

Shall He Wed Her?
by Anna Katherine Green

WHEN I met Taylor at the Club the other night, he looked so cheerful I scarcely knew him.

“What is it?” cried I, advancing with out-stretched hand.

“I am going to be married,” was his gay reply. “This is my last night at the Club.”

I was glad, and showed it. Taylor is a man for whom domestic life is a necessity. He has never been at home with us, though we all liked him, and he in his way liked us.

“And who is the fortunate lady?” I inquired; for I had been out of town for some time, and had not as yet been made acquainted with the latest society news.

“My intended bride is Mrs. Walworth, the young widow—”

He must have seen a change take place in my expression, for he stopped.

“You know her, or course?” he added, after a careful study of my face.

I had by this time regained my self-possession.

“Of course,” I repeated, “and I have always thought her one of the most attractive women in the city. Another shake upon it, old man.”

But my heart was heavy and my mind perplexed notwithstanding the forced cordiality of my tones, and I took an early opportunity to withdraw by myself and think over the situation.

Mrs. Walworth? She is a pretty woman, and what is more, she is to all appearance a woman whose winning manners bespeak a kindly heart. “Just the person,” I contemplated, “whom I would pick out for the helpmate of my somewhat exacting friend, if—” I paused on that if. It was a formidable one and grew none the smaller or less important under my broodings. Indeed, it seemed to dilate until it assumed gigantic proportions, worrying me and weighing so heavily upon my conscience that I at last rose from the newspaper at which I had been hopelessly staring, and looking up Taylor again asked him how soon he expected to become a benedict.

His answer startled me. “In a week,” he replied, “and if I have not asked you to the ceremony it is because Helen is not in a position to—”

I suppose he finished the sentence, but I did not hear him. If the marriage was so near, of course it would be folly on my part to attempt to hinder it. I drew off for the second time.

But I could not remain easy. Taylor is a good fellow, and it would be a shame to allow him to marry a woman with whom he could never be happy. He would feel any such disappointment so keenly, so much more keenly than most men. A lack of principle or even of sensibility on her

part would make him miserable. Anticipating heaven, he would not need a hell to make him wretched; a purgatory would do it. Was I right then in letting him proceed in his intentions regarding Mrs. Walworth, when she possibly was the woman who—I paused and tried to call up her countenance before me. It was a sweet one and possibly a true one. I might have trusted her for myself, but I do not look for perfection, and Taylor does, and will certainly go to the bad if he is deceived in his expectations. But in a week! It is too late for interference—only it is never too late till the knot is tied. As I thought of this, I decided impulsively, and perhaps you may say unwisely, to give him a hint of his danger, and I did it in this wise:

“Taylor,” said I, when I had him safely in my own rooms, “I am going to tell you a bit of personal history, curious enough, I think, to interest you even upon the eve of your marriage. I do not know when I shall see you again, and I should like you to know how a lawyer and man of the world can sometimes be taken in.”

He nodded, accepting the situation good-humoredly, though I saw by the abstraction with which he gazed into the fire that I should have to be very interesting to lure him from the thoughts that engrossed him. As I meant to be very interesting, this did not greatly concern me.

“One morning last spring,” I began, “I received in my morning mail a letter, the delicate penmanship of which at once attracted my attention and awakened my curiosity. Turning to the signature, I read the name of a young lady friend of mine, and somewhat startled at the thought that this was the first time I had ever seen the handwriting of one I knew so well, I perused the letter with an interest that presently became painful as I realized the tenor of its contents. I will not quote the letter, though I could, but confine myself to saying that after a modest recognition of my friendship for her—quite a fatherly friendship, I assure you, as she is only eighteen, and I, as you know, am well on towards fifty—she proceeded to ask in a humble and confiding spirit for the loan—do not start—of fifty dollars. Such a request coming from a young girl well connected and with every visible sign of being generously provided for by her father, was certainly startling to an old bachelor of settled ways and strict notions, but remembering her youth and the childish innocence of her manner, I turned over the page and read as her reason for proffering such a request, that her heart was set upon aiding a certain poor family that stood in immediate need of food, clothes, and medicines, but that she could not do what she wished, because she had already spent all the money allowed her by her father for such purposes and dared not go to him for more, as she had once before offended him by doing this, and feared if she repeated her fault he would carry out the threat he had then made of stopping her allowance altogether. But the family was a deserving one and she could not see any member of it starve, so she came to me, of whose goodness she was assured, convinced I would understand her perplexity and excuse her, and so forth and so forth, in language quite childlike and entreating, which, if it did not satisfy my ideas of propriety, at least touched my heart and made any action which I could take in the matter extremely difficult.

