

A FIRESIDE STORY

TOLD BY THE POKER

THE hearthrug ought to tell this story, because she had much more to do with it than I had. But, spread out there before the fire from morning to night, she thinks only of making herself comfortable, and I daresay considers it a hardship to be shaken out of her drowsy self-sufficiency even once in the twenty-four hours. So if the story is never told till the hearthrug takes to story-telling, nobody, I fancy, is ever likely to be the better for listening to it. The fender, I am bound to add, is very little more inclined to exert himself unnecessarily. As for the tongs and shovel, they are not quite so indolent, and I wish them joy of the compliment. The hare has not much to be proud of in being able to run faster than the snail. I don't think too much of my own activity therefore, when I say, that but for an occasional waking up on my part, we should fairly be considered a slow and sleepy lot. What I mean by all this is, that it is not out of conceit of my own ability that I now put myself forward to tell this story. I do so simply because I am the only one of our fireside companionship with energy enough in his composition to take so much trouble for the benefit and warning of domineering wives in particular, and in the interests of husbands in general; and I adhere to my original opinion, that the hearthrug ought to have told it.

Should the observation I am going to make at starting happen to be repeated within hearing of any individual following the same calling as myself, he will, I am sure, understand in a moment my feelings when I say that my mistress's face, in fact her person altogether, is such a one as a drawing-room poker reflects with warm and invariable satisfaction. As to her other good qualities, I shall not express my own opinion, which might be open to the suspicion of partiality, but shall report rather that of Mr. John Thomas the footman in his own words, uttered one morning while he was in the act of putting coals on the fire, a moment after she had left the room: "By George! master's a lucky man to have such a wife! If I was sure Amelia Catharine" (upper housemaid, equally good-looking and well-conducted) "would make me such another, blow me if I wouldn't marry her without even asking to see her savings'-bank book!" Mr. John Thomas had lived in many other families, and was therefore qualified to speak knowingly on such a subject. My own impression is, that his admiration of his mistress, in her capacity of wife of his master, is abundantly justified. Of Mr. Silver, my master, I have only to say that, though he is a member of the Stock Exchange and any thing but a saint, he is certainly not at all a bad sort of gentleman. He uses me a little roughly at times; but if it were not that in doing so he makes his wife start

unpleasantly on her chair, I should not object to be so treated—should rather like it, in fact. That they are a thoroughly happy pair is what any one would soon discover who had my opportunities for observing them together,—a privilege I have used judiciously, and without a suspicion of impertinence, I hope I may safely say, for very little short of ten years: to be precise, from about the seventh day after their return from their honeymoon trip, when my mistress took formal possession of her home, and sent my rusty predecessor travelling on the way of all old iron.

Premising that from my recumbent position on the fender I saw and heard every thing I am about to relate, this is my story:

Fires had not yet been begun in the drawing-room, but, from the force of habit I suppose, Mrs. Silver, when there was no company, would sit reading or at work by the side of the fireplace while her husband went for a ride after dinner, which he did very often in the summer twilight. One evening while thus seated alone, I noticed that she paused reflectively, and presently I heard her say:

“No, no; I’ll not remind him. To say to him, ‘My love, for the first time in ten years you have forgotten the return of our wedding-day,’ might sound like a reproach. No; neither tears nor reproaches belong to a day from which date ten years of tranquil happiness. I am sure his forgetfulness arises from no want of love for me. Active and occupied as he is, I know how many other things he has to think of. If he *had* remembered—well, it would have been very delightful. However, since he has chanced to forget, let me reflect that his memory might be as retentive as that of the almanac, and yet he might not love me. No; if I avenge his forgetfulness, it shall be in my own way—by making the fireside of which he is so fond more than usually pleasant to him this evening.”

Mrs. Silver smiled and resumed her work, which that evening was a handsome smoking-cap she was embroidering for master; but I certainly saw the beginning of a tear in one of her eyes—the one nearest to me.

“The other day,” she continued, meditatively, “he was regretting that the old custom of having hot suppers had passed away. I’ve a good mind to surprise him with one to-night! Yes, I will do it! But what shall it be?—what is he specially fond of?”

