

**HIS BROTHER MASON'S WIFE.**

(From The Bulletin, Australia.)

It was unquestionably wrong of Griffiths to covet his neighbour's wife—but what else was a weak, well-fed mortal, with a christian name other than Joseph, to do under the circumstances? Pretty Mrs. Poynter had such wicked little ways with her, ways of which her devoted husband, G. Potts Poynter, Esq., saw nothing and suspected less. At convenient times she would be curious to know what book Griffiths was reading, or what photograph he was admiring, and her plump figure, as she looked demurely over that gentleman's shoulder, would give him many gentle palpitating reminders that she was there. She had a habit, too, of brushing against Griffiths accidentally in passages, and no stairs could have been wide enough to enable him to avoid contact with Mrs. Poynter when they happened to meet by the way. If he courteously kept close to the wall, his hostess didn't trouble to hug the bannisters, and their elbows, at least, were sure to clash. Once Mrs. Poynter declared, with a side-glance and blush, that he had knocked her funnybone, but Griffiths merely smiled and passed upstairs. To say that the lady made overtures to her guest in these early days of our story might be uncharitable, but to say that she sorely tempted him to offer what Smollett and Fielding called "gallantries," were an assertion warranted by the facts of the case. Yet the poor fellow tried to remain good, although he couldn't keep from coveting in secret.

They were brother Masons, Charles Griffiths and Potts Poynter. They belonged to the same lodge, had sworn the same strange oaths in the same hall, and been mystically grilled on the same gridiron—which, as every Mason's wife understands, is the solemnest of all rites incidental to admission into the fraternity. Now, as a man and a brother, Griffiths was not only disqualified from assailing the virtue of Mrs. Poynter, but bound to protect her against the wiles of a wicked world at large, and, if necessary, save her from herself. Therefore, every time that voluptuous creature nudged him casually in the gloaming, or sighed like a furnace at him in the pianissimo part of a tête-à-tête, Griffiths would bite his lip and curse inwardly. A handsomely-framed certificate hung over Poynter's sideboard, and its large, all-seeing eye (like a horse's) seemed to be always on Griffiths.

The Potts Poynters, four years married, were not troubled with a family. There were no fairy footfalls tinkling on their tufted floor, or chubby baby fingers grabbing at dada's tufted chin. When Potts laid his weary head upon the pillow at night he knew, alas! that no sweet little cherub would start crowing into his ear about 3 a.m., and sometimes he indulged in vain conjectures respecting his possible feelings as a father in the event of the missing link being "about to teeth." The P.P.s, however, bore up very well against having no children, and, in point of fact, rather revelled in the calamity. Mrs. Poynter preferred single young people and musical evenings to dull married acquaintances and private baby-shows, and shuddered at the thought of a household treasure chipping in its soprano robusto from an adjacent bedroom when she was singing duets with her favorite tenor.

Griffiths was that privileged vocalist. The oldest of the young people (say a year or two over 30) he was the most in venerate attendant at these evenings. About three times a week, too, on an average, he dined with the Poynters en famille. Potts was very much attached to old chum Charlie, and had a fatal weakness for bringing the silvery tenor home with him from the city, to try over something new with his wife. Potts himself being nothing better than a cracked baritone with a chronic cough, was apt to leave the tuneful pair trilling their lays whilst he pattered round in the garden or went and yarned with the dog.

Love, beautiful love, was the inevitable theme of duets between Griffiths and his friend's wife. If they sang solos, accompanying one another upon the piano, it was with paeans of amorous joy, or musical sobs of such secret passion and subdued longing, that they shook the chandelier. This was as much owing to force of circumstances as to their own design. All the new ballads seemed to deal with brand new "engagements," or aching hearts and livers depressed by grief.

Weeks and months ran smoothly along on the lines laid down by the fatuous Potts. Friend Griff, was continually being thrilled by the touch of Mrs. Poynter's white hand as they both turned over a leaf of music at the same time, and his soul chafed more and more against the statute of limitations fixed by an unfeeling craft. The temptation to slip his arm round the lady's waist and press her tight against his bachelor bosom grew stronger with each new duet. He began to loathe the very name of Masonry, except at lodge dinners.

The sight of a Past-Grandmaster, or any sort of high chief cockalorum, was to him as a red rag to a raging bull. He often felt inclined to fall bodily on a bloated autocrat of the order in the middle of George-street, and ask him whether he didn't consider one particular law

of Masonry an outrage on human nature. As for the beautiful example of Joseph, he had long since decided that it was sickening.