“To refuse her request would be at once to mortify and aggrieve her; to accede to it and give her the fifty dollars she asked—a sum by the way I could not well spare—would be to encourage an action easily pardoned once, but which if repeated would lead to unpleasant complications, to say the least. The third course, of informing her father of what she needed, I did not even consider, for I knew him well enough to be sure that nothing but pain to her would be the result. I

therefore compromised the affair by inclosing the money in a letter, in which I told her that I comprehended her difficulty and sent with pleasure the amount she needed, but that as a friend I must add that while in the present instance she had run no risk of being misunderstood or unkindly censured, that such a request made to another man and under other circumstances might provoke a surprise capable of leading to the most unpleasant consequences, and advised her if she ever again found herself in such a strait to appeal directly to her father, or else to deny herself a charity which she was in no position to bestow.

“This letter I undertook to deliver myself, for one of the curious points of her communication had been the entreaty that I would not delay the help she needed by trusting the money to any hand but my own, but would bring it to a certain hotel down-town and place it at the beginning of the book of Isaiah in the large Bible I would find lying on a side table in the small parlor off the main one. She would seek it there before the morning was over, and so, without the intervention of a third party, acquire the means she desired for helping a poor and deserving family.

“I knew the hotel she mentioned, and I remembered the room, but I did not remember the Bible. However, it was sure to be in the place she indicated; and though I was not in much sympathy with my errand, I respected her whim and carried the letter down-town. I had reached Main Street and was in sight of the hotel designated, when suddenly on the opposite corner of the street I saw the young girl herself. She looked as fresh as the morning, and smiled so gayly I felt somewhat repaid for the annoyance she had caused me, and gratified that I could cut matters short by putting the letter directly in her hand, I crossed the street to her side. As soon as we were face to face, I said:

“‘How fortunate I am to meet you. Here is the amount you need sealed up in this letter. You see I had it all ready.’

“The face she lifted to mine wore so blank a look that I paused, astonished.

“‘What do you mean?’ she asked, her eyes looking straight into mine with such innocence in their clear, blue depths, I was at once convinced she knew nothing of the matter with which my thoughts were busy. ‘I am very glad to see you, but I do not in the least understand what you mean by the amount I need.’ And she glanced at the letter I held out, with an air of distrust mingled with curiosity.

“‘You cut me short in my efforts to do a charitable action. I heard, no matter how, that you were interested just now in a destitute family, and took this way of assisting you in their behalf.’

“Her blue eyes opened wider. ‘The poor are always with us,’ she replied, ‘but I know of no especial family just now that requires any such help as you intimate. If I did, papa would give me what assistance I needed.’

“I was greatly pleased to hear her say this, for I am very fond of my young friend, but I was deeply indignant also against the unknown person who had taken advantage of my regard for this young girl to force money from me. I therefore did not linger at her side, but after due apologies

hastened immediately here where there is a man employed who to my knowledge had once been a trusted member of the police.

“Telling him no more of the story than was necessary to ensure his co-operation in the plan I had formed to discover the author of this fraud, I extracted the bank-notes from the letter I had written, and put in their place stiff pieces of manila paper. Taking the envelope so filled to the hotel already referred to, I placed it at the opening chapters of Isaiah in the Bible, as described. There was no one in any of the rooms when I went in, and I encountered only a bell-boy as I came out, but at the door I ran against a young man whom I strictly forbore to recognize, but whom I knew to be my improvised detective coming to take his stand in some place where he could watch the parlor and note who went into it.

“At noon I returned to the hotel, passed immediately to the small parlor and looked into the Bible. The letter was gone. Coming out of the room, I was at once joined by my detective.

