

Sauce for the Gander

A Complete Story

by SHAN F. BULLOCK

(Published by special arrangement)



I N the garden of her house in Camberwell, close to the open drawing-room door, and shaded by the long star-set tendrils of a jessamine that hung from a rustic arch, sat Mrs. Piper, her feet on a brown sheepskin mat and three parts of her head—from the bun-shaped knob of whitey-brown hair upwards to the lace of her matron's cap—showing above the rounded back of a wicker armchair. She was darning a pair of huge fawn-colored socks—Mr. Piper's, for a certainty—with the slow deliberation of one come to viewing things through a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, her lips firmly met; her large, full face, with its relics of youth and beauty, and its deep impress of experience, set at an observant angle; her large, strong hands moving with the patient skill and certainty of a machine. On her lap was a work-basket lined with red. A pair of scissors hung by a tape from the band of her black apron. On either side of her feet, in the folds of her black dress, lay a fox terrier and a tabby cat. She had the comfortable, placid appearance and air of fifty-five just come down from the refreshing after-luncheon nap, conscious of a good morning's work done, of a house well-ordered, and ready now to while the peaceful hour or two that lay before five o'clock tea.

Having sight of her there in the small suburban garden, seated so comfortably, engaged so pleasantly, and with the warmth and radiance of July falling upon her, you must have thought Mrs. Piper to be burdened with as few cares as the cat sleeping blissfully at her slippered feet. Yet she had cares of her own. And, despite appearances, just then she was troubled. The little frown on her brow did not come of failing sight or the sunlight blinking through the jessamine. When at intervals she let her hands fall on her lap and sat looking down the garden, it was not the flowers or the narrow grass plot she saw. Mrs. Piper, in fact, was conversing with herself, going over things, recalling the past, weighing, considering; and as centre of her thoughts, cause and object of them together, was the partner of her life, the man Henry, her husband. He brought the little frown. He compressed her lips. It was he she saw, plain as though he stood large as life in his dark grey flannel suit, and it was with him she conversed silently, when she looked straight down the gravel path.

To use Mrs. Piper's own expression, things had begun on the evening before, during the evening meal. Being a woman of much common sense and judgment, she was ready to admit that perhaps, on the whole, Mr. Piper was not to be held entirely accountable for the beginning of things. The day had been uncomfortably hot. It was a busy season at Henry's office. To a man of his years—sixty almost and perilously near the retiring line—even one extra hour's work meant expenditure in nerves and energy. He had come home weary, found the girls gone out, found dinner not ready, found herself not dressed, found washing in the garden, found a pane broken in the greenhouse, found the cat asleep among the carnations—oh, had found sufficient to rasp those overstrung nerves. Men had their own troubles and endurance. Of course, of course. Still—still—well, so had women. Her own day had not been without trials, thought Mrs. Piper; then rested a moment, looked down the path again, and had sight once more of Henry seated in the armchair, legs outstretched, thumbs hooked in the arm-holes of his waistcoat, and those clear signs of ill-humor on his face. She knew that attitude, those signs; knew what to expect of them. Her best she had tried to smooth things over—and—well, had failed.

"Oh, I'm dog-tired," Henry had said, drawing his chair to table and pushing a corner of his napkin into his waistcoat. "Ding-dong I've been at it all the blessed day. Only half an hour for lunch. Driven from post to pillar. . . . Why the deuce do men ever become clerks? I'd rather drive a 'bus myself. Slavery—slavery! And nothing for it—nothing. One of these days I'll be called in and fired. And then—oh, then I'll find a place in the workhouse, I dare say. Well, serve me right and a good job too. There at least a man will have his meals served regularly. . . . How is it, Emily? Surely to goodness, it's little to expect. Here I've been waiting half an hour—tired—hungry. . . ."

Yes; that had been the beginning of things, thought Mrs. Piper; then resumed her darning and her slow process of thinking; then, in a while, came again, for maybe the twentieth time that day, to the matter that chiefly concerned her. "Tell you what, Emily," Mr. Piper had said over his portion of cold gooseberry tart. "I want—isn't there any cream? No. Hum. Oh, well. Dare say I don't deserve it. No matter. What was I going to say? Oh, yes. Tell you what. I need a good change. I'm fagged. I'm not the man I used to be. If I don't get a change I'll break down for a certainty. . . . A change. A holiday. Yes, that's what I want."

