

**The
Husband's Story**

A NOVEL

BY

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THE HUSBAND'S STORY

WHY

SEVERAL years ago circumstances thrust me into a position in which it became possible for the friend who figures in these pages as Godfrey Loring to do me a favor. He, being both wise and kindly, never misses a good chance to put another under obligations. He did me the favor. I gratefully, if reluctantly, acquiesced. Now, after many days, he collects. When you shall have read what follows, you may utterly reject my extenuating plea that any and every point of view upon life is worthy of attention, even though it serve only to confirm us in our previous ideas and beliefs. You may say that I should have repudiated my debt, should have refused to edit and publish the manuscript he confided to me. You may say that the general racial obligation to mankind—and to womankind—takes precedence over a private and personal obligation. Unfortunately I happen to be not of the philanthropic temperament. My sense of the personal is strong; my sense of the general weak—that is to say, weak in comparison. If “Loring” had been within reach, I think I should have gone to him and pleaded for release. But as luck will have it, he is off yachting, to peep about in the remote inlets and islets of Australasia and the South Seas for several years.

To aggravate my situation, in the letter accompanying the manuscript, after several pages of the discriminating praise most dear to a writer’s heart, he did me the supreme honor of saying that in his work he had “striven to copy as closely as

might be your style and your methods—to help me to the hearing I want and to lighten your labors as editor.” I assure him and the public that in any event I should have done little editing of his curious production beyond such as a proofreader might have found necessary. As it is, I have done practically no editing at all. In form and in substance, from title to finis, the work is his. I am merely its sponsor—and in circumstances that would forbid me were I disposed to qualify my sponsorship with even so mild a disclaimer as reluctance.

Have I said more than a loyal friend should? If so, on the other hand, have I not done all that a loyal friend could?

I

I AM tempted to begin with our arrival in Fifth Avenue, New York City, in the pomp and circumstance befitting that region of regal splendor. I should at once catch the attention of the women; and my literary friends tell me that to make any headway with a story in America it is necessary to catch the women, because the men either do not read books at all or read only what they hear the women talking about. And I know well—none knows better—that our women of the book-buying class, and probably of all classes, love to amuse their useless idleness with books that help them to dream of wasting large sums of money upon luxuries and extravagances, upon entertaining grand people in grand houses and being entertained by them. They tell me, and I believe it, that our women abhor stories of middle-class life, abhor truth-telling stories of any kind, like only what assures them that the promptings of their own vanities and sentimental shams are true.

But patience, gentle reader, you with the foolish, chimera-haunted brain, with the silly ideas of life, with the ignorance of human nature including your own self, with the love of sloppy and tawdry clap trap. Patience, gentle reader. While I shall begin humbly in the social scale, I shall not linger there long. I shall pass on to the surroundings of grandeur that entrance your snobbish soul. You will soon smell only fine perfumes, only the aromas of food cooked by expensive chefs. You will sit in drawing-rooms, lie in bedrooms as magnificent as the

architects and decorators and other purveyors to the very rich have been able to concoct. You will be tasting the fine savors of fashionable names and titles recorded in Burke's and the "Almanach de Gotha." Patience, gentle reader, with your box of caramels and your hair in curl papers and your household work undone—patience! A feast awaits you.

There has been much in the papers these last few years about the splendid families we—my wife and I—came of. Some time ago one of the English dukes—a nice chap with nothing to do and a quaint sense of humor—assembled on his estate for a sort of holiday and picnic all the members of his ancient and proud family who could be got together by several months of diligent search. It was a strange and awful throng that covered the lawns before the ducal castle on the appointed day. There was a handful of fairly presentable, more or less prosperous persons. But the most of the duke's cousins, near and remote, were tramps, bartenders, jail birds, women of the town, field hands male and female, sewer cleaners, chimney sweeps, needlewomen, curates, small shopkeepers, and others of the species that are as a stench unto delicate, aristocratic nostrils. The duke was delighted with his picnic, pronounced it a huge success. But then His Grace had a sense of humor and was not an American aristocrat.

All this by way of preparation for the admission that the branch of the Loring family from which I come and the branch of the Wheatlands family to which the girl I married belongs were far from magnificent, were no more imposing then, well, than the families of any of our American aristocrats. Like theirs, our genealogical tree, most imposingly printed and bound and

proudly exhibited on a special stand in the library of our New York palace—that genealogical tree, for all its air of honesty, for all its documentary proofs, worm-eaten and age-stained, was like an artificial palm bedded in artificial moss. The truth is, aristocracy does not thrive in America, but only the pretense of it, and that must be kept alive by constant renewals. Both here and abroad I am constantly running across traces of illegitimacy, substitution, and other forms of genealogical flim-flam. But let that pass. Whoever is or is not aristocratic, certainly Godfrey Loring and Edna Wheatlands are not—or, rather, *were* not.

