Men, Women, and Ghosts

by

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Note.

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E. S. P.

Andover, April, 1869.

Contents.

No News.

None at all. Understand that, please, to begin with. That you will at once, and distinctly, recall Dr. Sharpe--and his wife, I make no doubt. Indeed, it is because the history is a familiar one, some of the unfamiliar incidents of which have come into my possession, that I undertake to tell it.

My relation to the Doctor, his wife, and their friend, has been in many respects peculiar. Without entering into explanations which I am not at liberty to make, let me say, that those portions of their story which concern our present purpose, whether or not they fell under my personal observation, are accurately, and to the best of my judgment impartially, related.

Nobody, I think, who was at the wedding, dreamed that

there would ever
be such a story to tell. It was such a pretty, peaceful wedding! If you
were there, you remember it as you remember a rare sunrise, or a
peculiarly delicate May-flower, or that strain in a simple old song
which is like orioles and butterflies and dew-drops.

There were not many of us; we were all acquainted with one another; the
day was bright, and Harrie did not faint nor cry. There were a couple
of bridesmaids,--Pauline Dallas, and a Miss--Jones, I think,--besides
Harrie's little sisters; and the people were well dressed and well
looking, but everybody was thoroughly at home, comfortable, and on a
level. There was no annihilating of little country friends in gray
alpacas by city cousins in point and pearls, no crowding and no crush,
and, I believe, not a single "front breadth" spoiled by the ices.

Harrie is not called exactly pretty, but she must be a very plain woman
who is not pleasant to see upon her wedding day. Harrie's eyes shone,--I
never saw such eyes! and she threw her head back like a queen whom they
were crowning.

Her father married them. Old Mr. Bird was an odd man, with odd notions
of many things, of which marriage was one. The service was his own. I
afterwards asked him for a copy of it, which I have preserved. The
Covenant ran thus:--

"Appealing to your Father who is in heaven to witness your sincerity,
you .... do now take this woman whose hand you hold--

choosing her alone
from all the world--to be your lawfully wedded wife. You trust her as
your best earthly friend. You promise to love, to cherish, and to
protect her; to be considerate of her happiness in your plans of life;
to cultivate for her sake all manly virtues; and in all things to seek
her welfare as you seek your own. You pledge yourself thus honorably to
her, to be her husband in good faith, so long as the providence of God
shall spare you to each other.

"In like manner, looking to your Heavenly Father for his blessing, you
... do now receive this man, whose hand you hold, to be your lawfully
wedded husband. You choose him from all the world as he has chosen you.
You pledge your trust to him as your best earthly friend. You promise to
love, to comfort, and to honor him; to cultivate for his sake all
womanly graces; to guard his reputation, and assist him in his life's
work; and in all things to esteem his happiness as your own. You give
yourself thus trustfully to him, to be his wife in good faith, so long
as the providence of God shall spare you to each other."

When Harrie lifted her shining eyes to say, "I _do_!" the two little
happy words ran through the silent room like a silver bell; they would
have tinkled in your ears for weeks to come if you had heard them.

I have been thus particular in noting the words of the service, partly
because they pleased me, partly because I have since had some occasion
to recall them, and partly because I remember having

wondered, at the time, how many married men and women of your and my acquaintance, if honestly subjecting their union to the test and full interpretation and remotest bearing of such vows as these, could live in the sight of God and man as "lawfully wedded" husband and wife.

Weddings are always very sad things to me; as much sadder than burials as the beginning of life should be sadder than the end of it. The readiness with which young girls will flit out of a tried, proved, happy home into the sole care and keeping of a man whom they have known three months, six, twelve, I do not profess to understand. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it. But that may be because I am fifty-five, an old maid, and have spent twenty years in boarding-houses.

A woman reads the graces of a man at sight. His faults she cannot thoroughly detect till she has been for years his wife. And his faults are so much more serious a matter to her than hers to him!

I was thinking of this the day before the wedding. I had stepped in from the kitchen to ask Mrs. Bird about the salad, when I came abruptly, at the door of the sitting-room, upon as choice a picture as one is likely to see.

The doors were open through the house, and the wind swept in and out. A scarlet woodbine swung lazily back and forth beyond the window. Dimples of light burned through it, dotting the carpet and the

black-and-white marbled oilcloth of the hall. Beyond, in the little front parlor, framed in by the series of doorways, was Harrie, all in a cloud of white. It floated about her with an idle, wavelike motion. She had a veil like fretted pearls through which her tinted arm shone faintly, and the shadow of a single scarlet leaf trembled through a curtain upon her forehead.

