

Janet's Wedding Present

JANET'S features were small, but perfect in their regularity. Her brown eyes had unknown depths of tenderness. In its luxuriant abundance her bright hair had a perpetual tendency to escape from all control, and to fall about her like a veil, hiding her from mortal view. And it could have been done this! It was long enough and ample enough, especially as that perfect little figure of hers might soon have been put out of sight. Bless you, Arthur, her husband, was a tall, well-knit, handsome fellow, towering above her several feet, as it seemed; but in spite of the disparity in their height, it may be safely affirmed that he did not lose one loving glance of those gentle eyes, nor did a tone of his subdued voice fail to reach her ears. There is a magic in these things—the magic of mutual love.

As the bride and bridegroom entered the breakfast-room, with the bridesmaids in their gauzy trappings fluttering about them, there was a murmur of congratulations and a soft clapping of gloved hands. The guests went into little raptures of admiration.

“So handsome! so beautiful!” passed from one to the other; and there was the simpering and the glistening of tears inevitable on these occasions.

Arthur's face was radiant with delight; the bride's sweet features reflected her husband's happiness.

Old Morton, standing with his back to the fireplace, from which he appeared to derive as much enjoyment as if it had been January instead of June, and a fire had burned in the place of the silver shavings, rubbed his bald head with a white silk handkerchief until it glistened like marble.

On her part, his wife rustled about in her brocaded silk, in a little ecstasy of importance. Her pride in her boy had always been exclusive, and to-day it knew no limits—absolutely no limits whatever.

Then there was the bride's father, old Lorimer, as everybody called him, radiant in face, as conscious of all that was going on and enjoying it: but so deaf, so stone deaf, that not a syllable of all that passed was intelligible to him. He hobbled down to the end of the magnificently-spread table, at which his eyes glanced admiringly, expecting the rest of the company to settle down in their places without further ceremony.

But in this he was disappointed; the guess did not follow his lead; and when he had reached the remote end of the long table and turned back, he saw clearly enough that something had happened. Something serious, it appeared.

There stood young Morton, with a white, scared face. There stood his bride, in an agony of terror. Around them were grouped as many of the party as had yet entered the room, and the eyes of all those were open to their widest limits, while the hands of some were raised in manifest

astonishment; moreover, all were gazing intently at some object which occupied a central position on the wedding breakfast table.

Poor, deaf old Lorimer was all amazement. He looked at the stately epergne, crowned with flowers, which formed the central ornament. But there was no visible serpent among the blossoms, as there assuredly ought to have been, to account for half the obvious sensation. His eyes wandered to the wedding-cake, a sudden qualm of alarm suggesting that it might have been stolen; but no, there it was, white and glittering, a perfect monument to connubial bliss in frosted sugar. The thought of the plate struck him. Thieves had before now swooped off with the forks and spoons while bridal parties lingered at the church. But here again he was at fault. A glance showed him each plate duly flanked with silver. Suddenly a light flashed upon him.

“It’s the presents!” he exclaimed. “Something wrong about the presents!”

His sagacity this time was not at fault. A word will explain the matter. On the table itself, instead of on a side-table, in the usual way, there had been arranged a glittering trophy, consisting of the presents to the bride on her marriage. Numerous objects of value, chiefly in gold and silver, had been piled up in an artistic manner, not so much for the admiration of the guests as in the way of a pleasant surprise to Janet on her return from church, she being wholly ignorant of the pleasure thus in store for her.

Now, old Lorimer saw clearly enough that the consternation among the guests had to do with these costly and glittering objects, terming what we may term the bride’s trophy.

“What is it? What’s the matter?” he demanded, eagerly bustling forward.

But no one heeded him, for at that moment the bridegroom had asked a question too, and in a tone and manner that rendered an answer imperative. There could be no trifling with those flashing eyes and that terribly distorted face, with the red of it lessoning in the dead white of either cheek. On approaching the trophy, led thither by his loving and admiring mother, he had started back with an exclamation as if bitten by an adder.

“Who brought those diamonds here?” was the question that at once burst from his lips, the question he now repeated with increased violence of tone and action.

While speaking, he pointed to the central object among the sparkling wedding gifts—an object which in point of value outshone them all. It was a bracelet of a quaint and curious pattern, representing a butterfly caught by a snake; and the butterfly with its outspread wings was one mass of brilliants of the purest water.

“Who brought this? Who sent it?” he repeated, snatching the gem fiercely from the velvet case in which it was half imbedded.

"Indeed, Arthur, I don't know," answered the little geranium lips of the bride, half forming into a pout, while the tears gathered in those softest of brown eyes.