I beg here to be allowed to say that though I have never had any other mistress than the lady whose behaviour I am now describing, a poker who for ten years has been in the very best middle-class society, and who has assisted at the reading aloud of all the fashionable novels and a few of the most interesting divorce cases, is able to understand the exact difference between the best and the worst of wives.

“Ah! I know what I will order!” cried my mistress, after a long pause; “a lobster *rissole*, a roasted chicken, and a lemon-pudding. That shall be my great revenge.”

She was just about to ring the bell, when the drawing-room door

was suddenly opened, and a lady friend of hers, too much agitated to stand on ordinary ceremony, flounced into the room, exclaiming in tones which reminded me of the grating of a file—with which inharmonious noise I had been painfully familiar at an earlier part of my career—for even a poker can attest the truth of the French proverb, *il faut souffrir pour être beau*—

“My dear, I knew you *were* at home, so came up—only for a moment. Don’t disturb yourself. I’ve no time to sit down. I’m boiling over with indignation!”

“Dear me!” replied my mistress.

“Quite as much on your account as on my own, my love!” cried Mrs. Toovey, throwing herself on to the ottoman in the centre of the room, and untying her bonnet-strings almost fiercely.

“It’s very good of you, I’m sure,” said my mistress.

“You may smile, my love, but it’s no smiling matter for all that, I can assure you,” cried Mrs. Toovey.

“Not tragic, I hope?”

“I don’t know that!” replied Mrs. Toovey, whisking her shawl out of the way, and plunging her hand into the pocket of her dress. “Do you know this handwriting?”

Mrs. Toovey held out a letter to my mistress, as if it had been a cup of poison.

“I’ve no doubt it’s my husband’s,” said my mistress, without taking it out of Mrs. Toovey’s hand.

“Read it, my dear, read it!” cried that indignant lady.

“Pray excuse me; I see it is addressed to *Mr.* Toovey,” my mistress said gently.

“O,” cried Mrs. Toovey, “take my word for it, you’ll some day repent of indulging in such silly scruples. A husband and wife are one, and the wife cannot too often or too emphatically remind her husband of the fact. At least you’ll not refuse to listen to the contents of this atrocious document?”

I don’t think any refusal would have induced Mrs. Toovey to defer the reading of the letter for a single moment. She read:

“My dear Job, the supper-party of to-night, married and single, may count on me, even to the extent of an adjournment to Cremorne. I shall not say any thing about the affair to my wife, who would be fancying all sorts of dreadful consequences inevitable.”

“There, my dear! what do you say to *that*?” demanded Mrs. Toovey, refolding the letter with a spiteful jerkiness of action, and putting it back into her pocket, as if for further use.

“I say that I am much obliged to Mr. Silver for the thoughtful care he had taken to keep me in ignorance of what he fancied it might be unpleasant for me to know.”

Mrs. Toovey gave herself so sharp a twist on the ottoman, that I wonder she did not lose her balance and tumble off.

“Really, my dear,” she cried, “you—I must say—you make the blood curdle in my veins! You appear so wilfully blind that, positively, if I didn’t know you have been married to the man for ten years, I should fancy you were still in love with your husband.”

“Your imagination would not lead you in the least astray,” answered my mistress, quietly smiling; “I daresay I ought to be very much ashamed to make such a confession. But don’t for a moment suppose that my love for my husband is of the high romantic kind; it never was that. He did not run away with me in a midnight storm of thunder and lightning, and marry me in spite of all the world, his parents and mine included. Time, if it has made me acquainted with his faults, has also taught me to bear with them without disgust, impatience, or weariness. There is nothing to be surprised at in the continuance of such a love as mine—entirely unromantic, jog-trot, you see. Such as it, the sort of love I now feel for my husband, I hope to feel for him when my hair is gray, without blushing to confess it.”

Mrs. Toovey tied her bonnet-strings as tightly as if her chin had been a package of hardware, and she had been cording it for exportation.

“My dear,” she cried, “I can hardly trust myself to say what I think; but this I *will* say: if any wife ever went the way to spoil her husband, you are going exactly that way now. Patience with his faults, indeed! Mr. Toovey, I daresay, would be delighted to find me patient with his—and heaven knows he has enough of them! But that is not *my* nature. I know my duty as a woman of intellect a little better than *that*! Why, my love, I have just come from having a scene with him about this shocking letter of your husband’s. I made him confess every thing: that after supper the whole party are to go to Cremorne. *Are* they! ‘Mr. Toovey,’ I said, ‘you dare to go, and I’ll follow you!’ What is the result? Mr. Toovey has learned that when I say a thing I mean it. He has promised me he will not think of going, after my prohibition. Do, my love, let me give you some advice on the way to manage your husband.”