Her mother, crying a little, as mothers will cry the day before the wedding, was smoothing with tender touch a tiny crease upon the cloud; a bridesmaid or two sat chattering on the floor; gloves, and favors, and flowers, and bits of lace like hoar frost, lay scattered about; and the whole was repictured and reflected and reshaded in the great old-fashioned mirrors before which Harrie turned herself about.

It seemed a pity that Myron Sharpe should miss that, so I called him in from the porch where he sat reading Stuart Mill on Liberty.

If you form your own opinion of a man who might spend a livelong morning,--an October morning, quivering with color, alive with light, sweet with the breath of dropping pines, soft with the caress of a wind that had filtered through miles of sunshine,--and that the morning of the day before his wedding,--reading Stuart Mill on Liberty,--I cannot help it.

Harrie, turning suddenly, saw us,--met her lover's eyes, stood a moment

with lifted lashes and bright cheeks,--crept with a quick, impulsive movement into her mother's arms, kissed her, and floated away up the stairs.

"It's a perfect fit," said Mrs. Bird; coming out with one corner of a very dingy handkerchief--somebody had just used it to dust the Parian vases--at her eyes.

And though, to be sure, it was none of my business, I caught myself saying, under my breath,--

"It's a fit for life; for a _life_, Dr. Sharpe."

Dr. Sharpe smiled serenely. He was very much in love with the little pink-and-white cloud that had just fluttered up the stairs. If it had been drifting to him for the venture of twenty lifetimes, he would have felt no doubt of the "fit."

Nor, I am sure, would Harrie. She stole out to him that evening after the bridal finery was put away, and knelt at his feet in her plain little muslin dress, her hair all out of crimp, slipping from her net behind her ears,--Harrie's ears were very small, and shaded off in the colors of a pale apple-blossom,--up-turning her flushed and weary face.

"Put away the book, please, Myron."

Myron put away the book (somebody on Bilious Affections), and looked for a moment without speaking at the up-turned face.

Dr. Sharpe had spasms of distrusting himself amazingly; perhaps most men

have,--and ought to. His face grew grave just then. That little girl's clear eyes shone upon him like the lights upon an altar. In very unworthiness of soul he would have put the shoes from off his feet. The ground on which he trod was holy.

When he spoke to the child, it was in a whisper:--

"Harrie, are you afraid of me? I know I am not very good."

And Harrie, kneeling with the shadows of the scarlet leaves upon her hair, said softly, "How could I be afraid of you? It is _I_ who am not good."

Dr. Sharpe could not have made much progress in Bilious Affections that evening. All the time that the skies were fading, we saw them wandering in and out among the apple-trees,--she with those shining eyes, and her hand in his. And when to-morrow had come and gone, and in the dying light they drove away, and Miss Dallas threw old Grandmother Bird's little satin boot after the carriage, the last we saw of her was that her hand was clasped in his, and that her eyes were shining.

Well, I believe that they got along very well till the first baby came. As far as my observation goes, young people usually get along very well till the first baby comes. These particular young people had a clear conscience,--as young people's consciences go,--fair health, a comfortable income for two, and a very pleasant home.

This home was on the coast. The townspeople made shoes,

and minded their
own business. Dr. Sharpe bought the dying practice of an antediluvian
who believed in camomile and castor-oil. Harrie mended a few stockings,
made a few pies, and watched the sea.

It was almost enough of itself to make one happy--the sea--as it
tumbled about the shores of Lime. Harrie had a little seat hollowed out
in the cliffs, and a little scarlet bathing-dress, which was
surprisingly becoming, and a little boat of her own, moored in a little
bay,--a pretty shell which her husband had had made to order, that she
might be able to row herself on a calm water. He was very thoughtful for
her in those days.

She used to take her sewing out upon the cliff; she would be demure and
busy; she would finish the selvage seam; but the sun blazed, the sea
shone, the birds sang, all the world was at play,--what could it matter
about selvage seams? So the little gold thimble would drop off, the
spool trundle down the cliff, and Harrie, sinking back into a cushion of
green and crimson sea-weed, would open her wide eyes and dream. The
waves purpled and silvered, and broke into a mist like powdered amber,
the blue distances melted softly, the white sand glittered, the gulls
were chattering shrilly. What a world it was!

"And he is in it!" thought Harrie. Then she would smile and shut her
eyes. "And the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that Moses'
face shone, and they were afraid to come nigh him." Harrie wondered if

everybody's joy were too great to look upon, and wondered, in a
childish, frightened way, how it might be with sorrow; if people stood
with veiled faces before it, dumb with pain as she with peace,--and then
it was dinner-time, and Myron came down to walk up the beach with her,
and she forgot all about it.