"Does anybody know? Has any one here dared to offer my wife this insult?" he exclaimed.

"Insult, Arthur?" was the not unnatural ejaculation of the astonished bride.

It was unheeded. With a fiercely contorted brow, Arthur repeated his question, his voice grating in its sudden harshness.

There was no response. A dead silence followed, the guests looking from one to another inquiringly, all lost in wonder as to what this outburst might mean, and what was likely to come of it.

Presently, and to the great relief of all, Arthur's mother came to the rescue.

"Why, my boy," she said, "what is the matter? Of course somebody has sent the bracelet. And a beautiful gift it is. I'm sure I couldn't have expected anybody in our circle to have made dear Janet such a present."

"No," replied Arthur, very bitterly, "you would not have expected it. No one would have done so. As for me, I would have taken an oath before Heaven itself that such a thing was impossible!"

His voice, though loud, betrayed the deepest emotion. The fierce spots burning in his livid cheeks were like fire. Everything in his manner betrayed a degree of excitement almost incredible, and apparently out of all proportion to the trifle that had given rise to it. The timid, trembling woman at his side, whom he had just undertaken to love and cherish through life, gazed up at him in absolute terror. Only his mother had courage enough to interpose, and attempt something in the way of pacification.

"But as it has come," she said, "why make such a disturbance about it? You ought to be very proud and very gratified, I should say."

"Proud! gratified!" he repeated, savagely, grinding his clenched teeth. "Yes, proud at finding, when too late, that I have been duped and deceived; gratified that I have made a woman my wife who is—what shall I say? Enough that she has proved herself utterly unworthy of my love and confidence."

"Impossible!" broke from a dozen lips at once.

But he did not heed them. He only turned upon his bride with a fierce and threatening face, that drove home the barbed arrows of his cruel words. At this sight, and while his voice yet rang in her ears, the hapless woman uttered a feeble moan, and dropped at his feet like a stone, lying there helpless and insensible in her crushed bridal robes.

The sight was piteous, and all present felt called on to interpose, and protest against what had the appearance of injustice, if not cruelty.

As for old Lorimer, who had not heard a syllable of what had passed, and to whom no one cared to volunteer an explanation of what could hardly be explained, he grew frantic, and became possessed of a fixed idea of the necessity of sending for the police.

It was all that Arthur's father could do to hold him back by the coat-tails, so as to prevent his rushing out into the street, and securing the first constable to he encountered.

"Don't excite yourself!" old Morton shouted in his friend's ear. "Janet is not well; but she will be better. It's excitement."

"Is it?" returned the other, deafer than ever in his perturbation, but just catching at the idea that there was something wrong. "Send at once, then. Have 'em in if anything's missing. Have 'em in at once, and get it over. Is it plate?"

"No, no."

"Money? If it's money, have Starker—have Detective Starker. I know him. He'll do anything for me."

"Will anybody stop that raving old man?" cried Arthur, with uncontrollable impatience, as his bride was conveyed, insensible, from the room.

The desired feat was happily accomplished by Morton senior, who, having known Lorimer all his lifetime, had more influence over him than anybody else, and who thrust him into a chair in a remote corner, and, seating himself, held him down by the pressure of a friendly hand upon his arm.

Then, with a dark and lowering brow, and a face livid and seamed with the anger and indignation that possessed him, Arthur Morton strode to the table, and snatching up the glittering bracelet, held it in his hand roughly, as if he would have crushed it to atoms, while he prepared to give some explanation of his startling conduct.

"You think me cruel, if not mad?" he asked, impetuously.

There could be no answer. He felt this, and went on:

"You think I have acted like a brute, like a maniac, rather than a husband, to that woman?" he demanded.

This time an answer came. It was from the lips of his father.

"You have, Arthur—like a brute."

The son gazed at him sternly, yet with troubled eyes. It was hard to receive condemnation from those lips before he had uttered one syllable in his own defence. Yet he could not but feel that he had brought this upon himself. He had been rash, impetuous, and so far his strange conduct was wholly inexplicable.

“I am content,” he proceeded, “that you—that all of you who know nothing of what is past, of what I know but too well, in all its sickening details, should think your very worst of me, until you have heard my explanation—my defence, if you will—and know on what provocation I have spoken and acted thus strangely.”