My father kept a dejected little grocery in Passaic, N. J. He did not become a “retired merchant and capitalist” until I was able to retire and capitalize him. Edna’s father was— No, you guess wrong. Not a butcher, but—an undertaker!... Whew! I am glad to have these shameful secrets “off the chest,” as they say in the Bowery. He—this Wheatlands, undertaker to the poor and near-poor of the then village of Passaic—was a tall, thin man, with snow-white hair and a smooth, gaunt, gloomy face and the best funeral air I have ever seen. Edna has long since forgotten him; she has an admirable ability absolutely to forget anything she may for whatever reason deem it inconvenient to remember. What an aid to conscience is such a quality! But I have not forgotten old Weeping Willy Wheatlands, and I shall not forget him. It was he who loaned me my first capital, the one that— But I must not anticipate.

In those days Passaic was a lowly and a dreary village. Its best was cheap enough; its poorest was wretchedly squalid. The “seat” of the Lorings and the “seat” of the Wheatlands stood

side by side on the mosquito beset banks of the river—two dingy frame cottages, a story and a half in height, two rooms deep. We Lorings had no money, for my father was an honest, innocent soul with a taste for talking what he thought was politics, though in fact he knew no more of the realities of politics, the game of pull Dick pull Devil for licenses to fleece a “free, proud and intelligent people”—he knew no more of that reality than—than the next honest soul you may hear driveling on that same subject. We had no money, but “Weeping Willie” had plenty—and saved it, blessings on him! I hate to think where I should be now, if he hadn’t hoarded! So, while our straightened way of living was compulsory, that of the Wheatlands was not. But this is unimportant; the main point is both families lived in the same humble way.

If I thought “gentle reader” had patience and real imagination—and, yes, the real poetic instinct—I should give her an inventory of the furniture of those two cottages, and of the meager and patched draperies of the two Monday wash lines, as my mother and Edna’s mother—and Edna, too, when she grew big enough—decorated them, the while shrieking gossip back and forth across the low and battered board fence. But I shall not linger. It is as well. Those memories make me sad—put a choke in my throat and a mist before my eyes. Why? If you can’t guess, I could not in spoiling ten reams of paper explain it to you. One detail only, and I shall hasten on. Both families lived humbly, but we not quite so humbly as the Wheatlands family, because my mother was a woman of some neatness and energy while Ma Wheatlands was at or below the do-easy, slattern human average. *We* had our regular Saturday

bath—in the wash tub. *We* did not ever eat off the stove. And while we were patched we were rarely ragged.

In those days—even in those days—Edna was a “scrapper.” They call it an “energetic and resolute personality” now; it was called “scrappy” then, and scrappy it was. When I would be chopping wood or lugging in coal, so occupied that I did not dare pause, she would sit on the fence in her faded blue-dotted calico, and how she would give it to me! She knew how to say the thing that made me wild with the rage a child is ashamed to show. Yes, she loved to tease me, perhaps—really, I hope—because she knew I, in the bottom of my heart, loved to be teased by her, to be noticed in any way. And mighty pretty she looked then, with her mop of yellowish brown hair and her big golden brown eyes and her little face, whose every feature was tilted to the angle that gives precisely the most fascinating expression of pretty pertness, of precocious intelligence, or of devil-may-care audacity. She has always been a pretty woman, has Edna, and always will be, even in old age, I fancy. Her beauty, like her health, like that strong, supple body of hers, was built to last. What is the matter with the generations coming forward now? Why do they bloom only to wither? What has sapped their endurance? Are they brought up too soft? Is it the food? Is it the worn-out parents? Why am I, at forty, younger in looks and in strength and in taste for life than the youths of thirty? Why is Edna, not five years my junior, more attractive physically than girls of twenty-five or younger?

But she was only eight or nine at the time of which I am writing. And she was fond of me then—really fond of me, though she denied it furiously when the other children taunted, and

though she was always jeering at me, calling me awkward and homely. I don't think I was notably either the one or the other, but for her to say so tended to throw the teasers off the track and also kept me in humble subjection. I knew she cared, because when we played kissing games she would never call me out, would call out every other boy, but if I called any other girl she would sulk and treat me as badly as she knew how. Also, while she had nothing but taunts and sarcasms for me she was always to be found in the Wheatlands' back yard near the fence or on it whenever I was doing chores in our back yard.