She forgot all about everything but the bare joy of life and the sea,
when she had donned the pretty scarlet suit, and crept out into the
surf,--at the proper medicinal hour, for the Doctor was very particular
with her,--when the warm brown waves broke over her face, the long
sea-weeds slipped through her fingers, the foam sprinkled her hair with
crystals, and the strong wind was up.

She was a swift swimmer, and as one watched from the shore, her lithe
scarlet shoulders seemed to glide like a trail of fire through the
lighted water; and when she sat in shallow foam with sunshine on her, or
flashed through the dark green pools among the rocks, or floated with
the incoming tide, her great bathing-hat dropping shadows on her wet
little happy face, and her laugh ringing out, it was a pretty sight.

But a prettier one than that, her husband thought, was to see her in her
boat at sunset; when sea and sky were aflame, when every flake of foam
was a rainbow, and the great chalk-cliffs were blood-red; when the wind
blew her net off, and in pretty petulance she pulled her hair down, and
it rippled all about her as she dipped into the blazing West.

Dr. Sharpe used to drive home by the beach, on a fair night, always, that he might see it. Then Harrie would row swiftly in, and spring into the low, broad buggy beside him, and they rode home together in the fragrant dusk. Sometimes she used to chatter on these twilight drives; but more often she crept up to him and shut her eyes, and was as still as a sleepy bird. It was so pleasant to do nothing but be happy!

I believe that at this time Dr. Sharpe loved his wife as unselfishly as he knew how. Harrie often wrote me that he was "very good." She was sometimes a little troubled that he should "know so much more" than she, and had fits of reading the newspapers and reviewing her French, and studying cases of hydrophobia, or some other pleasant subject which had a professional air. Her husband laughed at her for her pains, but nevertheless he found her so much the more entertaining. Sometimes she drove about with him on his calls, or amused herself by making jellies in fancy moulds for his poor, or sat in his lap and discoursed like a bobolink of croup and measles, pulling his whiskers the while with her pink fingers.

All this, as I have said, was before the first baby came.

It is surprising what vague ideas young people in general, and young men in particular, have of the rubs and jars of domestic life; especially domestic life on an income of eighteen hundred, American constitutions

and country servants thrown in.

Dr. Sharpe knew something of illness and babies and worry and watching; but that his own individual baby should deliberately lie and scream till two o'clock in the morning, was a source of perpetual astonishment to him; and that it,--he and Mrs. Sharpe had their first quarrel over his persistence in calling the child an "it,"--that it should _invariably_ feel called upon to have the colic just as he had fallen into a nap, after a night spent with a dying patient, was a phenomenon of the infant mind for which he was, to say the least, unprepared.

It was for a long time a mystery to his masculine understanding, that Biddy could not be nursery-maid as well as cook. "Why, what has she to do now? Nothing but to broil steaks and make tea for two people!" That whenever he had Harrie quietly to himself for a peculiarly pleasant tea-table, the house should resound with sudden shrieks from the nursery, and there was _always_ a pin in that baby, was forever a fresh surprise; and why, when they had a house full of company, no "girl," and Harrie down with a sick-headache, his son and heir should of _necessity_ be threatened with scarlatina, was a philosophical problem over which he speculated long and profoundly.

So, gradually, in the old way, the old sweet habits of the long honeymoon were broken. Harrie dreamed no more on the cliffs by the bright noon sea; had no time to spend making scarlet pictures in the little bathing-suit; had seldom strength to row into the

sunset, her hair loose, the bay on fire, and one to watch her from the shore. There were no more walks up the beach to dinner; there came an end to the drives in the happy twilight; she could not climb now upon her husband's knee, because of the heavy baby on her own.

The spasms of newspaper reading subsided rapidly; Corinne and Racine gathered the dust in peace upon their shelves; Mrs. Sharpe made no more fancy jellies, and found no time to inquire after other people's babies.

One becomes used to anything after a while, especially if one happens to be a man. It would have surprised Dr. Sharpe, if he had taken the pains to notice,--which I believe he never did,--how easily he became used to his solitary drives and disturbed teas; to missing Harrie's watching face at door or window; to sitting whole evenings by himself while she sang to the fretful baby overhead with her sweet little tired voice; to slipping off into the "spare room" to sleep when the child cried at night, and Harrie, up and down with him by the hour, flitted from cradle to bed, or paced the room, or sat and sang, or lay and cried herself, in sheer despair of rest; to wandering away on lonely walks; to stepping often into a neighbor's to discuss the election or the typhoid in the village; to forgetting that his wife's conversational capacities could extend beyond Biddy and teething; to forgetting that she might ever hunger for a twilight drive, a sunny sail, for the sparkle and freshness, the dreaming, the petting, the caresses, all

the silly little
lovers' habits of their early married days; to going his own ways, and
letting her go hers.

