

WHO TOOK IT?

“Will you take charge of £20 till tomorrow morning, Marian?”

“Take charge of £20 Harold!” echoed my wife in amazement. “What do you mean?”

I settled myself down to an explanation. Explanations are things I hate, nevertheless, they are necessary sometimes. One was due on this occasion.

“You know, my dear Marian,” I began with a business like air, “that the failure of Hardinge Brothers threw scores of men, women, and children in the neighborhood out of work, in the hardest part of a very bad year. This evening a meeting was held with a view to enlisting the sympathy of the public. A subscription list was gotten up and a collection was made then and there to the tune of £20. As nothing else could be done with the money tonight, I was, as treasurer, obliged to bring it home; and very nervous I felt, I can assure you, at coming along these lonely roads with such a sum. However, I reached home safely in spite of my fears, and now I will deliver it over to you until I can get rid of it.”

“And so free your mind from all responsibility,” added my wife with a smile. She knows that one of my chief weaknesses is a dread of responsibility.

“As far as possible,” I replied.

We went immediately into a consultation as to where the money should be put. I suggested the meat safe, as a place to which thieves would never dream of going for money, but my wife phoo-phooed the idea, as well as several other suggestions of mine, which I thought were not so bad. At last an idea struck her in the shape of the wine-draw, in the cupboard of the sideboard. By this means the money would be doubly safe, she argued, for the draw might first be locked, in addition to locking the door. I looked rather contemptuously on the plan, for, if truth be told, I felt it was only due to myself to do so, since my wife treated every suggestion of mine in a similar manner.

Both of us failing to hit upon anything better, the wine-bin was agreed upon; and, as I looked over my evening paper, I watched her place the black japanned box in the drawer, lock the sideboard and place the key in her own purse.

“There,” she exclaimed triumphantly; “I shouldn’t think any one would get at that before to-morrow morning, for this purse goes into the well of my dressing case to-night, and that will be locked and the keys put away in my dressing-table drawer, so we are doubly and trebly secure.”

In spite of these precautions there was a load on my mind, that I felt would only be removed when the money was safe in the bank. I envied my wife her happy insensibility, for in less than half an hour she was quietly sleeping, while I tossed restlessly to and fro, thinking of the money and wondering whether any one could get at it. At last a grand idea

struck me, which was to put it inside the piano. Who would dream of searching for treasure in such a place? whereas what robber coming into a house would not go to a sideboard? and the very fact of finding it doubly locked would make him suspect that something was hidden there. Plainly enough, Mistress Marian, with all her cleverness, had chosen the very worst place possible. Should I go down and remove it? I knew where the keys were to be found. I had half a mind to do so, if only for the sake of quieting my fears and getting a little sleep. No doubt I should have done so, had not a circumstance intervened—I fell asleep.

It seemed scarcely an hour afterwards that I awoke and heard sounds of life in the street below. Well, so far, all was safe enough; no robbers had molested us, and I felt so comfortable and easy now that all danger was over that I began to laugh at my nervous fears. How stupid it would have been to have gone down stairs in the middle of such a bitter night! Thank goodness I had been too strong-minded for that. I fell off into another doze, and as a natural consequence was late for breakfast. That meal was a hurried one, and when it was over I had my coat and hat on, ready to start off to any important case, I reminded Marian of the money, and begged her to get it out quickly.

“I had quite forgotten it,” she exclaimed. “Here, Martha, run up stairs and fetch me my purse out of my dressing-case; the keys are in my dressing-table drawer.”

Martha flew up stairs to do her mistress’ bidding, while I stood and chafed in the hall and submitted to have my coat brushed. In a moment she returned and Marian ran into the dining-room. Two or three minutes passed and Marian was still fumbling at the sideboard. I entered the room impatiently. Marian looked at me crossly.

“This is quite too bad, Harold. What have you done with the box?”

“Done with the box!” I exclaimed; “what do you mean, Marian?”

“I won’t stand this trifling any longer,” replied my wife. “It’s a shame to give me the responsibility of that money and then tease me like this.”

“What on earth is the woman talking about?” I cried, bewildered. “Say what you mean in plain English, I beg.”

