

The Wife's Secret

by Howard Hazeltine

If I pride myself upon any mental endowment whatever, it is upon that humble one of common sense. I live what is called by the intellectual people a conventional life. I have my pew in the neighboring church, and sit in it twice every Sunday. I know one captain in the army- just such a person as he should be-polished, and yet ferocious, gentle to ladies, but rather insolent to civilian males, boastful of his clubs, and giving all his leisure time, which is considerable, to the cultivation of his mustaches; but otherwise I am ignorant of the fashionable world and all its gay doings. I have made no endeavor to break through the gilded pale that separates it from the steady-going middle class to which I belong. I do not understand the feeling which prompts my superiors to be ashamed of being seen in an omnibus. Once every day I return from the city in a yellow one; and if it is wet, I use the same conveyance in the morning to reach my office. I pay tradesmen weekly. My best sherry is 48s a dozen; and when the captain talks vintage wines (as he will do by the hour at my table), I often wonder what he thinks he is drinking. However, with true good-breeding, he imbibes it in great quantities, as though it were the best. I do not keep a man-servant. Our cook cannot compass an *omelette soufflee*. My wife trims her own bonnets. We have eight children, who all know the church catechism by heart, except the baby and the last but one. In short, a family more respectable and unfashionable than our own does not exist in all Bayswater.

Under these circumstances, it may be easily imagined that we are as free from the view of the great as we are without their privileges; and this was, I honestly believe, the case until within a very recent period. When I used to read in the papers that Lady Luctetia Day Coltay (of Norman ancestry and bluest blood) had left her husband's roof, and fled with Major Flutterly of the Life Guards; or that it was rumored among well informed circles that the gentlemen of the long robe would soon find employment in the domestic affairs of his grace the Duke of Belgravia, I used to give a prolonged whistle, and remark: "Here they are again," in general reference to the habits of the *haut ton*. I knew that our hereditary aristocracies were given to these escapades, which in my own rank of life would certainly be crimes, and I perused such details as the press could furnish with avidity unalloyed, I am afraid, with much reprobation. I seemed to be reading of a class of persons whose way of life was too far removed from my own to affect me, except as a spectator; just as when I went to the play I found myself in an atmosphere of intrigue, and misunderstanding, and jealousy, altogether unreal, and with which I had not the ghost of an experience in common.

Jealousy! Why, I had been married sixteen years without entertaining that passion should entertain me. Misunderstanding! The thing was impossible, for whenever there promised to be "a row in the pantry" – and every married man will understand me when I make use of that metaphorical expression- I brought it a head, and had it out and off we started again (speaking

for self and Mrs. R.) on the smooth current of our lives, with the little fracas buried forever in its depths. As for the mother of eight falling in love with another man- it is all very well in a stage-play, and particularly (with all deference to Miss Annie Dickenson) where the husband is a black man, and as I have said, befitting enough among persons of quality; but upon the Notting Hill side of Bayswater any such mischance would, I felt, be out of place, and ridiculous- a social presumption, as well as a grave domestic crime. Imagine, therefore, my astonishment when my opposite neighbor, Peabody, who also calls himself my friend, did me the honor to call upon me a few weeks ago, to speak in confidence, of the alarming conduct of my wife. Having demanded and obtained a private interview, this scandalous old person, who was once an indigo-merchant, and yet retains the trace of his calling upon curious circumstances connected with the ‘goings on’ as he was pleased to call them, of my wife, which he was not indeed prepared to say “might not possibly be only coincidences, after all” but which he felt it his duty as a fellow-creature, and one who had been a husband in his time- here his lips made a dumb motion of gratitude- to let me know. Even as a neighbor, and an inhabitant of a common crescent, hitherto remarkable for its respectability, and which, as I doubtless remembered, had declined to permit Mrs. Jones to put up *apartments* in her window, lest we should be confounded with the lodging house localities; nay, which, by the mere force of its public opinion, had prevented No. 484 from being let to a play actor- even in this character, said Peabody, he would have felt in his duty to make me aware of what was being said, though doubtless falsely, respecting the behavior of Mrs. R. Here I should have locked the door, and informed Peabody that his last hour was certainly arrived, and that he had better make his peace with Providence before I cut his throat; but from ignorance of the proper conduct to be adopted in such exceptional circumstances, and perhaps from the knowledge that there was nothing but a paper-knife in the room with which to effect this righteous punishment I only burst out laughing and called him a meddling and impertinent old fool.

“Very true,” returned he, for he always makes use of that form of words- “very true; but still the facts are worth investigating, even from their singularity. Do you know, for instance, that at eleven o’clock, three days a week, your wife goes out in a cab by herself?”

“No,” said I, “I do not; though, if she does, it is surely better than if she had any ineligible companion. As a matter of fact, however, she does not do so, for I have offered to go shopping with her twice this week, and she had declined to accompany me upon the ground of having a sore throat.”