“O, certainly, if it will afford you any satisfaction to do so,” replied my mistress, with a good-natured little laugh.

“You won’t laugh, my dear,” said Mrs. Toovey, “when you find out, some day, that another woman has carried off your husband’s affections; and not only his affections, but his fortune—for that’s what commonly happens now. However, I see plainly enough you are prepared to despise my advice, and to laugh at my solemn warning. So be it. But, take my word for it, you’ll find too soon what cause you have for repentance.”

“I hope not. Really, my dear, you seem determined to imagine my husband a second Lovelace. You forget that he is not a young man of twenty.”

“Good heavens, my dear!” exclaimed Mrs. Toovey; “what have their *ages* to do with it?”

“Well, even if that is so,” replied my mistress, smiling; “my husband is as ungallant a man as you could name.”

“To *you*, perhaps, my love,” answered the amiable Toovey, with her sweetest smile. If it had been winter, and I had happened to be red-hot, I should have been strongly tempted to throw myself at the lady’s feet, and set fire to her at this particular moment.

“To you also, dear; for, you remember, it is only a few days ago you were complaining of his ‘shocking want of politeness.’”

“Very likely; but his rudeness to *me* is easily accounted for. It is because I give you what he considers ill advice; which means that he fears to lose the power he now enjoys of tyrannising over you at his pleasure.”

“My dear, have you ever written a sensation novel?” asked my mistress, with an arch smile playing about the corners of her mouth.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You have such a vivid imagination; the portrait you have drawn of my husband so much resembles that of a romance-hero,” replied my mistress.

“Pray let us drop the subject,” cried Mrs. Toovey. “Positively your notions are an outrage to common sense.”

“I’m sure, my dear, I hope to be forgiven. You see the scope of my mind is so very prosaic; you’ll think so, no doubt, when I tell you that at the moment you came I was busy planning a little unromantic hot supper for my Blue Beard—especially a lemon-pudding, of which I know he is particularly fond.”

“You’ll find you have had your labour for your pains, for he will certainly not be at home to partake of it.”

“My own impression is that he *will*,” said my mistress gently. “Will you and your husband drop in at ten o’clock?”

“With pleasure, my dear; for I am sure you will be alone, and glad of sympathetic company. Do, my love, allow *me* to remonstrate with your husband, if you don’t feel equal to the task yourself.”

“No, no; pray don’t do any thing of the sort!” cried my mistress hastily. “You are not so well acquainted with my husband as I am, and might do me more harm than good.”

“Just as you please, my dear,” said Mrs. Toovey, starting to her feet, and pulling her shawl about her shoulders with a spasmodic action of the hands. “Just as you please, of course; though I did not think I was quite such a fool as *you* appear to consider me.”

Saying which Mrs. Toovey flounced out of the room even more impetuously than she had flounced into it.

“The foolish creature!” said my mistress, after she was gone; “it is no fault of hers if she hasn’t made me very uncomfortable; and all with the best intentions. Those best intentions! What would she not have said if she had known that to-day is my wedding-day? But I am sure my husband does not care to go to this supper-party. He has

been drawn into it; and if he had declined to go, might have been rallied on being under petticoat dominion. I know I have only to say to him, 'I wish you would not go out to-night;' but I will not say it, for there is a tyranny of gentleness as well as of unkindness."

She paused for a moment or two; and then, as if an idea had come into her head, rang the bell.

"I *should* like him to remain at home this evening," she continued; "but if he does so, it shall be from the prompting of his own feelings alone. John, bring your master's dressing-gown and cigar-case."

She said this to Mr. John Thomas as she passed out of the drawing-room. In the course of a few minutes her orders had been obeyed. Almost immediately afterwards my master and Mrs. Toovey came into the room together.

"I can't help it, Mr. Silver," she said, "if what I say isn't pleasant for you to hear. I repeat that you are setting my husband a bad example; and I have told him that I will not allow him to have any thing to do with the supper-party to-night."