“Has the letter been taken?” he eagerly inquired.

“I nodded.

“His brows wrinkled and he looked both troubled and perplexed.

“I don’t understand it,” he remarked. ‘I’ve seen everyone who has gone into that room since you left it, but I do not know any more than before who took the letter. You see,’ he continued, as I looked at him sharply, ‘I had to remain out here. If I had gone even into the large room, the Bible would not have been disturbed, nor the letter either. So, in the hope of knowing the rogue at sight, I strolled about this hall, and kept my eye constantly on that door, but—’

“He looked embarrassed, and stopped. ‘You say the letter is gone,’ he suggested, after a moment.

“‘Yes,’ I returned.

“He shook his head. ‘Nobody went into that room or came out of it,’ he went on, ‘whom you would have wished me to follow. I should have thought myself losing time if I had taken one step after any one of them.’

“But who did go into that room? ‘I urged, impatient at his perplexity.

“‘Only three persons this morning,’ he returned. ‘You know them all.’ And he mentioned first Mrs. Couldock.”

Taylor, who was lending me the superficial attention of a preoccupied man, smiled frankly at the utterance of this name. “Of course, she had nothing to do with such a debasing piece of business,” he observed.

“Of course not,” I repeated. “Nor does it seem likely that Miss Dawes could have been concerned in it. Yet my detective told me that she was the next person who went into the parlor.”

“I do not know Miss Dawes so well,” remarked Taylor, carelessly.

“But I do,” said I; “and I would as soon suspect my sister of a dishonorable act as this noble, self-sacrificing woman.”

“The third person?” suggested Taylor.

I got up and crossed the floor. When my back was to him, I said, quietly—“was Mrs. Walworth.”

The silence that followed was very painful. I did not care to break it, and he, doubtless, found himself unable to do so. It must have been five minutes before either of us spoke; then he suddenly cried:

“Where is that detective, as you call him? I want to see him.”

“Let me see him for you,” said I. “I should hardly wish Sudley, discreet as I consider him, to know you had any interest in this affair.”

Taylor rose and came to where I stood.

“You believe,” said he, “that she, the woman I am about to marry, is the one who wrote you that infamous letter?”

I faced him quite frankly. “I do not feel ready to acknowledge that,” I replied. “One of those three women took my letter out from the Bible, where I placed it; which of them wrote the lines that provoked it I do not dare conjecture. You say it was not Mrs. Couldock, I say it was not Miss Dawes, but—”

He broke in upon me impetuously.

“Have you the letter?” he asked.

I had, and showed it to him.

“It is not Helen’s handwriting,” he said.

“Nor is it that of Mrs. Couldock or Miss Dawes.”

He looked at me for a moment in a wild sort of way.

“You think she got some one to write it for her?” he cried. “Helen! my Helen! But it is not so; it cannot be so. Why, Huntley, to have sent such a letter as that over the name of an innocent young

girl, who, but for the happy chance of meeting you as she did might never have had the opportunity of righting herself in your estimation, argues a cold and calculating selfishness closely allied to depravity. And my Helen is an angel—or so I have always thought her.”

The depth to which his voice sank in the last sentence showed that for all his seeming confidence he was not without his doubts.

I began to feel very uncomfortable, and not knowing what consolation to offer, I ventured upon the suggestion that he should see Mrs. Walworth and frankly ask her whether she had been to the hotel on Main Street on such a day, and if so, if she had seen a letter addressed to Miss N— lying on the table of the small parlor. His answer showed how much his confidence in her had been shaken.

“A woman who, for the sake of paying some unworthy debt or of gratifying some whim of feminine vanity, could make use of a young girl’s signature to obtain money, would not hesitate at any denial. She would not even blench at my questions.”

He was right.

“I must be convinced in some other way,” he went on. “Mrs. Couldock or Miss Dawes do not either of them possess any more truthful or ingenuous countenance than she does, and though it seems madness to suspect such women—”

“Wait,” I broke in. “Let us be sure of all the facts before we go on. You lie down here and close your eyes; now pull the rug up so. I will have Sudley in and question him. If you do not turn towards the light he will not know who you are.”

