

Mr. Grassey's Secret
by Amy Randolph

“So you’ve made up your mind to come and live with us, Mrs. Hedgington,” said Mr. Grassey—and as he spoke the words, a curious expression, which might be interpreted either as gratification or otherwise, came out around the corners of his mouth.

Mrs. Hedgington, a portly dame in black silk, with extremely juvenile curls on either side of her well-powdered cheeks, nodded assent, as she settled the bows of white ribbon that adorned her cap.

“Yes, Oswald,” said she, “I have. Not but that my own little house is pleasant enough—and dear knows I’ve no wish, at my time of life, for what the gay world calls society. But Sophia needs me.”

“Needs you?” repeated her son-in-law, with some emphasis.

“The housekeeping, you know!” suggested Mrs. Hedgington.

“We are able to keep plenty of servants,” said Mr. Grassey. “And I really think we ought not to expect you to give up your time and attention—”

“It isn’t that altogether,” said Mrs. Hedgington, with an aggressive toss of the cap ribbons, that betokened a sort of overt hostility.

“No?” Mr. Grassey’s countenance became inquiring.

“It’s Sophia’s spirits,” said Mrs. Hedgington.

“Oh!” said Mr. Grassey.

“The poor, dear girl pines,” said Mrs. Hedgington. “She needs society.”

“Really?” Mr. Grassey raised his eyebrows. “I was not aware of that.”

“And if I *must* say it,” added the mother-in-law, “although I am the very last person to wish to sow the seeds of dissension, you give her very little of your companionship, Oswald!”

“Business,” said Mr. Grassey, briefly.

“That’s what men always say,” said Mrs. Hedgington, with a meaning sniff. “However, the fact remains the same—my Sophia droops. And as you can have no sort of objection to my occupying a little insignificant corner in this big house—”

“Not the least in the world,” said Mr. Grassey.

“I thought so,” said Mrs. Hedgington. But she had anticipated a pitched battle on the subject, and was, perhaps, just a little disappointed that her son-in-law had capitulated without a blow.

“What did he say, ma?” nervously questioned Mrs. Oswald Grasse, a meek, pink-eyed little creature in white muslin and blue ribbons, who was a sort of female chameleon, taking the color of the nearest companion *pro tempore*.

“He said he had no objection,” said Mrs. Hedgington. “But I know he doesn’t like me!”

“Don’t say that, ma,” said Sophia.

“But I *do* say it,” retorted the widow. “And he’s one of the kind—sardonic, is it? or satirical, or sarcastic—”

“I’m sure I don’t know, ma,” said Mrs. Grasse.

“Well, it doesn’t matter much,” remarked Mrs. Hedgington, belligerently scratching the bridge of her Roman nose. “One of the kind, I mean, that is always poking fun at you!”

“O, ma!” fluttered Sophia. “I am sure Oswald means nothing of the kind.”

“Yes he does, too” said Mrs. Hedgington, sharply. “But *I’ll* teach him. He’ll find out that his secrets and mysteries don’t go down with *me!*”

Mrs. Grasse burst into tears. In uttering these words, her mother had touched upon the spring of her heart’s inward discontent. Oswald had secrets. There was no disputing that fact. Oswald came and went mysteriously, like a brigand, or a conspirator, kept a special key to the cellar, and when asked what all this meant, only chucked his partner under the chin, and responded:

“Business, my dear, business!”

“And I’m sure, ma,” whimpered Mrs. Grasse, with her pocket-handkerchief to her eyes, “I’d give all I’m worth to know what it means.”

“Down cellar, eh?” said Mrs. Hedgington, feeling reflectively of her chin.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Grasse, “down cellar. In the little north-east room, where there’s a gas-burner, and a shuttered window, and a stone floor, and a lot of shelves.”

“Can’t you contrive to get hold of his key?”

“Oh, dear no,” said Sophia. “He always carries it about with him.”

“It can’t be counterfeiting,” said Mrs. Hedgington.

“What nonsense, ma!” bristled up the bride.

“Or another wife hidden there, like Bluebeard!”

“Ridiculous!” said Mrs. Grasse.

“Well,” said Mrs. Hedgington, “it may be ridiculous and it may not. But whether or no, I mean to find out what it all means!”

“But how?” said Sophia.

“You’ll see,” nodded Mrs. Hedgington. “A married man has no right with secrets, and, besides, I’ll show him that it doesn’t pay to make fun of *me*. I may be his mother-in-law, but I’m not the dust under his feet.”

“Oh, dear, oh, dear!” said Sophia, with a burst of weak tears. “I don’t think he considers you so at all.”

And Mrs. Hedgington threw up her head like a war-horse eager for combat.

“I’ll track out his guilty mysteries,” said she. “Or I’ll know the reason why.”

And within a week Mrs. Hedgington had borrowed a bunch of keys big enough for a locksmith’s sign and fitted one of them, triumphantly, to the mysterious cellar door. And the heart of conquering Julius Caesar himself never beat more exultant than did that of Mr. Grassey’s mother-in-law as she shuffled, slipper-footed, into the stone-floored sanctum.

She was not altogether certain what she had expected to find, whether a human skeleton, a set of counterfeiter’s tools, or a can or so of nitro-glycerine; but it was to have been something very terrible. And her revulsion of spirits, on discovering only a row of bottles, was correspondingly great.

“Humph,” snorted Mrs. Hedgington, holding up her candle and looking around.