"Very well, my dear madam!" cried my master impatiently; "if Toovey likes you to lead him by the nose, that's his affair; it wouldn't suit me."

"Possibly; but you'll allow me to say that I don't believe there's another woman in the world who would put up with such behaviour as your wife has borne with hitherto. Do not suppose, however, that she will submit to your tyranny for ever. You are greatly mistaken if you imagine she will let you go to this scandalous party to-night. Poor thing," she said aside; "I must defend her in spite of herself."

"Confound it, Mrs. Toovey!" cried my master; "I wish you'd mind your own business, and not drive me into saying disagreeable things to you."

"I have only one more remark to make, Mr. Silver," said Mrs. Toovey; "it is to request that you will not hold any further communication with my husband; I'll not have him corrupted by your bad example."

"Go to ——"

I don't think my master named any final destination for Mrs. Toovey, who sailed out of the room with more anger than dignity.

"Hang the woman!" exclaimed my master, ringing the bell, as if that were the order of execution; "I can't imagine how Job Toovey manages to get along with her. What the deuce does she want here?—filling my wife's head with a lot of rubbish, I'll be bound."

Mr. John Thomas came in answer to the bell.

"See that my evening dress is all ready," said my master sharply.

"Evening dress, sir? mistress told me to bring your dressing-gown—"

"Who is master here? Go instantly and do as I tell you!" cried my master.

“Yes, sir,—of course, sir,” cried Mr. John Thomas in a bewildered state of mind, in which condition he hurried from the room.

“I see what has happened,” said my master, as soon as he was left alone. “I’m to be put into leading-strings. Not yet. Laura ought by this time to know that I love her with all my heart, but that I am master of my own actions; and, egad, I intend to remain so!”

My mistress came back into the room, and saw at a glance that Mr. Silver had been put out of temper by something. But she said, as if quite unconscious of any thing being the matter:

“Have you enjoyed your ride, love?”

“Pretty well,” answered my master, drily. “There is no objection to my going out for an hour’s ride in the evening, I hope?”

“Objection?—expressly ordered by your doctor, dear.”

“An intention of mine to go out to supper this evening appears to be not equally unobjectionable?”

“My love!”

“At any rate, Mrs. Toovey—”

“My dear Edward,” said my mistress, interrupting him; “Mrs. Toovey is—Mrs. Toovey; whom, I am sure you will allow, I do not in any way resemble.”

“I am happy to say you don’t,” replied my master; “but why do you encourage her visits?”

“If you recollect, you yourself particularly requested me to cultivate her acquaintance, for the sake of her husband—one of your oldest and most intimate friends.”

“I beg your pardon, dear; I was wrong,” said my master, a little pettishly. “The fact is, the woman’s a tittle-tattler, and may be a mischief-maker.”

“She has done nothing but good in the present instance; since I owe to her the knowledge of the pains you had taken to keep from me a something which you thought it would be uncomfortable for me to learn.”

My master was evidently embarrassed.

“Then, my darling,” he stammered, “my going to this supper does not vex you?”

“In one respect, a little bit; in another, not at all.”

“Might I ask you to explain?” inquired my master, relapsing in the smallest degree into his recent ill-humour.

“O,” cried my mistress, laughing pleasantly, “you don’t expect me to declaim you a speech like a heroine in a melodrama? By the way, that reminds me of something I *can* do. Would you mind putting on your dressing-gown for a moment? I want to see how this cap, which I am embroidering for you, will go with it.”

“Would I mind?” cried my master, taking off his walking-coat and slipping into his dressing-gown; “why it’s a positive pleasure to find an excuse for putting it on. I should like never to wear any thing else.”

“That will do, I think,” said my mistress, after comparing the new cap with the old dressing-gown. “You may take it off now.”

“There’s no need for hurry, my love,” replied my master, throwing himself comfortably into a favourite chair; “I shall not start for this precious supper for another hour. But you were saying that my going out vexed you in one way, though not in another.”

“I meant that I would rather have had you at home this evening, because I had planned a nice little hot supper for you,—a lobster *rissole*, a roasted chicken, and a dainty lemon-pudding.”

“A lemon-pudding!” cried my master.