“Take care, Arthur!” It was his mother who spoke this time, raising a warning finger as she did so. “Take care that we don’t continue to think so after we have heard you. Your conduct—”

“Spare me your reproaches, mother,” he interrupted. “Your lips, of all others, should be the last to read my condemnation. My conduct has been harsh, brutal—give it what name you will. But the provocation! You heard my words, but Heaven alone knows the wrong that prompted them. Look at this trinket—observe it well. It is costly, as you see; but that is not all. It is peculiar, most peculiar, in design. The man who had once seen it could hardly forget it or mistake it; and if he had doubted, if he had thought mistake probable, there is a clue which cannot mislead him. Yes; you will perceive that as yet I have made no minute examination of it since it came into this room; yet I can tell you two things respecting it which none of you have discovered. Close scrutiny will reveal. One is that there is a recess—a kind of locket for hair or a portrait—concealed in it; the other is that it bears an engraved inscription, the very words of which I can repeat to you.”

They were all amazement.

While speaking, he had touched a spring, and the diamond butterfly rose from the snake’s mouth, disclosing the aperture he had described under it.

On this, his father quitted the old friend whom he held, to speak, in charge, and stepped forward.

“It is I who am, next to my son, interested in this,” he said. “Let me see it.”

Arthur handed him the bracelet.

“You see,” he said, “here is what I have described. Look closer, and you will find that there is an inscription on the gold back of the butterfly.”

“There is. I can almost read it without my glasses.”

“Try.”

“I can trace the words perfectly. They are—”

“Stay! If I, who am not looking, can repeat the words exactly, you will admit the probability that I have seen this thing before.”

“Nobody can question that, I should say,” was the reply.

“Listen, then. The words there engraved form this sentence, *‘A slight token of sincere love. To Janet.’*”

“The very words!” cried old Morton, in amazement; “and how very simple and pretty they are!”

“Very!” retorted Arthur, bitterly; “very simple, very pretty, as between man and wife, or as a tribute from a lover to his beloved. Nothing could surpass them in simplicity and tenderness; but what of them if inscribed by a scoundrel to a woman he has deceived and betrayed?”

“Stay!” cried the elder Morton. “Remember, Arthur, you are bringing the most serious charge that can be brought against man or woman—against your own wife of an hour, and a man who is unknown to us—”

“And to me also, thank Heaven!” interrupted Arthur Morton.

“How? Unknown to you? What evidence have you of all this turpitude and wickedness—of all that you allege so positively?”

“The best; that of this cursed trinket itself. The sentence I have repeated to you, and which has been verified by your own eyes, is a sentence of outrage to us. Those words have crushed my heart, and destroyed the happiness of my life.”

“But, my boy, matters cannot be so serious,” cried the agitated father. “Explain to us what has happened. Under what circumstances have you before seen this bracelet? And why does it now move you to these desperate conclusions against the poor girl, the unhappy creature, who is your wife? Remember she is your wife.”

“She is—she is! There lies the pain! there is the agony! My wife! Yes, I have been duped into uniting my fate with that of this miserable woman. She is my wife!”

For a time he was quite unable to control his emotion, which seemed to sweep over him like a tide. Then recovering himself a little, he said:

“I owe you—I owe even the unhappy wretch who has been borne senseless from this room—an explanation of this apparent mystery, and I will not withhold it from you, painful as may be the revelation thus coming from me.”

“Yes, Arthur,” exclaimed his mother, entering at that moment from the room to which the bride had been conveyed, “you do indeed owe us—all of us—an explanation; for your words have turned the brightest day I ever hoped to know into one of utter wretchedness.”

"True, mother, quite true," he faltered. "No one knows or feels this more acutely than I do. But this misery was not of my seeking. It was to be. I am not a fatalist; but I believe that what has been was to be. Fool, fool that I was not to take warning when it was not too late! When the wrong, great as it was, might have been repaired, and I at least might have escaped the burden of this misery!"

"But the explanation, Arthur," his father interposed; "these wailings are unmanly. Come, let us have your story. But first, let me say that I believe there must be some mistake, some misapprehension; for my faith in Janet's purity and innocence remains unshaken, in spite of the appearances against her."

"Would that I could share your confidence," cried the agonized son; "but this is wide of the purpose. Let me hurry on to my brief explanation. When I first met Janet Lorimer, and, struck with her beauty, her innocent looks and childlike nature, sought her for my wife, one little circumstance occurred that might have opened my eyes. A man of the world, more versed in woman's ways, would have known that these childlike natures are weak natures, easily impressed, and with no strength to resist temptation."

"You are raving, Arthur," said his father.

"It may be; but I think not. But to return to the matter which should have opened my eyes—the little incident I could never quite clear up or explain away. It was the single cloud in the blue heaven of our love, and I have cause—Heaven knows what bitter cause—to remember it."

"To what do you allude, Arthur?"

It was the mother who asked the question. Her curiosity was beginning to be aroused. Here was something of which she had not heard—an episode in a courtship she had watched with true maternal anxiety that had escaped her. She was all eagerness and excitement.