After two years in the High School I went to work in the railway office as a sort of assistant freight clerk. She kept on at school, went through the High School, graduated in a white dress with blue ribbons, and then sat down to wait for a husband. Her father and mother were sensible people. Heaven knows they had led a hard enough life to have good sense driven into them. But the tradition—the lady-tradition—was too strong for them. They were not ashamed to work, themselves. They would have been both ashamed and angry had it been suggested to them that their two boys should become idlers. But they never thought of putting their daughter to work at anything. After she graduated and became a young lady, she was not compelled—would hardly have been permitted—to do housework or sewing. You have seen the potted flower in the miserable tenement window—the representative of the life that neither toils nor spins, but simply exists in idle beauty. That potted bloom concentrates all the dreams, all the romantic and poetic fancies of the tenement family. I suppose Edna was some such treasured exotic

possession to those toil-twisted old parents of hers. They wanted a flower in the house.

Well, they had it. She certainly was a lovely girl, far too lovely to be spoiled by work. And if ever there was a scratch or a stain on those beautiful white hands of hers, it assuredly was not made by toil. She took music lessons— Music lessons! How much of the ridiculous, pathetic gropings after culture is packed into those two words. Beyond question, everyone ought to know something about music; we should all know something about everything, especially about the things that peculiarly stand for civilization—science and art, literature and the drama. But how foolishly we are set at it! Instead of learning to understand and to appreciate music, we are taught to “beat the box” in a feeble, clumsy fashion, or to screech or whine when we have no voice worth the price of a single lesson. Edna took I don’t know how many lessons a week for I don’t know how many years. She learned nothing about music. She merely learned to strum on the piano. But, after all, the lessons attained their real object. They made Edna’s parents and Edna herself and all the neighbors feel that she was indeed a lady. She could not sew. She could not cook. She hadn’t any knowledge worth mention of any practical thing—therefore, had no knowledge at all; for, unless knowledge is firmly based upon and in the practical, it is not knowledge but that worst form of ignorance, misinformation. She didn’t know a thing that would help her as woman, wife, or mother. But she could play the piano!

Some day some one will write something true on the subject of education. You remember the story of the girl from Lapland

who applied for a place as servant in New York, and when they asked her what she could do, she said, "I can milk the reindeer."

I never hear the word education that I don't think of that girl. One half of the time spent at school, to estimate moderately, and nine tenths of the time spent in college class rooms is given to things about as valuable to a citizen of this world as the Lap girl's "education" to a New York domestic. If anyone tells you that those valueless things are culture, tell him that only an ignorance still becalmed in the dense mediæval fog would talk such twaddle; tell him that science has taught us what common sense has always shown, that there is no beauty divorced from use, that beauty is simply the perfect adaptation of the thing to be used to the purpose for which it is to be used. I am a business man, not a smug, shallow-pated failure teaching in an antiquated college. I abhor the word culture, as I abhor the word gentleman or the word lady, because of the company into which it has fallen. So, while I eagerly disclaim any taint of "culture," I insist that I know what I'm talking about when I talk of education. And if I had not been too good-natured, my girl— But I must keep to the story. "Gentle reader" wants a story; he—or she—does not want to try to think.

It was pleasant to my ignorant ears to hear Edna playing sonatas and classical barcaroles and dead marches and all manner of loud and difficult pieces. Such sounds, issuing from the humble—and not too clean—Wheatlands house gave it an atmosphere of aristocracy, put tone into the whole neighborhood, elevated the Wheatlands family like a paper collar on the calico shirt of a farm hand. If we look at ourselves

rightly, we poor smattering seekers after a little showy knowledge of one kind or another—a dabble of French, a dabble of Latin or Greek, a sputter of woozy so-called philosophy—how like the paper-collared farm hand we are, how like the Hottentot chief with a plug hat atop his naked brown body.

But Edna pleased me, fully as much as she pleased herself, and that is saying a great deal. I wouldn't have had her changed in the smallest particular. I was even glad she could get rid of her freckles—fascinating little beauty spots sprinkled upon her tip-tilted little nose!

She was not so fond of me in those days. I had a rival. I am leaning back and laughing as I think of him. Charley Putney! He was clerk in a largish dry goods store. He is still a clerk there, I believe, and no doubt is still the same cheaply scented, heavily pomatumed clerkly swell he was in the days when I feared and hated him. The store used to close at six o'clock. About seven of summer evenings Charley would issue forth from his home to set the hearts of the girls to fluttering. They were all out, waiting. Down the street he would come with his hat set a little back to show the beautiful shine and part and roach of his hair. The air would become delicious (!) with bergamot, occasionally varied by German cologne or lemon verbena. What a jaunty, gay tie! What an elegant suit! And he wore a big seal ring, reputed to be real gold—and such lively socks! Down the street came Charley, all the girls palpitant. At which stoop or front gate would he stop?