"I'm sure you do, Henry. So do we all, perhaps. Well, can't you arrange to have your vacation a little earlier this year?"

"Hum. Yes, I suppose so." "For myself, I'd much rather go away now than later on. Everybody goes in August. We've always gone then—always for years and years."

"Yes, always for years and years," Mr. Piper had said, pushing back his empty plate with some appearance of disgust. "The same time—the same blessed place—the same blessed rooms—the same old weary round!"

"But—but—" Mrs. Piper, over her darning, remembered accurately the way she had received Henry's outburst, and had sat regarding him across the table. "But we needn't go to the same place, my dear. Not at all. Indeed, I'd like a change myself. Why not try Bourne-mouth this year, or Yarmouth, say—or even somewhere in Wales? I should like to go to Wales. Mrs. Ritchie was here yesterday, and she says that—"

"I know what Mrs. Ritchie would say, Emily. She's another of the tame cats. All she wants is niggers with banjos, and somewhere to parade up and down in her new dresses, and a pier with some idiot playing solos on the piccolo. . . . I know, I know. The seaside? I'm sick of the seaside. What change can a weary man get there? Ozone—bracing air—bathing—bah! All humbug. Might as well spend one's holiday on the Thames Embankment."

"But—but—" Again Mrs. Piper recalled the feeling of surprise, of amazed revelation, that had come to her at hearing of Henry's bitter words. What did they mean? What did they portend? "Then what do you suggest, my dear?" she had asked. "I'm sure I for one am ready to meet you halfway in anything."

"Oh, I dare say. I dare say. I know you are, Emily. . . . Tut. It's all nonsense. What does it matter what I think or want? Who am I? Only the breadwinner."

Quite clearly, as she sat there in the garden, Mrs. Piper had vision of Henry's enormous sneer whilst, with a lurch in his chair and a shrug of his shoulders, he in a tone of exceeding bitterness had exclaimed "Only the breadwinner." How often in the course of their long and by no means unprosperous married life had she heard that phrase, and how often had it come as prelude to some domestic episode which happily could soon be forgotten.

"All I'm fit for," Mr. Piper had continued, "is to keep things going—work like a horse and bring home the money. Oh, yes, that's it. Who cares whether I get my meals on time or not, or whether I'm dog-tired or not, or any blessed thing? And as for holidays—pooh! Let the old fool spend a fortnight pottering about Ramsgate, catching shrimps and getting sunburnt. That's good enough for him. That's all he's jolly well worth." And then Mr. Piper had risen, spraddled on the hearthrug, and put on his look of suppressed martyrdom. "Well, perhaps it is," he had said, with a slow shake of his foolish old head; "yes, perhaps it is. Hunting shrimps in a pool. Chasing young crabs across the sands. Paddling with the nursemaids and the children. . . . That's what I'm worth," Mr. Piper had said, stretching a hand and fixing his Emily with an austere eye.

"That's what I've come to! That's what you call enjoyment, recuperation—that! That's what you call a holiday—for a—man!" Mr. Piper had exclaimed, with slow and concentrated intent, one hand outspread, the other hoisting his coat-tails; and as she sat darning in the sunshine, Mrs. Piper recalled that at sight of him she had felt a great inclination towards laughter.

But she had not laughed. No. The spectacle had its serious aspect. Something was in Henry's mind, deep down in it—something important that must be found. So, quietly and saucily, she had made answer, "Then what is your idea of a holiday for a man, Henry?"

"Idea—idea? Oh, I don't know.

Something different from all that foolishness. Something manly. Something to stir a fellow's blood, and make him feel fine and strong."

"I see. Mountain climbing, for instance?"

"M—yes. That might do. A bit expensive, though—and risky, too."

"Well, yachting on the Broads?"

"Yes. Jolly good idea. I've heard men talk of that."

"Or going for a walking tour in Brittany with a companion or two?"