“But now I’ll tell you why I do not mind your going out to supper: it’s because I know you will get no wine so good as that in your own cellar; no lemon-pudding so nice as the one I’ve had made for you, even if you get any at all; because you’ll have to wear what you call ‘a choker’ instead of your dressing-gown,—have your ears split with noisy conversation,—be bored to death with frothy politics,—and have no opportunity, however much you may wish for it, for saying to your wife, ‘Laura, I love you better than any thing else in the world.’”

What my master did is what I really believe every man in his senses would have done under the circumstances. In other words, he put his arm round his wife’s waist and kissed her, and went on kissing her while the clock on the mantelpiece slowly and distinctly ticked off thirty seconds.

“You see I *must* go, Laura,” he said, not quite *apropos*; “I’ve promised ’em.”

I fancied that I detected just the faintest shade of disappointment fall upon my mistress’s face; but she said quite cheerfully:

“By all means, dear; and if you would like to oblige me, there is one particular neck-tie I should like you to wear to-night. I’ll fetch it.”

She left the room, and in a few minutes returned with a handsome white neck-tie, beautifully embroidered at the ends.

“Why,” exclaimed my master, “this is the one I wore on my wedding-day! And you are really going to let me wear it when you will not even be present?”

“I think you’ll own it’s very magnanimous of me,” answered my mistress, with a very significant twinkle in her eyes; “but quite in accordance with my ordinary heroism of character; and, of course, without a thought in my head of having the lemon-pudding all to myself. But what *are* you doing? I declare you’ve made a perfect rope of it round your neck!”

“By Jove! I’ve done worse—I’ve torn it!” cried my master.

“You have indeed,” replied my mistress. “Ah, well, it’s ten years old.”

“Ten years old? Good heavens, Laura,—what’s the day of the

month?" demanded my master; and then, without waiting to be answered, he threw himself at her feet, exclaiming: "Beat me, my darling! I deserve it; thoughtless, ungrateful brute that I am! A day that was the beginning of so much happiness entirely forgotten! Put away the dear old neck-tie; I shall sup with you, love. Let them wait for me if they like. Half an hour ago I was an ass, making myself and you uncomfortable for fear some people I don't care a pin for should think I preferred your society to theirs,—ashamed of my own happiness, in fact. Let them think I am governed by my wife! You *do* govern me, Laura; I know it; and it shall always be my glory to own the influence of your goodness, kindness, and gentleness. You are the fountain-head of all my happiness; and if it is ridiculous for a man to confess that he loves his wife better than all else in the world, let me appear the most ridiculous of husbands. Laugh with me, Laura! Why, my darling, you are crying!"

Something at that moment affected my sight; but I have no doubt that what my master said was literally true. An instant later, Mr. John Thomas opened the door to announce the return of Mrs. Toovey, but the lady herself entered before he had time to pronounce her name. She appeared both surprised and disgusted to see that pretty little picture of domestic felicity.

"What!" she exclaimed; "are you not gone?"

"No; I am going to sup at home," replied my master.

"When all the rest are gone?" cried Mrs. Toovey. "Ridiculous!"

"Good heavens!" he cried, bursting into laughter; "there's no being in agreement with you, Mrs. Toovey. Half an hour ago you quarrelled with me for proposing to *go*; now you quarrel with me for *not* going."

"But *your* husband, dear?" inquired my mistress.

"Gone, my love! Gone, in spite of all I could do or say to prevent him, after flying into the most dreadful passion, and terrifying me almost to death. I can't understand it at all. It's as if he had suddenly become quite another man—a lion, my love."

And Mrs. Toovey threatened to go instantaneously into hysterics, in proof of the terrible change that had come over her hitherto submissive "lord and master." It required a great deal of persuasion on the part of my mistress to get her to give up the idea of the hysterics in the first place, and in the next, of going to Cremorne to confront her peccant husband, "in the shockingest hansom I can find," as she said.

As to my master's suggestion, that in dealing with the wild beasts called husbands, wives may, in some cases, find coaxing do better than coercion, she emphatically pooh-poohed it, even after a second help of the lemon-pudding at supper—nay, even after more than one glass of cold punch.

I will only say in conclusion, that's my story. If the hearthrug could have told it better, why didn't she tell it?