Taylor followed my suggestion, and in a few moments Sudley stood before me. I opened upon him quite carelessly.

“Sudley,” said I, throwing down the newspaper I had been ostensibly reading, “you remember that little business you did for me in Main Street last month? Something I’ve been reading made me think of it again.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Have you never had a conviction yourself as to which of the three ladies you saw go into the parlor took the letter I left hid in the Bible?”

“No, sir. You see I could not. All of them are well known in society here and all of them belong to the most respectable families. I wouldn’t dare to choose between them, sir.”

“Certainly not,” I rejoined, “ unless you have some good reason for doing so, such as having been able to account for the visits of two of the ladies to the hotel, and not of the third.”

“They all had a good pretext for being there. Mrs. Couldock gave her card to the boy before going into the parlor, and left as soon as he returned with word that the lady she called to see was not in. Miss Dawes gave no card, but asked for a Miss Terhune, I think, and did not remain a moment after she was informed that that lady had left the hotel.”

“And Mrs. Walworth?”

“She came in from the street adjusting her veil, and upon looking around for a mirror was directed to the parlor, into which she at once stepped. She remained there but a moment, and when she came out passed directly into the street.”

These words disconcerted me; the mirror was just over the table in the small room, but I managed to remark nonchalantly:

“Could you not tell whether any of these three ladies opened the Bible?”

“Not without seeming intrusive.”

I sighed and dismissed the man. When he was gone I approached Taylor.

“He can give us no assistance,” I cried.

My friend was already on his feet, looking very miserable.

“I know of only one thing to do,” he remarked. “To-morrow I shall call upon Mrs. Couldock and Miss Dawes, and entreat them to tell me if, for any reason, they undertook to deliver a letter mysteriously left in the Bible of the — Hotel one day last month. They may have been deputed to do so, and be quite willing to acknowledge it.”

“And Mrs. Walworth? Will you not ask her the same question?”

He shook his head and turned away.

“Very well,” said I to myself, “then I will.” Accordingly the next day I called upon Mrs. Walworth.

Taking her by the hand, I gently forced her to stand for a moment where the light from the one window fell full upon her face. I said:

“You must pardon my intrusion upon you at a time when you are naturally so busy, but there is something you can do for me that will rid me of a great anxiety. You remember being in —Hotel one morning last month?”

She was looking quietly up at me, her lips parted, her eyes smiling and expectant, but at the mention of that hotel I thought—and yet I may have been mistaken—that a slight change took

place in her expression, if it was only that the glance grew more gentle and the smile more marked.

But her voice when she answered was the same as that with which she had uttered her greeting.

“I do not remember,” she replied, “yet I may have been there; I go to so many places. Why do you ask?” she inquired.

“Because if you were there on that morning—and I have been told you were—you may be able to solve a question that is greatly perplexing me.”

Still the same gentle, inquiring look on her face; only now there was a little furrow of wonder or interest between the eyes.

“I had business in that hotel on that morning,” I continued. “I had left a letter for a young friend of mine in the Bible that lies on the small table of the inner parlor, and as she never received it I have been driven into making all kinds of inquiries in the hope of finding some explanation of the fact. As you were there at the time you may have seen something that would aid me. Is it not possible, Mrs. Walworth?”

Her smile, which had faded, reappeared. On the lips which Taylor so much admired a little pout became visible, and she looked quite enchanting.

“I do not even remember being at that hotel at all,” she protested. “Did Mr. Taylor say I was there?” she inquired, with just that added look of exquisite naivete which the utterance of a lover’s name should call up on the face of a prospective bride.

“No,” I answered gravely; “Mr. Taylor, unhappily, was not with you that morning.” She looked startled.

“Unhappily,” she repeated. “What do you mean by that word?” And she drew back looking very much displeased.

I had expected this, and so was not thrown off my guard.

“I mean,” I proceeded calmly, “that if you had had such a companion with you on that morning I should now be able to put my questions to him, instead of taking your time and interrupting your affairs by my importunities.”

“You will tell me just what you mean,” said she, earnestly.