"Rather! Just the thing. One of the office men—Brown—you know Brown—chap that's always gadding about the world—has been everywhere 'cept the North Pole, seems to me. Well, Brown went walking in Brittany last year with two other men and had no end of a good time. Of course—"

"But where was Mrs. Brown, Henry?"

"Mrs. Brown!" Upon the fawn-colored heel of Mr. Piper's sock his wife could still see the look, part startled, part apprehensive, that had helped to give expression to the words; and she smiled, a little grimly, at the vision. "But there isn't—surely I've told you—there isn't any Mrs. Brown, Emily."

"Oh, I had forgotten. I'm sorry, Henry. And the other men, they're bachelors, too, I suppose?"

"Hum. Well, as a matter of fact, I'm not quite—that is, I think they're both married men."

"Then their wives, of course, accompanied them on the walking tour?" (The smile still lingered on Mrs. Piper's face.) "No. Of course they didn't. God bless my soul, what a question! What would women do on a walking tour? Couldn't stand it—wouldn't enjoy it a bit. Why, they did a matter of twenty to thirty miles a day. And it rained sometimes. And they carried everything on their backs. Think of that, Emily!"

"Yes, I understand. Still—Where were the wives of those other men, Henry, I want to know?"

"Oh, dear! Why will you women ask such questions. On earth how am I to tell where they were? At home, perhaps—or with friends, perhaps—"

"Or maybe catching shrimps at Ramsgate, or helping the children to paddle?"

"Can't say, I'm sure. Don't know. If it's of such importance, Emily, I'll try to find out for you. But, 'pon my soul, I can't see what they've got to do with the matter."

"Neither can I, Henry. Clearly, they had nothing to do with the matter. And, I suppose, if you went mountain-climbing, or yachting on the Broads, or walking in Brittany, I shouldn't have anything to do with that matter either?"

How had Mr. Piper, standing on the hearthrug and filling his pipe from a pouch, taken that straight shot? In Mrs. Piper's recollection he had taken it badly, with a frown and a smothered exclamation, and the air of one being found out; then had flung his pouch on the table, struck a match and let it burn out, and of a sudden had demanded, "What on earth are you driving at, Emily?"

"Oh, nothing much, Henry. Merely trying to get you to be frank with me, my dear. Am I right in assuming that your idea of a real holiday for a man—for yourself, of course—doesn't include myself and the children?"

"There! I knew that was coming. I knew the tables would be turned on me before long and I'd be made out the most selfish brute in creation. It's always the way. It doesn't matter a straw what I do—slave my heart out—pinch and save—deny myself everything—at the end I'm only the worm that's made to be trodden on. . . . It's a shame, Emily. You ought to have more consideration for me—if nothing else. . . . I won't stand it. No, I won't. . . . Now, look here. I'm going to talk straight. How many years have I given up everything for sake of you and the children? Have I ever grumbled before about the seaside and those beastly lodgings in a back street? Have I ever even hinted to you before about going away by myself for a change?"

"Wasn't it Mr. Brown, of your office, Henry, who first gave you the notion of making that little trip to Tangier some years ago?"

"Ah! It's come at last. I knew it! You've been saving that up for a good while, Emily, waiting a good opportunity for flinging it in my face. So much for all my explanations and pleadings; and so much for your pretended forgiveness. Didn't I go on my knees to you, Emily? Didn't I explain that only a passing fit of madness made me go? Didn't I tell you everything—everything—everything? Didn't we agree to bury the confounded thing for ever and ever? And now here it comes bobbing up again. . . ."

"I know, Henry. But so has the other thing come bobbing up again. My dear Henry, it's no use. I can read you clearly. Much better be frank with me. Why do you want to spend your holiday this year away from your wife and children? Is it because you have lost your love and affection for us? Are you tired of us? Are you tired of your home? Or—or—Henry, is there any other attraction that causes you to have these strange turns? I can't understand them. You used not to be so. You used to delight in taking me and the children away for a change, and delight in your home and our society—and—and—And now it's all different. It's the club, or bowls, or those precious Freemasons, or something else. Ever since that miserable trip to Tangier you've been

changed. I've seen it, and tried to hide it from myself, and—and—And I can't. I can't. . . ."