One warm summer evening the pair were languishing together at the piano, as usual. Rain had just been falling after a six weeks' drought so the confiding but inhuman Potts, armed with a bag of salt, was making the most of such an opportunity to go snail-hunting in the garden. By the pale light of a lantern he was dropping grains of destruction upon the slimy shell-backs and slugs, and emitting fiendish chuckles as they ptered out of this life in yellow-green bubbles. Occasionally he varied the monotony of the slaughter by stamping on a large, fat snail in order that he might hear its dying crackle and gloat over the "horrid swish" of its splattered entrails. The master of the house was happy enough. Griffiths, playing his own accompaniment on this occasion, had just concluded a really melting appeal to "Her whom I love with a love like fire, with the passionate throb of a mad desire," or something of that sort—we have constructed the poetry for this occasion. The thermometer stood at 91 in the gas, and the bright color in Mrs. Poynter's cheek came and went like a revolving light. She was so impressionable; she had no mother; Mrs. Grundy forgot her, and she fell to kissing Griffiths fast and furiously. Bending over that fascinating tenor as he sat, charged with magnetism, upon the music-stool, she took his face between her hands, pressed it backward a little to the left, and attacked his mouth ravenously.

For several seconds Griffiths was carried away by these unhallowed endearments, and returned kiss for kiss. Then he shook himself free, stood up, and, facing his assailant, gasped: "Mrs. Poynter—Maud—you mustn't." The words came from his white, trembling lips like a despairing groan. "O, what have I done!" said the lady. Her hands were before her face, and perhaps she took one little peep at Griffiths through her fingers. Mrs. Poynter knew quite well what she had done, and was all too ready to repeat the dose; yet her enquiry was perfectly feminine and natural. It is the privilege of women to be able to delude themselves into astonishment at their own behavior, when astonishment seems called for.

"Darling, you have shown me your heart, told me at last with your own lips (this was Griff's circumspect manner of putting the case) what I have dared to suspect all along. You have made me—at least, you would have made me the happiest fellow on earth but for—O! Maud, you mustn't. I'm a Mason." She clutched the arm of her unlucky idol, and hung her head a little. "I didn't know—at least I don't quite understand—are you angry with me?"

He wasn't so angry but that he could arrange her hot head against his shoulder. Then in a serious, Masonic-brotherly voice he told her of the awful barrier between them, of the everlasting oath of allegiance which had placed every other Mason's wife beyond the pale of his hopes, and called upon her, with a gentle squeeze the while, to observe that they could never, never be more than dear friends.

"Oh, Charlie, how could you come to join such a wretched thing, I always hated it!" His explanation hadn't impressed the lady as much as he expected. She looked almost sulky as he shook her limp hand and rushed out to bid good-bye to Potts, who was still busy amongst the snails. That amiable husband, after escorting Griffiths to the gate, returned to the drawing-room and found his wife sitting at the piano, apparently deep in reflection. "Naughty man, we began to think you were lost," she exclaimed.

The visits of Griffiths to his old friends grew less frequent for a long time after the episode recorded above, whilst his absence from their periodic gatherings was regretfully noted by the brethren. And although the pressing invitations of Poynter at length overcame his scruples as regards the musical evenings, and tempted him back to the house of danger as often as of yore, nothing could revive his interest in the Craft. Friend Charlie excused himself from accompanying Potts to Masonic dinners on the score of indigestion. He didn't dare to say aloud that Freemasonry was "rot," but he thought it all the same. His disgust for the institution was almost as great as that of Mrs. Poynter, who plainly told her husband that no man who loved his wife would belong to a secret society, and besought him to give it up at once. It flattered him to see how the little woman's jaw dropped when he said that withdrawal from the sacred bonds of Masonry was impossible. "Begg! she does like to have me always at home," thought Potts.

All men are vain. Autumn was far advanced in the sere, the yellow leaf, and Mr. Poynter was down with the influenza, when Griffiths one morning received a letter.

Dear Charlie,—Be sure to come round this evening, I want you to get something for me. Mind you come. Yours ever, Maud.

Dear Charlie knitted his brows a good deal over this harmless-looking note. It was the first he had ever received from his friend's wife—her handwriting even was strange to him. There had been no need for such special

invitations to one who was seldom away from the house for two consecutive nights. With something of uneasy curiosity, he went round to pay his respects to Mrs. Poynter and see how the sneezing Potts was getting on.

Mrs. Poynter, looking exceptionally seductive in a loose wrapper and studiously untidy hair, greeted him with effusion. There was no active display of tenderness on either side—there hadn't been, of course, since that memorable night at the piano—but the lady's eyes seemed full of strange light.

"He is asleep, and I—I think he is getting better."