"It is soon told," Arthur went on. "One evening early in the time of our intimacy, when I paid Janet my accustomed visit, I entered the drawing-room unannounced, and found her in the act of handing her maid a letter she had just written, which she was instructing the girl to post without delay."

"Well, I hope a young woman may be allowed to write a letter in a Christian land without anybody's leave or license," said the irrepressible mother.

"Certainly," was Arthur's quiet rejoinder. "It is a privilege she may exercise freely and openly, the more freely and openly the better. It is only when there is a mystery, an attempt at concealment, about a perfectly harmless act that suspicion is awakened, especially in a lover's breast. Now in this particular case I detected such an attempt at concealment. No sooner had I entered the room than Janet, pale as death, snatched back the letter she was handing, and would have hidden it, but it was too late; I had seen too much, and her only resource was dissimulation.

Assuming a light and indifferent tone, very strongly opposed to her real feelings at the moment, she dismissed the maid with the half-concealed letter. ‘Are you writing to an old schoolfellow?’ I asked, carelessly. Her lips trembled. They would have formed the word ‘No.’ I saw that, and knew that if they had done so it would have been the truth; but she had not the moral courage to utter it. Her lips changed, and she faltered out, ‘Yes.’ The instant that word had been uttered I saw that she was trembling violently. Then her better nature triumphed, and she sank at my feet in a swoon.”

“Poor dear!” ejaculated the tender-hearted mother.

“You do right to pity lies,” he went on. “I believe she was up to that time pure as an angel. I believe she had uttered her first lie; but it has worked like a poison in her moral nature. When she recovered she knelt to me. ‘Forgive me, Arthur!’ she cried; ‘I have done wrong. I have deceived you; but I did not mean to do so in my heart. I was frightened and said ‘Yes,’ yet there was nothing to conceal. I only wanted to spare you a little uneasiness, and so I said I was writing to a schoolfellow. I was not. I was writing a reply to—’ I stopped her. ‘Philip Hargreaves,’ I said. The effect of that name was terrible. I thought she would have relapsed into the swoon, so intense was her astonishment and terror. But she did not swoon again; she shook the feeling from her, or overmastered it. ‘How—how did you know this?’ she asked. ‘I simply read it on your blotting-paper,’ I replied. ‘See! Here it is. You write with a free pen.’ To her dismay, I showed her the name in full, which I had traced out as I stood talking to her.”

“And did she offer any explanation?” his eager listeners asked.

“She would have done. I verily believe, at that moment—so few steps had she then taken in the perilous downward course—she would have confessed all, and we might have been spared the shame and agony of this hour. But I had too great a faith in the purity of woman’s nature, or, perhaps, I was too blinded by love, to believe anything really shameful against Janet, and I refused to listen to what she would have stated. Vain boy that I was, I stopped her mouth with kisses. I forgave her, trusted her, and went on, madly, fatuously loving her.”

“You did rightly, my boy; depend on it, you did rightly!” said Morton, senior, while with upraised finger he motioned to old Lortimer—who was all eyes and eagerness, but failed to catch a word of what passed—that he should be quiet and patient.

“From that time,” continued Arthur, “up to about six weeks since, I never again heard the name of Philip Hargreaves. I had sometimes thought over that incident of the letter, but never with any serious or jealous feeling, seeing that I had myself rejected an explanation, which would, no doubt, be forthcoming whenever I chose to demand it. But I did not choose. I regarded the thing as a trifle. I set down Janet’s emotion to that excess of delicacy which is apt to make a young and innocent girl keep a too sensitive guard upon her conduct. Now, about the time I mention, I had occasion to pay a visit to a first-class engraver at the West End. You will rightly surmise that I went there to secure these wedding-cards, the mere sight of which will henceforth be hateful to

me. While in the shop giving my order, I could not help overhearing a conversation carried on in an apartment only divided from the shop by a thin partition. It had reference to some article of jewelry, and was evidently carried on between two gentlemen in the intervals of instructing the engravers. ‘That is a neat thing in bracelets,’ said one; ‘is it for the marchioness?’ ‘Not exactly,’ was the contemptuous retort. ‘It’s for a little party whose name would not interest you; she has just hooked a green young party into giving her that most expensive of all articles of taste in the long run—the “plain gold ring.”’ ‘And so you are going to do the handsome thing by her?’ asked the other, carelessly. ‘Yes; one must do this sort of thing, you know. How do you like the inscription?’ He read it. The other demurred. It was read again and again, discussed and re-discussed. As there were but few words, and I heard them thus often, I was not likely to forget them. Can you guess what they were?’