“Upon what days did she give this excuse?” inquired Peabody, taking out his pocket-book.

“Last Monday and last Thursday,” returned I.

“Well here’s a memorandum: *Monday, 4th. Saw Mrs. R. start as usual at 11; Thursday, 17th. Ditto, ditto.* She could not be going to a morning concert, because she had no white gloves on.”

“I will grant that much,” quoth I sardonically, and yet not by any means unmoved by this unexpected unintelligence. “My wife does not go to morning concerts.”

“Very true,” observed Peabody. “Then the question arises, where does she go to? Now, as an inhabitant of crescent-”

“Peabody,” interrupted I severely. “I acknowledge the right of no man- no, not of the man in the moon himself- to meddle in my affairs upon that ground. I am obliged to you for the interest you have taken in this matter, but the simple fact is, that it has been entirely misplaced. I have been perfectly well aware of wife’s movements, and they have had my fullest permission and approbation. I only wanted to see to what lengths your impertinence and love of interference would carry you. That is your hat, I believe; your umbrella is the alpaca one; I wish you a very good- morning.”

I ushered my visitor out, and then sat down in my private parlor with my elbows upon the table, and both my hands thrust into my hair. I had temporarily extinguished Peabody, but I was on hair with jealous apprehensions myself. What could it all mean? For sixteen years my wife had never taken any excursion unless in my company, upon which, she had always given me to understand, she doted; and yet, after refusing to go out with me upon Monday and Thursday last, on the pka of sore throat, she had started, the instant that my back was turned, in a Hansom- or even supposing it was a four-wheeler- in a cab, without white gloves on, and- Confound it, here was a row in the pantry, and one which my peace of mind demanded to have cleared up at once. “Anna Maria, I wish to speak with you immediately.”

“Lor’ bless me,” answered my wife from the top story, “it isn’t one of the children, is it John? Pray tell me the worst at once.”

“No madam, it is I,” replied I, stiffly.

“Then it’s the kitchen chimney,” exclaimed she in a dogmatic tone. “And didn’t I tell Mary to have it swept a week ago; and now the fire-engines will spoil everything, even if we are not burnt out of house and home.”

Was it possible that this woman could have deceived me, as Peabody had said, and yet talk so simply of her children, and of the house and home? By the time Anna Maria had got down to the drawing room flight I began to be rather ashamed of myself. When the mother of eight reached my sitting room door, with her honest face aglow with animation, and her voice so earnest about the soot, I did not dare mention what I had in my mind.

“I called you down dear to say that I was going to give myself a holiday today and to ask you to come with me to Hampstead Heath, and dine at Jack Straw’s Castle this afternoon, it being such a beautiful day.”

A ray of joy passed for an instant over her features, and then, as if recollecting herself, she began to stammer that she was very, very sorry, but really she had so much to do about the house just then; if I would only wait till Friday week, which was my birthday, then we would go somewhere, and she should enjoy it above measure. This afternoon, however, the thing was impossible.

“Well,” said I gravely, “we have not many holidays together, and I am sorry. You had a sore throat on Monday and on Thursday, when I offered you a similar opportunity.”

“O yes,” answered her, shaking her little head, which is very prettily –could it be *too* prettily? - Set upon her shoulders; “It is quite impossible that I could go out with that throat.”

“Here,” thought I, for she could not have gone out *without* her throat, “is some dreadful falsehood; but Peabody may have told it, and not she. Perhaps she never went out at all. Should I not rather believe the wife of my bosom than scandalous old retired indigo-merchant? Was it not base even to suspect Anna Maria of deception? Doubtless it was; but yet I thought I would just satisfy myself with my own eyes.

“Very well,” observed I quietly, “since you cannot come with me today, I shall go to the city as usual. I don’t care for a holiday by myself.”

“Poor, dear fellow,” Anna Maria, coaxingly, as she helped me on with my greatcoat, “I am quite grieved to disappoint you. Good bye John, Mind you have a good luncheon; it’s very bad for you catting those buns and rubbish.”

“Ah, what a tangled web we weave,” says somebody, “when first we practice to deceive, though after but a little trying, there’s nothing easier than lying. I protect I felt like a pickpocket, as I dodged and lurked about our crescent, watching in the distance my own door, to see whether Mrs. R. would cross the threshold. I suppose I have none of the attributes necessary to the profession of a detective for whenever a passer-by cast his eyes on me, I felt myself blushing all over, and hanging my head on one side, as a dog hangs his tail. I dared not, of course, stop in the crescent, but loitered at the corner of a street which commanded it now trying of dig up the tops of the coal-cellars by inserting the nozzle of my umbrella in their circular holes, and now eliciting mournful music by dragging it against the area railings. Exhausted with these exercises, I had been leaning against a lamp-post for about ten minutes, when the door of house opposite opened suddenly, and a widow lady of vast proportions came swiftly out upon me with her cap-strings streaming in the wind.