At this point, Mrs. Piper remembered, tears had interrupted the progress of things; and they being assuaged, thereupon had ensued a weary half-hour, during which, so it seemed to herself, Mrs. Piper had sat enduring a series of explanations to which she gave neither belief nor sympathy. Of what avail was it to hear Henry maintain, with much earnest iteration, that now as always his thoughts and endeavors were solely in the interests of his family? What in the shape of comfort might come of sentimental passages expounding the old eternal theme, *Absence makes the heart grow fonder*? What consolation was it to know that in the view of many wise people, including hundreds of correspondents to the morning papers, the ideal holiday for husband and wife was spent by each of them apart?

"Stuff and nonsense!" Mrs. Piper had sat exclaiming; and so, after hours of reflection, after long and earnest consideration, she sat under the jessamine arch exclaiming now. Not one of Henry's explanations held water. He wasn't sincere. He was trying to deceive her. Deep inside him was some wicked plot designed for his mysterious and selfish ends. For what did men try to get away from their wives and families? For what had Henry himself gone away so mysteriously, so inexplicably, in that spring of five years ago? Of course, he had explained, had been contrite and abashed, and she in a way had understood and had forgiven. Yes, but something had always remained—a doubt, a feeling of distrust, a sense of striving to comprehend the motives that had led him to doing such an amazing thing. Think of it! Without any word of warning to leave her standing on the step and go down the road swinging his cane; so to sail away in a ship to Tangiers, leaving her to bear all that agony of terror and grief and gnawing suspicion through an eternity of days. Could any explanation, any abatement, ever rid her of the memory of that? Why had he gone? What had he not told her? Why, supposing it all to be a mad freak, had the going worked such change in him, made him restless, more discontented with his lot and his home, more secretive, more difficult to live with and to understand? Since then she had always kept dreading the next outbreak. Despite herself, not a day hardly in all those five years had she spent without wondering whether Henry would come home to her in the evening. And now there she sat wondering again, full of worrying thoughts and suspicions. What had Henry in his mind? What did he intend? Were his motives innocent? Was she exciting herself unnecessarily? Was there not something to be said for the idea of husband and wife separating for the holidays?

"No, no, no," cried Mrs. Piper within herself, and sat looking fixedly at a post of the rustic arch. "It's all stuff and nonsense. I don't believe a word of it. I'm not unreasonable. I'm not a suspicious kind. I'm ready to make every allowance. But the good old-fashioned way is enough for me. Where Henry goes I go. I'm his lawful wife, and I have my rights and I mean to have them. I've been too easy all these years. I was a fool over that Tangier business. If he thinks he can stop out whenever he likes, and go where he likes, and come back when he likes, well—"

For perhaps twenty minutes Mrs. Piper sat in deep thought; then, a grim smile on her face, she resumed her darning and formulated the following conclusions:

- (1) "What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander."
- (2) "It would serve him right."
- (3) "He needs a good lesson."
- (4) "YES, I WILL!"

II.

When Mrs. Piper came to the momentous conclusion which found expression in that phrase, "Yes, I will," she was not aware that, in determining to teach Mr. Piper a lesson, by giving him tit for tat, or, as she expressed it, by "giving him back a little bit of his own," she showed herself lacking in powers of invention. In her view the method of accomplishment was nothing, the object everything. If a man needed a lesson, then the quickest and surest way of enforcing it was to turn the tables completely; in other words, to say:

"Look here, Henry Piper, this is how you treated me and made me feel—well, my dear man, and how do you like it? Once you went off mysteriously on your travels; for a long time now you have been doing as you like—well, my dear Henry, I want you, before you make another expedition, just to know that others have rights as well as you and are not afraid to use them. In other words, dear Henry, I'm going to let you see what it means to come home one day and find your faithful helpmate and slave gone off on an expedition of her own. Never mind where, Henry. Never mind with whom. We shall discuss all that afterwards when it comes to explanations. Meantime, I want you just to feel and comprehend; and amongst other things I want to prove to you, by your own methods, my worth and value. . . ."

But if in determining her method of operations Mrs. Piper displayed small

(Continued on page 27.)