Often—only too often—it was at the front gate next ours. How I hated him!

And the cap of the joke is that Edna nearly married him. In this land where the social stairs are crowded like Jacob's Ladder with throngs ascending and descending, what a history it would make if the grown men and women of any generation should tell whom they *almost* married!

Yes, Edna came very near to marrying him. She was a lady. She did not know exactly what that meant. The high-life novels she read left her hazy on the subject, because to understand any given thing we must have knowledge that enables us to connect it with the things we already know. A snowball would be an unfathomable mystery to a savage living in an equatorial plain. A matter of politics or finance or sociology or real art, real literature, real philosophy, seems dull and meaningless to a woman or to the average mutton-brained man. But if you span the gap between knowledge of any subject and a woman's or a man's ignorance of that subject with however slender threads of connecting knowledge, she or he can at once bridge it and begin to reap the new fields. Edna could not find any thread whatever for the gap between herself and that fairy land of high life the novels told her about. In those days there was no high life in Passaic. I suppose there is now—or, at least, Passaic thinks there is—and in purely imaginary matters the delusion of possession is equal to, even better than, possession itself. So, with no high life to use as a measure, with only the instinct that her white smooth hands and her dresses modeled on the latest Paris fashions as illustrated in the monthly "Lady Book," and her music lessons, her taste for what she then regarded as literature—with only her instinct that all these hallmarks must stamp her twenty-four carat lady, she had to look about her for a matching gentleman. And there was

Charley, the one person within vision who suggested the superb heroes of the high-life novels. I will say to the credit of her good taste that she had her doubts about Charley. Indeed, if his sweet smell and his smooth love-making—Charley excelled as a love-maker, being the born ladies' man—if the man, or, rather, the boy, himself had not won her heart, she would soon have tired of him and would have suspected his genuineness as a truly gentleman. But she fell in love with him.

There was a long time during which I thought the reason she returned to me—or, rather, let me return to her—was because she fell out of love with him. Then there was a still longer time when I thought the reason was the fact that the very Saturday I got a raise to fourteen a week, he fell from twelve to eight. But latterly I have known the truth. How many of us know the truth, the down-at-the-bottom, absolute truth, about why she married us instead of the other fellow? Very few, I guess—or we'd be puffing our crops and flirting our feathers less cantily. She took up with me again because he dropped her. It was he that saved her, not she or I. Only a few months ago, her old mother, doddering on in senility, with memory dead except for early happenings, and these fresh and vivid, said: "And when I think how nigh Edny come to marryin' up with that there loud-smelling dude of a Charley Putney! If he hadn't 'a give her the go by, she'd sure 'a made a fool of herself—a wantin' me and her paw to offer him money and a job in the undertakin' store, to git him back. Lawsy me! What a narrer squeak fur Princess Edny!"

Be patient, gentle reader! You shall soon be reading things that will efface the coarse impression my old mother-in-law's

language and all these franknesses about our beginnings must have made upon your refined and cultured nature. Swallow a caramel and be patient. But don't skip these pages. If you should, you would miss the stimulating effect of contrast, not to speak of other benefits which I, probably vainly, hope to confer upon you.

She didn't love me. Looking back, I see that for many months she found it difficult to endure me. But it was necessary that she carry off—with the neighborhood rather than with me—her pretense of having cast off Charley because she preferred me. We can do wonders in the way of concealing wounded pride; we can do equal wonders in the way of preserving a reputation for unbroken victory. And I believe she honestly liked me. Perhaps she liked me even more than she liked her aromatic Charley; for, it by no means follows that we like best where we love most. I am loth to believe—I do not believe—that at so early an age, not quite seventeen, she could have received my caresses and returned them with plausibility enough to deceive me, unless she had genuinely liked me.

And what a lucky fellow I thought myself! And how I patronized the perfumed man. And what a thrashing I gave him—poor, harmless, witless creature!—when I heard of his boastings that he had dropped Edna Wheatlands because he found Sally Simpson prettier and more *cultured*!

I must have been a railway man born. At twenty-two—no, six months after my majority—I was jumped into a head clerkship at twelve hundred a year. Big pay for a youngster in those days; not so bad for a youngster even in these inflated years. When I brought Edna the news I think she began to love me. To her

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