

MY WIFE'S LOSSES.

I have already celebrated my wife's nose; but she has one more peculiar trait which remains to be painted. Bless her little soul! she may not be beautiful as Venus or wise as Minerva, but she is the most amusing wife man ever had.

"Ago cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety."

The other day a young and lovely bride called on us. Her eyes bright, her color glowing, her hair rich and lustrous; the words of truth and soberness fell from her lips. You could not fail to admire her. She would be a model housekeeper, a good mother—"mild, yet firm," as the old owl said to his son, Billy—and decorous, proper, excellent, to the end of her days. Shall I confess that the call bored me exceedingly? I suppose my total depravity came to the surface just then. As for Nan, she turned toward me with a sigh, half-stifled, and a pretty, wistful, enquiring look.

"Isn't she nice, Jack? I declare I do think she's lovely. You can depend on her every time. She'll be just in the right place from now till never. Oh dear."

"Yes," said I, "that's all true, Nan; but there is such a lack of unexpectedness about her that I should hate her in a week."

"Oh, you dear old thing; that's why you love me isn't it?"

And she threw herself into my arms in the most gushing manner, and—bit the tip of my ear! She really did; not entirely in a savage fashion, but as a kitten bites.

"That was unexpected, certainly," said I, with a grimace, rubbing the injured member. But Nan did not sympathize. She withdrew herself calmly, and began to hunt about the room in a most vivacious manner.

"What are you looking for now, Nan?"

She resented the emphasis with a look of rage at me, for this was a sore point. But as the search went on, and she grew desperate, she turned to me and remarked, not too sweetly:

"If you *must* know, I can't find my other ivory needle."

I could not help it—I had to laugh. The needle was struck through the dark knot of her hair like a Roman girl's dagger.

"Oh," said she, when I told her—an "oh" that ought to be written *staccato*, if I had only a bit of score to do it. For my wife's losses are the family delight. Never was such an inconsequent woman made. She knows where all my things are, and reproaches me with the cruelest scorn if I venture to ask where my stockings live, or what has become of my white vest. And the drawers that belong to little Gracilis, her niece, are miracles of order, and the luckless child is visited with awful tirades from her aunty if an apron is mislaid, or a shoe wandering from its own place. This is all very nice for Gracilis and me; but when it comes to her own things, if they were created out of original atoms every time she wanted them, they could not be more astray or longer in coming together.

Well do I remember, when we moved from the hotel to our little house, the anguish of mind which pervaded Nan's atmosphere. But after three days we looked about us, and found "most things were somewhere," as she lucidly stated it. Still there were three bottles of claret to be accounted for—the last of a dozen which a kindly friend had sent us to mitigate the austerities of a hotel table. It was very good claret; the taste was clean and tolerably mild, and the bouquet fine. This it was which recommended it to my wife. She would hang over her glass like a bee above a blossom, with dilated nostrils and dreamy eyes—"Oh, Jack, it is like English violets!"—the dinner, such as it was, growing cold on the plate, till I was obliged to suggest that her food was waiting to be eaten, and perfume would not supply the place of beef and bread. But those three bottles of claret were gone. Nan knew perfectly well she had taken them in a basket when I carried her and a few other precious things over to the house in my buggy.

"You see, I didn't want to put any temptation in Polonius's way, Jack, so I took them myself. I *know* I did."

Let me put in a parenthesis here, and rise to explain that Polonius is not the immortal adjunct in *Hamlet*, but only my queer wife's way of saying Malony, which is our washer-woman's name.

"But if you put them there, Nan, we must have taken them out."

"Oh, Jack, what geese men are! Don't you know you left the buggy and went up stairs to fetch that lovely vase you broke on the steps after all; and how do you know who helped themselves to the claret then?"

There was a double flavor to this speech, a sort of mental peppermint that made me feel two ways at once, just as that popular aromatic makes your mouth hot and cold together. I at least was freed from blame about the claret, but then I was brought to recollect that I broke the vase.

"Perhaps, though," she went on, "you might have put it under the buggy seat, and in that case it may still be at the livery stable. Oh, do go right away and see."

So I meekly walked over to the stable; but though I searched in every crack of the buggy, there was no claret there.

Then Polonius was interrogated. She is an excellent creature, but afflicted with a fluent piety of speech, whose liberal dispensation on all occasions is not quite reverent.

"Ellen, don't you remember seeing three tall dark bottles on the window-sill at the Blank House when you were helping me to pack?"

"Indeed thin, ma'am, I recollect them intirely a-standin' in a row be the windy; an' I've a splendid mimory, glory be to God! it's niver gone back on me yit."

"Did you see me put them into a basket?"

"Decd 'n' I don't call to mind seein' ye do anything wid them. I remimber them bottles, because you was jist alther givin' me the ear-rings out o' that drawer in the table be the windy."