“The money’s not here. It’s gone, box and all,” Marian replied with a white face.

“Gone!” I cried, “gone! Where is it gone, how is it gone, or who has taken it, I should like to know? You must be raving. Let me come and look.”

Marian moved aside and I knelt down to the drawer. No sign of the box was there. As my wife had said, the money was gone.

But how, when or where? The drawer was locked, the cupboard was locked, the dressing-case was locked, the purse was inside it, the keys in the dressing-table drawer. These

things my wife and Martha were sure of. A man in such a position is bound to have an idea on the subject, and to assert it; so I suggested that Martha must be the culprit.

“No, no, don’t say that,” cried my wife excitedly. “I would as soon believe that I was the thief as she. I’ve known her all my life. No, no, it isn’t Martha.”

“You talk like a child,” I replied with an air of superiority, for really women have no reasoning powers whatever—not even the best of them. “Can you suggest any one else who by any possibility could have taken the money?”

“Indeed, I cannot,” Marian replied. “It could not be a housebreaker, for the locks were just as I left them; nothing has been touched, apparently.”

“You admit that it could not be any one outside the house, so it must be Martha; that is plain logic,” I said, with as much evenness of temper as I could command at the moment.

“It isn’t Martha,” replied my wife stubbornly. “I’ll never believe it.”

For my part I felt sure that it was Martha. And as it was quite impossible that she could have got rid of it yet, I hoped I should easily discover it.

But she denied the charge so emphatically that it was with very anxious heart that I betook myself to the bedside of my patient. The case was a complicated and peculiar one, and my mind become so interested in the progress of the various symptoms that my own cares became a thing of naught. After paying one or two minor visits I returned home. Martha opened the door and retired into the kitchen without saying a word. Marian was nowhere to be found. I went up stairs in search of her. She was not there, but a little table in the corner covered with writing materials betrayed her recent presence. An open letter in a handwriting that I knew and detested attracted my attention. Husbands have certain prerogatives. I asserted one at that moment. If you care to do the same, here it is; if not, skip it:

“DEAR MAY—If you don’t contrive to send £10 before this day week it will be ruination for me. If you send it you will enable me to retrieve my former position, and become a credit to my family.

“Yours, affectionately, FRANK.”

“The young rascal! What fresh mess has been getting into?” I exclaimed, angrily. This same Frank had been the source of untold squabbles between myself and Marian; holding a fairly good position in the city. For an unmarried man, and yet always getting into debt.

Presently I heard Marian enter the house. With the letter in my hand I confronted her. She turned first white and then red and asked me by what right a gentleman entered a lady’s private room and read her correspondence.

I paid no attention to her high-flown language, but replied by asking her whether she had been out to post a letter. She admitted she had.

“To Frank?” I inquired.

“I decline to answer.” She replied, haughtily.

“Containing money?” I asked.

“That I also decline to answer,” she replied.

Here was a pretty pass things had come to—my own wife openly refusing to answer my questions! What was I to think? I think any one else in my place would have come to the same conclusion as I did—namely, that the letter was to Frank, and that it contained money. A few inquiries at the postoffice confirmed my supposition. From the time of this discovery a cloud seemed to have settled over our usually happy household. Marian was sullen and angry, and sat at the head of the table without speaking a word. Between meal times I scarcely ever saw her. Martha sided with her mistress and always looked at me very reproachfully.

In the meantime other cases were pressing hard and fast upon me. In spite of a rigid examination I could discover no clue to the lost money. Of course, I had been obligated to make it good; and in order to do this, had drained myself of every available farthing.

These events happened at a time of the year when it was impossible to call in many outstanding debts; so that after a while of desperate struggle against our unfortunate circumstances, I was compelled sorely against my will, to appeal to my father. All this time I had not been inert about the lost money, but had held several discussions with a detective. A fear of incurring additional expense had deterred me from setting him to work; but as he seemed to think that to trace the money would be the easiest thing in the world, I at last gave him the authority to commence a strict investigation.