“Now just you go away, my gentleman,” said she in a menacing voice, “before the police make you- I know who you’re a-looking for, and I can tell you she ain’t a-coming, for I’ve got her locked up in the coal cellar. I know you, although you have not got your red coat on today; and mind- if you get another slice of meat in my house, I’ll persecute you as sure as my name’s Mivins.”

“Gracious heavens, madam!” cried I, “do you take me for a common soldier?”

“No sir,” answered she maliciously; but for a truepenny- ha penny life guardsman, who never saw a shot fired in his life; and if ever you come after my Jemima again-”

I turned, and fled into the very arms of the abominable Peabody. “Make haste!” exclaimed he; “there is not a moment to be lost. No; the cab is coming this way, you may see for yourself whether I am not right this time.”

And sure enough, who should drive by at a rapid rate but Anna Maria, in a four-wheeled cab and without her bonnet and *with a flower in her hair!* This blow, coming so closely upon the attack of the widow lady, was almost more than I could bear.

“Where can she be going to?” gasped I, half unconsciously. “It’s the most extraordinary thing I ever heard of.”

“I have heard of similar things,” returned Peabody, quietly, “although I never experienced anything of the sort myself. Of course, I don’t know where she is going to, but the direction she has taken is towards St. John’s Wood.”

I hastened back to my own house, and with the air of a man who has forgotten something, began to search in the pockets of a greatcoat hanging up in the hall. “By the by,” said I, as the servant who had let me in was disappearing, “I think your mistress must have got it, after all. Just run up, and tell her I want to see her for a minute.”

Emily Jane, who had been in our service ever since we were married, turned as scarlet as her cap-ribbons. “Sir,” said she, bolder than brass, “missis has just stepped out; she has taken two of the little girls for a morning walk.”

“Which two?” inquired I, looking this abandoned young person full in the face. Her subtle spirit was cowed by this course of procedure; she replied that she did not know- she didn’t recollect- she hadn’t paid particular attention, but she rather thought that it was the two youngest- all in a breath.

“In that case,” rejoined I, pointing with withering scorn to the perambulator, “how comes this here? No Emily Jane; your mistress must have taken out with her today the same two children that she took on Monday and on Thursday, when her sore throat was so bad that she could not go out with me.”

“Yes sir,” replied she; “it was the same two.”

“Emily Jane,” said I solemnly, “always tell the truth. I know all. Where is your mistress gone to all by herself today with her hair so neatly arranged, and a flower stuck in the left hand side of her head and that after telling me she was too busy to move out. Concealment is worse than useless. Where is she?”

“Wild horses shouldn’t do it,” returned the domestic resolutely. “I told her I would keep it dark, and I won’t betray any confidence as has been reposed in me. You must find out all of your own head, sir; O dear, O dear!”

Here, to my confusion, Emily Jane cast her apron, by a sudden and dexterous movement, over her features, and in that blinded condition rushed down the kitchen stairs like a bull stung by bees.

At that moment, the front door bell rang with a violence such as none of our visitors, except the captain, ever dare to use. My wretched heart seemed to experience a little throb of joy. He at least then- and I confess my suspicious had been turned in his direction, for was it not his profession to guard us from foreign foes, and to destroy our domestic peace- he at least, I say, unless there was more than one- I dared not trust myself to finish the reflection, but opened the front door with my own hands.

It was somebody in uniform, but not the captain. “Telegraph for Mrs. R,” squeaked the boy in his shrill thin voice; “please to sign on the right hand side.” Then dancing a double shuffle upon the door step, in order to keep himself warm, he broke forth into ballad, “There’s somebody in the house with Dinah, there’s somebody in the house I know, there’s somebody in the house with Dinah-”

I didn’t like his impudence, and I didn’t like his song but there was nothing for it but to submit. What could Anna Maria be doing with telegraphs? “From *Rupert Merrington 6 Cupidon Villas, St. John’s Wood. Pray, be punctual this time. I am engaged after twelve. I trust you will be looking your best, not pale, as on Monday and Thursday.*”

“There’s somebody in the house with Dinah, there’s somebody in the house I know-” I rushed out with the receipt in my head, and the boy snatched it, and took to flight for he saw that I was dangerous. What could this dreadful message mean? Or rather what meaning could it have but one? Rupert Merrington! Not at all a steady sounding name, to begin with; the sender too was evidently no businessman, or he would not have exceeded his twenty words so foolishly. It had a military smack all over (and I didn’t like that notion- a military smack!). Merrington was of course an assumed name. The handwriting was good, and so far unlike the captain’s, but then people don’t write their own telegraph messages. I felt that some immediate action was necessary, or that I should be suffocated. In a couple of minutes I was in a Hanson bound for Cupidon Villas, in a state of mind easier imagined than described, and yet I had often read descriptions of it in novels which professed to describe aristocratic life, and often had seen upon the stage (although principally in farces) the husband racked by jealous pangs.