I was equally emphatic in my reply. “That is only just. You ought to know why I trouble you with this matter. It is because this letter of which I speak was taken from its hiding-place by some one who went into the hotel parlor between the hours of 10:30 and 12 o’clock, and as to my certain knowledge only three persons crossed its threshold on that especial morning at that especial time, I naturally appeal to each of them in turn for an answer to the problem that is

troubling me. You know Miss N—. Seeing by accident a letter addressed to her lying in a Bible in a strange hotel, you might have thought it your duty to take it out and carry it to her. If you did and if you lost it—”

“But I didn’t,” she interrupted, warmly. “I know nothing about any such letter, and if you had not declared so positively that I was in that hotel on that especial day I should be tempted to deny that too, for I have no recollection of going there last month.”

“Not for the purpose of rearranging a veil that had been blown off?”

“Oh!” she said, but as one who recalls a forgotten fact, not as one who is tripped up in an evasion.

I began to think her innocent, and lost some of the gloom which had been oppressing me.

“You remember now?” said I.

“Oh, yes, I remember that.”

Her manner so completely declared that her acknowledgments stopped there, I saw it would be useless to venture further. If she were innocent she could not tell more, if she were guilty she would not; so, feeling that the inclination of my belief was in favor of the former hypothesis, I again took her hand, and said:

“I see that you can give me no help. I am sorry, for the whole happiness of a man, and perhaps that of a woman also, depends upon the discovery as to who took the letter from out the Bible where I had hidden it on that unfortunate morning.” And, making her another low bow, I was about to take my departure, when she grasped me impulsively by the arm.

“What man?” she whispered; and in a lower tone still, “What woman?”

I turned and looked at her. “Great heaven!” thought I, “can such a face hide a selfish and intriguing heart?” and in a flash I summoned up in comparison before me the plain, honest, and reliable countenance of Mrs. Couldock and that of the comely and unpretending Miss Dawes, and knew not what to think.

“You do not mean yourself?” she continued, as she met my look of distress.

“No,” I returned; “happily for me my welfare is not bound up in the honor of any woman.” And leaving that shaft to work its way into her heart, if that heart were vulnerable, I took my leave, more troubled and less decided than when I entered.

For her manner had been absolutely that of a woman surprised by insinuations she was too innocent to rate at their real importance. And yet, if she did not take away that letter, who did? Mrs. Couldock? Impossible. Miss Dawes? The thought was untenable, even for an instant. I

waited in great depression of spirits for the call I knew Taylor would not fail to make that evening.

When he came I saw what the result of my revelations was likely to be as plainly as I see it now. He had conversed frankly with Mrs. Couldock and with Miss Dawes, and was perfectly convinced as to the utter ignorance of them both in regard to the whole affair. In consequence, Mrs. Walworth was guilty in his estimation, and being held guilty could be no wife for him, much as he had loved her, and urgent as may have been the cause for her act.

“But,” said I, in some horror of the consequences of an interference for which I was almost ready to blame myself now, “Mrs. Couldock and Miss Dawes could have done no more than deny all knowledge of this letter. Now Mrs. Walworth does that, and—”

“You have seen her? You have asked her— “

“Yes, I have seen her, and I have asked her, and not an eyelash drooped as she affirmed a complete ignorance of the whole affair.”

Taylor’s head fell.

“I told you how that would be,” he murmured at last. “I cannot feel that it is any proof of her innocence. Or rather,” he added, “I should always have my doubts.”

“And Mrs. Couldock and Miss Dawes?”

“Ah!” he cried, rising and turning away; “there is no question of marriage between either of them and myself.”

I was therefore not astonished when the week went by and no announcement of his wedding appeared. But I was troubled and am troubled still, for if mistakes are made in criminal courts, and the innocent sometimes, through the sheer force of circumstantial evidence, are made to suffer for the guilty, might it not be that in this little question of morals Mrs. Walworth has been wronged, and that when I played the part of arbitrator in her fate, I only succeeded in separating two hearts whose right it was to be made happy?

It is impossible to tell, nor is time likely to solve the riddle. Must I then forever blame myself, or did I only do in this matter what any honest man would have done in my place? Answer me, some one, for I do not find my lonely bachelor life in any wise brightened by the doubt, and would be grateful to anyone who would relieve me of it.

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