the watch as the train steamed noisily into the station. The platform was crowded and he was shunted roughly to the edge as more eager passengers, who had no patience for a dithering old codger, barged past to be sure to get a seat. He managed to clamber aboard shielding his bouquet from the seething mob with only moderate success.

'I should have caught an earlier train.' he thought, trying in vain to find a handhold as it lurched suddenly from the platform. He stumbled and almost fell, but was saved by a kind young soldier who jumped up and helped him into the seat he had just vacated.

Hector stammered his thanks and another lump lodged in his throat at this unexpected kindness from an absolute stranger on this day of all days. The soldier nodded and resumed reading his newspaper whilst hanging onto the overhead strap.

Hector sat immersed in his memories. Forever hadn't been nearly long enough. His beautiful Nellie, wife, loving companion and best friend had succumbed to pneumonia one year ago today at the age of seventy-two. It had been the loneliest, most terrible year of his life. They had not been able to have children and almost everyone else he knew or loved had departed years ago, but losing Nellie had been the cruellest blow of all. They had hoped that they would be together until at least well into their eighties and now he was alone and missing her terribly. Only one year today but it seemed like an eternity.

The train screeched to a halt at the next station and chuffed impatiently, waiting for all who were disembarking to step off onto the platform. Once again Hector thanked the soldier who had made way in the carriage for him and had also helped him off the train before resuming his seat. Steam billowed and swirled, encompassing everyone within its fog and tiny gritty particles of ash settled onto coats and hats and floated into eyes, noses and mouths. The guard blew his whistle, raised his red flag and the train thundered off in a cloud of steam.

Outside the station Hector hailed a waiting horse and buggy to take him the two miles to the cemetery. The driver was inclined to be chatty and shrugged when Hector's monosyllabic responses indicated his unwillingness to participate in small talk. Feeling remorse for his seeming churlishness, Hector paid him double what he asked for the fare and with some trepidation approached the cemetery gates. He checked the rough map that the minister had drawn for him on the day of Nellie's funeral and followed the directions that led him to her grave. He hadn't known if he could do this and he still wasn't sure he could without breaking down into a blubbing mess, but he was here now, might as well get on with it.

At last, he found her. Sadly, once again he pulled out the watch and ran his fingers over the simple inscription on the cover HJH. With tears in his eyes, he read the inscription on his wife's tomb.

Here lies my dearly beloved Nellie. In my heart forever. RIP my darling.

Your loving husband Hector.

With a sob he fell to his knees and let his tears wash the dust from her grave. Tenderly he kissed the flowers and arranged them carefully over the rough gravel surface. For a long while he sat with his head in his hands pouring out his grief and loneliness to his lost love until he was roused by the buggy driver who tapped him gently on the shoulder. He had been asked to return in two hours to pick him up again. Had two hours gone already? This time, sensing Hector's pain, the driver refrained from his idle chatter and kindly refused to take the fare for the trip back to the station.

'No Guv you already paid enough for both ways.' Hector thanked him and walked out onto the platform. He was the only one waiting and the trip back home was uneventful.

Hector continued to visit Nellie's grave every year on the anniversary of her death until he himself passed away seven years later and was buried beside his loving wife. His solicitor, having no benefactors to distribute his estate to, as requested in Hector's will, donated the furniture to various charities and sent all the small valuables, including Hector's much-loved timepiece, to a local second-hand emporium. He had left instructions that any proceeds from those, along with that from the sale of his house, were to be donated to the local Methodist Church of which both he and Nellie had been members.

There was only one strict codicil to Hector's will. His fob watch was to be sold only to a person that Jim, the town's second-hand dealer and his last remaining friend, deemed worthy of such a special treasure. If the right person wanted it and couldn't afford the asking price it was to be reduced, or even given to him free and clear. Before his death Hector personally forcefully expressed this to Jim and had been assured that this would be carried out to the letter.

Over the next few years many potential buyers showed an avid interest in the watch, but Jim judged none of them worthy of Hector's beautiful gift from his loving wife. It sat in its blue velvet box alone on the shelf, carefully wound weekly by Jim himself and keeping perfect time. Because it was such a valuable item, it was mainly the wealthy landowners who offered to buy it, but Jim kept his promise and told everyone that it was already spoken

for so was not for sale. He didn't really know who he would sell it to, only that he would know who it was when they came into the shop.

One late afternoon just before closing, a young man wandered into the emporium. His intelligent blue eyes searched the shelves and he exclaimed softly every time he spotted something that he admired. Henry sidled up to the counter.

"Can I help you, young feller? "

"No sir. I'm just looking. You have some lovely things here."

He was cheaply but neatly dressed, clean cut and looked to be in his early twenties. Henry immediately took to him.

"Well, it doesn't cost nothin' to look son, so look all you like!"

The man approached the shelf where Hector's fob watch gleamed in the reflected glow of the kerosene lantern. He gave a sharp intake of breath and leaned closer, not daring to touch it. He carefully picked up the price tag and shaking his head walked onto the next shelf. As he examined the other goods his gaze kept returning to the timepiece.

'You like the look of that dontcha? Pick it up and have a closer look, go on, it won't bite cha!'

'No sir, it's way more than I can afford. It is beautiful though. How do you do?'

They shook hands; his grip was firm and friendly.

'My name is Harold. I've just moved into a boarding house up the road and thought I would check out the place before I start work tomorrow. I was offered a position here as a reporter for the Daily Chronicle, so I haven't even had my first pay check yet.'

'Well son, maybe we can come to some arrangement.' He extracted the watch from its velvet bed and handed it to Harold, who gingerly weighed it in his palm.

'Sure feels real good!' Gently he ran his fingers over the golden cover. Suddenly he jerked his head back and stared at the initials engraved on its surface.

'What's the matter son?'

'You're not going to believe this sir. My name is Harold James Honeywell. HJH, just like the engraving. He turned it over and read the inscription on the back.

'I can see that this was once a token of great love.'

Jim grinned. He had found Hector's timepieces 'new owner.

'Well, it just so happens that this watch is on special this week. No deposit and one shilling a week to be paid in person every Friday without fail.'

Harold couldn't believe his ears when Jim told him about Hector's stipulation that it be sold to someone who deserved it and was nonplussed when told he would only have to pay ten shillings all up.

'Sir, I'm no expert but even I can see that it's worth much more than that!'

Jim insisted and Harold finally eagerly accepted, carefully placing it in his pocket.

'Guess I'll have to buy myself a vest with a fob pocket.' He laughed. They shook hands again and arranged to meet for a drink after Jim closed up for the night.

With a shy grin Harold asked if Jim would take him to the graveyard soon to pay his respects to Nellie and Hector and if he could fill him in on the details of their lives, maybe he could put a feature story in the paper about them and the watch and what it meant to them both. Before Jim shut up the Emporium for the night, he moved a set of silver backed brushes to the place on the shelf where Hector's fob watch had sat alone in all its glory for the past four years.

‘Well, I’ve kept my promise. You can rest in peace now Hector. I’m sure you would both approve. I know Harold will treasure Nellie’s gift just as much as you did.’

He turned off the lamp and whistled happily as he locked the door. As he headed for the inn he added

‘And thanks to you I think I may have even found a new friend. I’ve really missed you, old mate!’