What had there been to laugh at in that, I wondered now! Why should the tender emotions of the human heart be made the subject of buffoon- but what a wicked looking set of houses were these which I was now passing! If bricks and mortar- and especially stucco- can look vicious, certainly St. John’s Wood possesses a patent for-

“What number, sir?” shouted my driver, through the little hole in the roof “this is Cupidon Willas”

“I am sorry to hear it,” groaned I passing my pocket handkerchief over my brow. “Don’t mind me, my good man (for his countenance evinced much dismay at my voice and manner); I know it is not your fault that I am miserable. Please to pull up at No.6.”

Of all of wicked looking houses in Cupidon Terrace, No.6 was, it seemed to me, the wickedest. The round eye which formed its staircase window, winked viciously in the sunlight, and in the garden was a little grating, as though for the purpose of reconnaissance before admittance, which was not a little grating to me. The drawing room shutters were closed. This latter circumstance gave me some satisfaction, since it might signify that Mr. Merrington was dead, but a glance at the gay attire of the servant girl who answered my summons cut away this ground of consolation. “Is Mrs. R within?” inquired I, with a tome assumed indifference.

“Well- yes sir- but you can’t see her just at present. Mr. Merrington has a great objection to-”

“Confound Mr. Merrington! Cried I, pushing my way in. “I want to see my wife.”

“O, your wife is it, sir?” replied the maid with a giggle. “Then of course you can go up, if you please, although it’s as much as my place is worth. You will find them in the drawing room.”

“What! There!” exclaimed I, passionately, pointing to the closed windows.

“Yes, of course, sir! That’s the room they always sit in.”

They always sit in? Then this sort of thing must have been going on for years?

I cleared the two little flights of stairs in a couple of bounds, and hurled open the drawing room door like a catapult.

I found myself in a large apartment, darkened, indeed, upon one side, but well lit by a huge window (invisible from the front of the house) at its northern end. In the center of the room was a raised structure, hung with purple, and rather resembling a scaffold decorated for the execution of royalty, and upon the scaffold sat my wife in an uncomfortable attitude, and with an expression of countenance that she only wears upon those ceremonious occasions which demand what are called “company manners.” Between her and the window stood a gentleman with moustaches, and in a velvet coat- at an easel, and evidently painting her portrait. He elevated his eyebrows at my peculiar mode of entering the room, and looked towards my wife, as if for an explanation of the phenomenon.

“It is only my husband, Mr. Merrington,” returned her. “O John, I am so sorry that you found me out, for I had meant my picture to be a pleasant surprise to you upon your birthday next week, This was to be my last sitting but one; and nobody knows the trouble I have taken to keep you ignorant of my coming here. That stupid Emily Jane must have let it out.”

“No, my dear,” said I, “I discovered the fact for myself, through the telegraph; and really I- I couldn’t help coming down to see how the picture was getting on. It was so very kind of you, and dear me Mr. Merrington what a charming likeness!”

“Well, it’s not nice in a very good light, you see,” rejoined he, deprecatingly. “Not having a room with a sky-light, I’m obliged to block up those windows, and manage how I can. It makes the house dark, and I am afraid, caused you to stumble at the drawing room door.”

“Yes,” said I, “that was just it; I very nearly came in head first. I-I only thought I’d look in on my way to the city. I won’t interrupt you another moment; and indeed I have myself no time to lose.”

I gave the maid five shillings and- thinking it would be more likely to insure her silence- a chuck under chin. Then I wrote to Peabody from Bun hill Row (where my place of business is situated), to tell him that I would not make a fool of him any longer; but the fact was, that, during the last few weeks, I had been making my wife sit for her picture, which he was to come and pass his judgment on as soon as it was finished; there was a question as to whether the flower in her hair was an improvement.

But I knew that Emily Jane would tell Anna Maria all about it, however, nothing was said until my birthday arrived, and with it the portrait, for which the dear creature had saved up her pin money, and put her to the greatest inconvenience. I declare my heart smote me for my base suspicious when I looked upon that honest face, which had never worn paint before. Upon that day, she said: “By the bay, John, when that telegraph arrived for me from Mr. Merrington, it didn’t make you jealous at all, did it?”

“O dear no! My darling, jealous of you? Impossible! Not, of course, that you are not beautiful enough to make all the world fall in love with you; but I never dreamed of such a thing.”

“That’s all right, John,” said she, kissing me; but there was a wicked twinkle in her kind eyes as she added drily: “I am glad to hear you say that, for do you know, I almost thought you were just a little jealous.”

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