"Oh, that makes me think: could you wear them?"

"Oh, sure, ma'am, an' plase the Lord, I nivor had mo ears holed from that day to this; but my Mary Ann, an' she not three year old come March, she fetcht thim down a Monday aff the booreau; an' 'Mother,' sez she, 'be the help o' God I'll wear thim ear-rings wan day,' sez she. Sho's real smart, that wan."

This was too much for Nan; she left Polonius to her scrubbing, and turned to me with a comic yet desperate expression:

"It's no use, Jack; they're gone."

If only she could have accepted that situation we should have had peace; but day after day went on, and our possessions were daily turned inside out, outside in, and bottom side up, while all our friends were regaled with the woeful tale, and everybody wondered who *could* have stolen the claret.

Six weeks after, as I came into the parlor at night, I behold a strange pile on the table, carefully veiled with a towel. Nan sprang up from her low chair, and with a naughty sparkle in her eye, and a highly dramatic sweep of her arm, snatched off the towel, and revealed the three claret bottles.

I sank into the sofa and laughed until I could laugh no more.

"You horrid thing!" she exclaimed, after she had laughed a little herself. "I thought you'd be so glad."

"My dear, I'm as glad as I can be; but consider the weakness of humanity. I had to laugh; I should have died of its suppression and the 'flood of memories' this apparition called up."

"Oh!!!" Exclamation marks cannot give the indignation which this little syllable hurled at me.

"Where did you find them, Nan?"

"I don't want to tell you. I thought you'd be magnanimous, and you are not a bit. I *know* I shall never hear the last of that claret. But if you *must* know, they were in my work basket, rolled up in Gracey's new flannel night-gowns."

Here she had to laugh with me; and, though I lose all character for magnanimity, I must own that Nan never did hear the last of that claret, for it was perpetually brought to confront her during the next three months, when at one time every pair of her scissors disappeared, to be recovered from the crease of the sofa, the middle of Webster's dictionary, and the top of a jam-pot on the highest pantry shelf—places where she had laid them down in some emergency, and quite forgotten them; at another, when every one of five pairs of eyeglasses (specially provided to avert such a catastrophe as my near-sighted wife being left without any,) took to themselves wings or heels, and by patient search were at last resurrected from forgotten pockets, the desk, the dressing-case drawers, and—shall I say it?—under the bed! As for spools, neck ribbons, pencils, handkerchiefs, gloves, they seemed to symbolize the lost tribes of Israel for number and persistence, except that they always came back.

It is true that I lost things, but in the normal way; a sleeve button that dropped out in the street, and never came back; a new duster that fell from the buggy on a drive, and probably has done somebody else good service long since. Nan's worst losses were retrieved inevitably.

But in three months came a loss that was really annoying. Nan has dreadful headaches after any exposure to cold, and consequently wraps her head up in a long thick veil if the weather is the least threatening when she is obliged to face it.

There was a funeral one day in Portland, some thirty miles from us by rail, which she must attend, being one of the immediate family; and, though it was in the month of May, the sky looked dark enough when Nan left—*for I could not leave my business to go with her further than the station.* Of course she took her veil—a new and expensive one, just obtained from New York. But after she reached town the weather changed to extreme heat, and the next afternoon I met her at the train flushed and panting, with her thick shawl over her arm, scolding about the day: "I've almost been roasted, I do assure you. The house was like an oven—everybody gasping, and the cars, oh, how hot they were! Please, I'd rather walk home; it's too warm to ride."

So we walked home; and matters went on as usual for two or three weeks, when, one day, a picnic being afoot, Nan came to me with wide eyes:

"Jack, do you remember, that day I came home from Aunt Dorcas's funeral, seeing my dark blue veil in my hand?"

"No, I don't. Is it lost, Nan?"

"Of course it is," she retorted with much dignity. "I must have left it in the cars. I remember taking it off my hat, I was so warm, and hanging it over the seat back. Will you please go up to the noon train and ask Conductor Scott if he found it?"

Now I have been on so many fool's errands of this sort, I greatly demurred. "Are you quite sure you haven't it in the house, my dear?"

"Of course I am. Jack, I do wish you *never* would say 'my dear' to me. I'd rather be sworn at any day. Now you think I haven't lost the veil. I have. I know I have. But I'll go myself."

"Indeed you won't, Mrs. Nan. But can you blame me, remembering the claret?"

The blessed little woman flew after me to box my ears, but I'm nimble and escaped—by a hair's breadth.

Of course Mr. Scott had not seen the veil. And then Nan recollected she had it in one hand coming out of the station; therefore she must have dropped it in the street, and it had to be thoroughly advertised in the local paper. But nobody restored it.

About a year after, Nan came to me with one hand behind her back, and the sidewise, doubtful look of a cat caught cream-stealing.

"What have you found?" laughed I, sure of a sequel of this sort.