From the detective’s I went to my father, and, plainly stating the facts, asked him if he would lend me the sum I had lost. This he agreed to do; and the conversation turned on family matters generally. The unhappy coolness which had arisen between myself and Marian was presently discussed; and when my father taxed me with unkindness towards her, I felt bound to explain to him Frank’s demand, and her resentment of my interference.

My mother started up suddenly from a fit of thinking and plied me with questions.

“Was Marian the only person who had access to the sideboard?”

“As far as I knew, the only person,” I replied.

“And did her letter to her brother contain money?”

“Yes—a P.O.O. for £10.”

“Had she £10 of her own?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Was she likely to have saved it from her allowance for housekeeping or private purposes?”

“Very unlikely, indeed.”

“Then,” my mother continued, “it seems to me that the nearer home you look for your money, the sooner you will find it.”

When I arrived home my mind was torn and distracted by conflicting opinions. I felt very anxious to discover some assurance of innocence, or maybe of guilt.

“Marian,” I said, as gently as I could, “where did you get the money from that you sent to Frank?”

She started and turned quickly around upon me.

“How did you know I sent money to Frank?”

“Never mind how I knew it,” I replied. “Where did you obtain it? You must answer me that question before you leave this room,” I added, more sternly; for her evasion of my question disquieted me.

She looked me steadily in the face for a minute, then dropping her eyes and clasping her hands tightly together, she exclaimed:

“I see now the drift of your question. The money was lost at the same time that I sent some to Frank. Harold, you suspect me—your wife—of being the thief, and you have sent that man (I saw he was a detective directly) to track me out and prove this against me. Do you intend to send me to prison?”

“Marian,” I answered excitedly, “when I sent that man here no such suspicion had ever occurred to me; and now that I must confess it has, one word from you will dispel it; or, if it should be otherwise (here I extended my hand to her, but she flung it from her), you have only to acknowledge it, to obtain my free forgiveness.”

“Your forgiveness!” she added haughtily, “I do not need it,” and with out another word she left me.

For some minutes I remained stunned by this new aspect of affairs. Could it be possible my Marian was guilty? I would never believe it. And yet she had not attempted to deny it. Again, the anxious face she had lately worn, together with other circumstances of the case, served only to confirm the idea. Would that it had not been so, or even being so, that she would come to me for the reconciliation I was longing for, and the forgiveness I was only too anxious to bestow.

A day or two after this I found a note awaiting me when I returned home to dinner. The handwriting was Marian's and my delight at seeing it was so great that I kissed it again and again. Eagerly I opened and read it. It ran as follows:

“The society of a thief cannot be congenial. For that reason I have kept out of your way till I had made up my mind what to do. I shall not trouble you any more. Baby and I have gone to my father. I know you can claim baby if you like to do so, but I think you will see that it is better for him to be with me. Do not ask me to come back; I never can. The miserable life I have been leading lately would soon have killed me, and my life is precious to my child. Your unhappy wife,

MARIAN.”

That was all, except a few words at the end that had been hastily scratched out, of which I could distinguish only “Oh, Harold.”

Strange as it may seem, this note did not shock me as the discovery of Marian's guilt had done. I felt so angry with her for her unreasonable conduct that my tender feelings remained almost untouched. My love for the Marian of former days had not decreased one whit, but my anger with the present Marian was for the moment paramount. The child was better with her and for the present she should keep him, for I had no idea of fetching her back. She had left me through no unkindness of my own, and no wife could be justified in leaving her husband in the way Marian had left me.

I was beginning to get a little accustomed to my renewed bachelorhood, when one night, very late, a telegram was brought me worded thus—

“Come at once to Baby.”

The night train would leave in about an hour's time. I packed a few things and started to catch it. In about three hours more I was conducted into the room where Marian was sitting with our little one lying in her lap, struggling hard for life. Some medical man was already there, bending over the child, and anxiously gazing at its contorted, livid features, but, as far as I could see, doing nothing to assist in the battle against death. He left at once, and Marian looked up into my face and said—

“Thanks God, you have come! He was doing no good. Oh, Harold! Save my baby; save my child.”

“I will do what I can to save our child,” I answered.