No one responded.

“The inscription was the identical one which my father has just read on the inside of the bracelet.”

There was naturally a sensation.

The narrative began to acquire intense interest.

Arthur Morton proceeded:

“The name—Janet—struck a chord in my heart; but before this I had no special interest in it, or in the conversation between the two fellows, whom, however, I instinctively detested as loose, slangy, unprincipled ‘men of the world,’ as they would be called—heartless triflers with everything pure and sacred in life. Presently the engraver went into the room where the men had talked, and when he returned he held in his hand a morocco case. It was open, and I then for the first time saw the bracelet I am now holding! It was lying in the open case. I saw the snake and the diamond butterfly. More than that, on my expressing admiration at the design, the thing was placed in my hands for inspection. I examined it minutely; the concealed locket was shown me. In a word, I learned all that enabled me to recognize it the moment it was presented to my view to-day.”

“Singular! very singular!” muttered Morton, senior.

“And yet I won’t believe she’s a false woman,” said his wife, with determination.

“As you please,” said Arthur; “but hear me to the end. The beauty of the trinket fascinated me; I admired both its costliness, and the taste displayed in its manufacture. ‘And who,’ casually, ‘is the fortunate possessor of this gem?’ Heaven knows what prompted the question; it was an unfortunate one, and I was not at all interested in the answer. The engraver replied, very frankly, ‘His name is Hargreaves—you know him very likely. Quite a celebrity in his way—a man of

fashion, I mean.' The name went through me like an arrow. 'Incredible!' I said to myself. 'Hargreaves and Janet! The two names united again. Is it possible that—'

Infuriated by a sense of the wrong done to him, and the misery brought on his devoted head, he tore at the jewel in his hand as if he would have wrenched it to atoms; then, in an outburst of irresistible passion, tossed it contemptuously through the open window into the street below.

"Let it go!" he shouted. "But for that wretched trifle I might never have known the misery in store for me!"

The words, loud and passionate as they were, were lost on the ears of the deaf man; but old Lorimer saw the action, and saw also the glitter of the diamonds as they blazed into the street.

"What are you doing, Arthur?" he cried out. "Are you mad? My beautiful diamonds! Run somebody, run and pick up my wedding present to my poor child!"

Arthur Morton caught him by the throat.

"What do you mean?" he shouted in his ear; "your gift, did you say? Your gift?"

"Yes, mine—my own!" replied the old man, who could barely fail to hear the words so fiercely uttered. "I bought the bracelet in the way of trade, you know—in the way of trade. Hargreaves couldn't take up those bills of his—Morton knows all about them; don't you, Morton?—and I found out that all the time he was buying jewelry for goodness knows who. So I commenced proceedings, though I had known him all my life—but that was nothing; I couldn't help that in the way of business, you know—and he brought me this bracelet. So, as Janet's wedding was coming off, and I wanted to make her a present, I took it in a friendly way, on condition that he got it engraved for me with a few nice words and Janet's name; that was necessary, you know, and I didn't want to be seen in it. I wanted it as a surprise, and I thought this would prevent its coming out before the wedding."

"It prevented that, sure enough," muttered Arthur, still half incredulous in the intensity of his surprise.

"He got it engraved," Lorimer wandered on. "He knew Janet. He wanted to marry her himself once, but she wouldn't hear of it, and wrote him such a letter, bidding him go about his business."

"The very letter you surprised her in the act of sending; not a doubt of it!" cried Arthur's mother, in an ecstasy of delight.

"Such a letter! But as I was saying, he got it engraved, and the sly dog, he told them, as I have heard, that the diamonds were for an old flame of his who was going to be married, and that he was going to make her that present. He give Janet diamonds, indeed! He hadn't a brass farthing

to bless himself with, but actually got a friend of his to accept a bill on the strength of the story.
Ha! ha! Funny, wasn't it?"

Funny, indeed! The change that came over Arthur Morton's face was, if you like, funny—to the rage of tragedy. He heard, he understood, but remained staring at the speaker like a man in a dream.

And when the worst had passed he started up and looked towards the door, hearing a soft and well-remembered footstep. He looked and saw Janet enter and stand before him, smiling fondly through her tears, and in an instant they were clasped in each other's arms.

For a long time old Lorimer—in whose hands the bracelet recovered from the street had been placed—could not be made to understand quite clearly what had taken place; but he mastered the facts at last, and from that day forth he was never weary of telling, *apropos* of his deafness, the story of the trouble and misery that had been brought about through the agency of "Janet's Wedding Present."

Flag of our Union, Nov. 6, 1869