"Oh, of course; sort of thing soon passes off, you know," Mr. Griffiths looked wistfully at his companion before adding, "but what was it you wanted me to get for you?"

Mrs. Poynter fiddled with the top button of her robe, and stretched her warm neck uncomfortably, as though her collar was rather tight. "I wish you would get me a little poison from your place," she said.

Griffiths, who earned his daily bread as acting-manager of a wholesale drug business, was not used to supplying his lady friends with that class of goods.

"Poison!" His thoughts naturally turned to Rugh on Rats.

"Yes, the dog howls at night and disturbs Potty (her pet name for Potts). Besides, he's getting very old, and I'm sure he would be better killed"—referring, of course, to the dog. Her husband was in the prime of life.

"Don't you think you had better give the brute away?"

"Who'd take him! And then it would save trouble to have him killed. I thought a few grains of strychnine on a piece of meat—but you know best. Perhaps there is something not so—so violent as strychnine; the same sort of thing, only a little milder." Mrs. Poynter shifted her position several times whilst making the suggestion.

Griffiths offered feeble objections to this mode of dealing with the dog. He referred, in harsh, jocular tones, to the danger of having deadly poisons about a house, and suggested that the butcher would give any domestic animal his happy dispatch for a shilling. The lady remained obdurate, however.

"How foolish you are; as if there was danger." She rose from her chair and put her hand upon his shoulder. He took a rough hold of her wrist, and they looked straight into one another's eyes, enquiringly.

"Get is for me, Charlie."

"If you must have it," he answered.

His brother Mason's wife drew a little nearer to Charlie, as though expecting a more affectionate reply, but he shook his head significantly, and Maud knew he mustn't. But a moment afterwards when he was leaving the house she put her hand again on his shoulder and whispered a few words so softly that he had to bend his head to catch their meaning.

The influenza, which affects so many different people in so many different ways, soon began to have a terrible depressing influence on Mr. Potts Poynter, and at about six o'clock on a cold, grey morning that respected merchant stiffened himself out for ever.

They gave Potts Poynter a fine Masonic funeral, and a great concourse of gentlemen in silk aprons and other uncanny trappings, gathered round his grave. Not one of his old friends was missing from the ceremony save Charlie Griffiths, who had started North on a month's holiday before poor Poynter's bad symptoms set in. When the chief mourners returned to the house for a little light refreshment and a parting sigh, they remarked that the dog in the yard was howling most pathetically. So it would seem that Mrs. Poynter hadn't poisoned the faithful animal after all. She couldn't find the heart to do it, perhaps.

Mrs. Poynter took a trip to Maoriland almost immediately after the funeral, and remained away from Sydney a full six months. Griffiths waited patiently for an intimation of her return, which arrived at last. They met where they had parted, in the same room which had witnessed his last triumphant struggle against temptation. She looked so nice in her weeds.

"There is no barrier between us now!" asked Mrs. Poynter.

"None, none, my darling," said the emancipated Mason.

And that night, ere turning into his bachelor couch to dream of an impending wedding, he humbly thanked Heaven for having given him strength to keep the solemn law of the craft.

Footman—A newspaper reporter wishes to interview you, sir. Great Man—Did you not tell him I was hoarse—could scarcely speak? Footman—Certainly, sir. But he assured me he would only ask questions which you could answer by a nod or a shake of the head. Great Man—Then tell him I have a stiff neck.

As a young man passed along the street a resident remarked to a visitor: That is one of our ablest financiers. Why, I am astonished, was the reply. He doesn't look to be over twenty-five. He isn't so old as that, even. How does he happen to be so successful? Blamed if I know. He came here a stranger three years ago, with nothing except his good looks, and to-day he is the husband of the richest woman in town.

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Full many a building reaching near the sky, The dark unfathomed clouds will penetrate, While men who own the vacant ground near by Hold to their deeds that they may speculate.

Improvements all around one vacant lot Oft raise its value to a monstrous price, And thus in one short year the unused spot Is multiplied in value twice or thrice.

Full many a money-king, with stony heart, Has reached the goal of wealth, his chief ambition— Whose great "success" in unearned increment did start, And crowned his hopes of wealth with full fruition.

But he who made improvements is the man Who adds his quota to the general good; His industry and enterprise outran Each one whose name for speculation stood.

For making good improvements men are fined, Although the law politely calls it paying A needful tax of some wise, modern kind, Which Wisdom's hand on Industry is laying.

But Justice, with unerring rule, requires That taxes should on idle land be laid, And he who to improve the world desires, Should not be fined for what he's done or made.

—Ralph E. Hoyt, in the Standard.

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