Yet he loved her, and loved her only, and loved her well. That he never
doubted, nor, to my surprise, did she. I remember once, when on a visit
there, being fairly frightened out of the proprieties by hearing her
call him "Dr. Sharpe." I called her away from the children soon after,
on pretence of helping me unpack. I locked the door, pulled her down
upon a trunk tray beside me, folded both her hands in mine, and studied
her face; it had grown to be a very thin little face, less pretty than
it was in the shadow of the woodbine, with absent eyes and a sad mouth.
She knew that I loved her, and my heart was full for the child; and so,
for I could not help it, I said,--"Harrie, is all well between you? Is
he quite the same?"

She looked at me with a perplexed and musing air.

"The same? O yes, he is quite the same to me. He would always be the
same to me. Only there are the children, and we are so busy. He--why, he
loves me, you know,--" she turned her head from side to side wearily,
with the puzzled expression growing on her forehead,--"he loves me just
the same,--just the same. I am _his wife_; don't you see?"

She drew herself up a little haughtily, said that she heard the baby
crying, and slipped away.

But the perplexed knot upon her forehead did not slip

away. I was rather glad that it did not. I liked it better than the absent eyes. That afternoon she left her baby with Biddy for a couple of hours, went away by herself into the garden, sat down upon a stone and thought.

Harrie took a great deal of comfort in her babies, quite as much as I wished to have her. Women whose dream of marriage has faded a little have a way of transferring their passionate devotion and content from husband to child. It is like anchoring in a harbor,--a pleasant harbor, and one in which it is good to be,--but never on shore and never at home. Whatever a woman's children may be to her, her husband should be always something beyond and more; forever crowned for her as first, dearest, best, on a throne that neither son nor daughter can usurp. Through mistake and misery the throne may be left vacant or voiceless: but what man cometh after the King?

So, when Harrie forgot the baby for a whole afternoon, and sat out on her stone there in the garden thinking, I felt rather glad than sorry.

It was when little Harrie was a baby, I believe, that Mrs. Sharpe took that notion about having company. She was growing out of the world, she said; turning into a fungus; petrifying; had forgotten whether you called your seats at the Music Hall pews or settees, and was as afraid of a well-dressed woman as she was of the croup.

So the Doctor's house at Lime was for two or three months overrun with

visitors and vivacity. Fathers and mothers made fatherly and motherly
stays, with the hottest of air-tights put up for their benefit in the
front room; sisters and sisters-in-law brought the fashions and got up
tableaux; cousins came on the jump; Miss Jones, Pauline Dallas, and I
were invited in turn, and the children had the mumps at cheerful
intervals between.

The Doctor was not much in the mood for entertaining Miss Dallas; he was
a little tired of company, and had had a hard week's work with an
epidemic down town. Harrie had not seen her since her wedding day, and
was pleased and excited at the prospect of the visit. Pauline had been
one of her eternal friendships at school.

Miss Dallas came a day earlier than she was expected, and, as chance
would have it, Harrie was devoting the afternoon to cutting out shirts.
Any one who has sat from two till six at that engaging occupation, will
understand precisely how her back ached and her temples throbbed, and
her fingers stung, and her neck stiffened; why her eyes swam, her cheeks
burned, her brain was deadened, the children's voices were insufferable,
the slamming of a door an agony, the past a blot, the future
unendurable, life a burden, friendship a myth, her hair down, and her
collar unpinned.

Miss Dallas had never cut a shirt, nor, I believe, had Dr. Sharpe.

Harrie was groaning over the last wristband but one, when she heard her

husband's voice in the hall.

"Harrie, Harrie, your friend is here. I found her, by a charming accident, at the station, and drove her home." And Miss Dallas, gloved, perfumed, rustling, in a very becoming veil and travelling-suit of the latest mode, swept in upon her.

Harrie was too much of a lady to waste any words on apology, so she ran just as she was, in her calico dress, with the collar hanging, into Pauline's stately arms, and held up her little burning cheeks to be kissed.

But her husband looked annoyed.

He came down before tea in his best coat to entertain their guest. Biddy was "taking an afternoon" that day, and Harrie bustled about with her aching back to make tea and wash the children. She had no time to spend upon herself, and, rather than keep a hungry traveller waiting, smoothed her hair, knotted a ribbon at the collar, and came down in her calico dress.

Dr. Sharpe glanced at it in some surprise. He repeated the glances several times in the course of the evening, as he sat chatting with his wife's friend. Miss Dallas was very sprightly in conversation; had read some, had thought some; and had the appearance of having read and thought about twice as much as she had.

Myron Sharpe had always considered his wife a handsome woman. That nobody else thought her so had made no difference to