I called a servant and gave her my instructions. In a few minutes the room was filled with vapor, every vent being carefully guarded. The cloud or vapor kept on steadily increasing, till drops of water began to trickle down the walls. Still the child on Marian's lap lay almost choked, its struggles growing fainter each succeeding time. The cloud was still pouring out into the room, and nothing more could be done, so I stood at Marian's knee, watching for the approach of some favorable symptom. Only once Marian spoke, and then it was to ask me with blanched face and faltering lips if there were any hope.

"To the last moment, yes," I answered; and she was relieved at once, hardly comprehending from my words how faint that hope was.

Presently the struggles grew more frequent; gradually the almost lifeless limbs became imbued with fresh vigor, the heavy lids relaxed, the gasps for breath became more effectual, and with a mighty effort nature asserted her sway. In a short time baby was nestling peacefully in Marian's arms, wrapped in a sweet, life-giving slumber.

When he was laid in his cot his mother turned to me and said pathetically, "Oh, Harold! When baby was so near death, and you far away, I could not help seeing how wicked I had been to leave you as I did. Will you forgive me dear, and take me back for baby's sake?"

I could only kiss her and press her to my heart. After a while I said, "It was only these words, 'Will you forgive me?' that I wanted. If you would have spoken them sooner we need never have parted."

"Oh, Harold! How can you? It was not that I was asking you to forgive me, but my folly in leaving you. I am as innocent of taking that wretched money as my own child. Won't you believe me?"

"I do, darling, I do," I replied with genuine delight. "I would have believed you then if you had said this to me; but you know you never deigned me a word, and what was I to think?"

"I was so horrified at your even suspecting me that I fancied it was beneath me to deny it. I cannot now understand what prompted you to think such a dreadful thing of me. It is very hard to bear."

I was beginning to wonder, too, how I could have suspected my own Marian. Circumstances and my mother were more to blame than I, however.

In answer, I murmured something about Frank.

"Ah, the letter to Frank; I remember it. You were always so hard upon him that I don't like to tell you about it. He really had been trying to keep on steadily at the post your kindness had obtained him, but old debts were constantly coming in, and his limited

salary would not meet them and keep him as well. There was one man who pressed him hard for £10. He spent his last quarter's salary within a pound or two, and more would not be coming for some time. He wrote and told me this, asking me to help him, but I could not. He wrote again and said he must draw on his salary, but I begged him not to do so so soon. I was sure his employers would think it a bad sign. The man threatened to expose his former habits to the firm, which you know might have ruined him with them. I resolved to help him this once, and in order to do so sold my diamond brooch, which I scarcely ever had the occasion to wear. I got £10 for it and I sent him notes to that amount—he little guessed at what cost.”

“My poor, persecuted, self-sacrificing little woman; why did you not tell me all this? Why could you not trust me?”

“Why could you not trust me?” Marian demanded half playfully, half pathetically. Then she added earnestly, “I have been very much to blame. I was proud and self-willed and all sorts of bad things, and then leaving you was worse than all. Harold, dear, I am so ashamed of myself for that. No woman is justified in leaving her husband on so slight a pretext as I had.”

I thought so too. She was becoming the most sensible little woman in the world; but I had been to blame too, and was not going to let all the magnanimity be on her side.

“We were both to blame,” I replied. “I am not going to exonerate you quite, little wife, but I am going to own to my fault. I was a brute to doubt you. Marian, you must forgive me, dear.”

“Oh, Harold! We shall be so happy again now, shan't we?” the little woman replied; and then she wound up our reconciliation in a truly womanly style, with tears and smiles and kisses.

But the mystery of the money was still more dark after Marian's explanation, and it was months before we penetrated it. We did so at last, however.

Our piano being sadly in want of repair, I sent to a professional man to come and “do it up.” I was in the room when he proceeded to take it to pieces. As soon as the front was removed, I perceived a little black box snugly lodged inside, which I immediately recognized. My grand idea now flashed into my mind. Here, then, was the clue to the mystery. I was the thief. In my anxiety I had placed the money in the piano, while still under the influence of sleep.

Marian was delighted. She actually shed tears of joy when I told her of my discovery.

“Oh, you abandoned man,” she said, shaking her head at me, “to suspect me when all the time you had stolen your own money. —*Cassell's Magazine*.”

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