“Bottles! Nothing on earth but bottles!”

She sat down her candle and indulged herself in a second view.

“I wonder what’s in ’em,” said she to herself.

The corks were not sealed down.

“It can’t do any harm just to *look*,” said Mrs. Hedgington, “or to smell, which amounts to the same thing.”

And whipping out her pocket scissors, Mrs. Hedgington proceeded to remove the corks from the bottles and inhale the odor of their contents, one by one.

“Wine, as I live,” said Mrs. Hedgington, “and good wine, too! Oh, the hardened sot! Only to think of a man like Oswald Grassey making nightly visits to this spot, with his depraved associates, just to drink himself into delirium tremens! Oh, my poor Sophia! Oh, the wickedness of mankind! But it isn’t bad wine, I must say.”

And, out of a laudable spirit of inquiry, Mrs. Hedgington took a good, comfortable swallow out of each bottle.

“A slight difference in the flavor,” said she, smacking her lips. “In the bouquet, as poor dear Hedgington used to say. But none in the body. One—two—three—four shelves full. Well, I never! What *will* Sophia say!”

And carefully replacing the corks and relocking the door behind her, Mr. Grasse’s mother-in-law hurried up stairs to impart her tidings to Mr. Grasse’s wife.

Sophia listened, wrung her hands and wept.

“Oh, ma! oh, ma!” she bewailed herself, “what shall I do? Do you think he is really a drunkard?”

“Just wait, my dear, and hear me confront him with his sins,” said Mrs. Hedgington, severely.

“But what good will that do, ma?” sobbed Sophia.

“Child, I do believe you’re a fool,” said Mrs. Hedgington, almost angrily.

And there was the mysterious solemnity of an avenging Fate upon her countenance when Mr. Grasse came home to dinner. She was still culling out, in her mind, the most appropriate terms to use, when the culprit himself broke silence, rubbing the palms of his hands complacently together.

“Well, Sophy,” said he, “you can have a fortnight at Saratoga this summer, if you please.”

“What?” said the pink-eyed wife, scarcely disposed to believe her own ears.

“I’ve done a smart stroke of business lately,” added Mr. Grasse. “In the manufacture of poisons.”

“*What!*” shrieked Mrs. Hedgington, dropping her knife and fork.

“Exactly,” said Mr. Grasse, all smiles. “To be sent out to Central Africa—ordered by the king of Gharri-Wakki, to exterminate the hostile tribe of Fouchi-Haha. Put up and flavored like the choicest wines. No one can tell corrosive sublimate from Madeira, nor strychnine from St. Julien claret! Of course, the whole thing is *sub-rosa*; the government passes ’em through for wines; but there’s a fortune to be made out of the thing. And—”

But here Mr. Grasse’s tide of eloquence was interrupted by a fearful shriek from his mother-in-law.

“Eh!” said Mr. Grasse. “What’s the matter, Mrs. Hedgington?”

But the old lady had started up, with both hands pressed compulsively over the pit of her stomach.

“Water!” she gasped. “White of egg! Emetics! A stomach pump! Quick! Don’t lose a moment!”

“You don’t say—” began Mr. Grassey.

“Yes I do,” said Mrs. Hedgington, with a choke and a gasp. “I got into the cellar, Oswald—and I thought it was wine—and—and I tasted every one! Oh, dear! oh, dear! what shall I do? Run to the druggist, Oswald! Bring me some warm water, Sophia! Do you mean, among you, to let me die?”

“So you’ve been prying into my affairs, eh?” said Mr. Grassey, deliberately leaning back in his chair.

“Yes, I have!” acknowledged Mrs. Hedgington. “But I didn’t mean any harm—I didn’t indeed; and I’ll never, never do such a thing again!”

“I wouldn’t, if I were you,” said Mr. Grassey.

“Can’t anything be done? Can’t I be saved?” wailed the old lady, beginning to twist and writhe herself about, while Sophia clasped her hands in mute dismay.

“Don’t excite yourself,” said Mr. Grassey. “If you’ve been breaking into my wine cellar, you’re all right. I don’t keep the poisons about the house.”

“Oh, thank Providence for that!” sobbed Sophia, while Mrs. Hedgington drew herself upright, with a jerk.

“Is this a joke?” said she, indignantly.

“Well, —if you choose to consider it so!” demurely acknowledged her son-in-law.

“It’s a shame!” shrieked the old lady.

“Do you mean that system of yours, of prying and peeping around a gentleman’s house? I quite agree with you, then,” said Mr. Grassey.

Mrs. Hedgington rose to her feet in a rage.

“I won’t stay another night under this roof,” said she.

“Don’t—if you don’t feel like it,” said Mr. Grassey, blandly.

And Mrs. Hedgington packed her trunks and departed, leaving serene peace behind her.

“Oswald,” said Mrs. Grassey, feebly.

“Well, my dear.”

“Was it true?”

“Was what true, my dear?”

“About the poisons?”

“It was what they call poetic license, my dear,” chuckled the husband. “Entirely imaginary. It isn’t the poison business I’m in—it’s the California wine trade.”

“But the two weeks at Saratoga?”

“Oh!” said Mr. Grasse. “That’s true enough! But don’t you think you’ll enjoy the mineral springs more without your mother?”

“Perhaps so, my dear,” said Mrs. Grasse.

And Mrs. Hedgington never came back to stay at the residence of her son-in-law again.

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