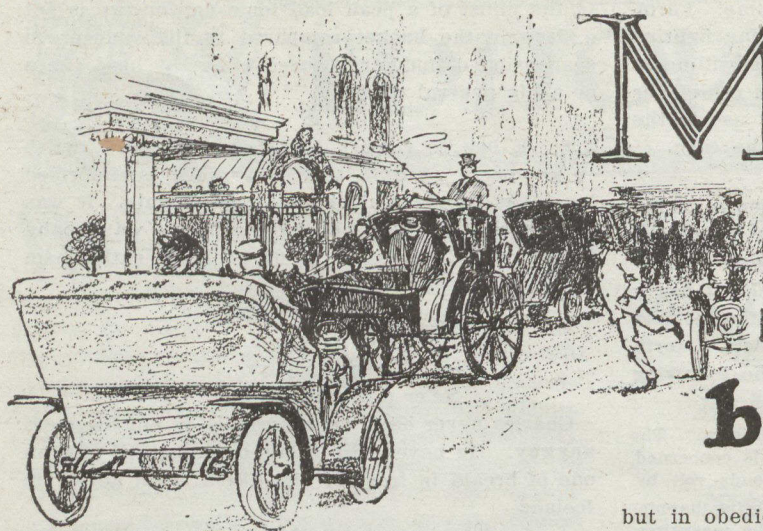




MELLISH'S SUSPICION

by Frederic Taber Cooper

EXCEPTING for Mellish and the two women waiting ahead of him at the ticket window, the lobby of the theatre was deserted. It lacked only twenty minutes to three, when he glanced once more impatiently at his watch. Behind the drawn curtains of the auditorium, ripples of laughter, scattering volleys of applause, told that the usual Saturday matinee audience was getting its usual enjoyment out of the latest popular play, still running to full houses when other theatres had already begun to close for the summer. The man in the box office was at the telephone, the irritating deliberation of his answers being plainly audible from without. He had nothing left for to-night nearer than the nineteenth row. No, nor for next Tuesday either. Wednesday, the house was practically sold out; two large theatre parties. Thursday? He might do better for Thursday. Hold the wire.

It seemed to Mellish hardly worth his while to wait. He knew from experience that it was unwise to offer Nora tickets for the nineteenth row; she would rather never see the play at all. The women ahead of him evidently shared his discouragement. The younger one was bewailing the necessity of exchanging her tickets for some evening next week, in place of to-night. Such good tickets, too! It was so like Harry to forget and make an appointment with a business friend. "My dear, during business hours Harry doesn't remember that I exist!"

Mellish sighed involuntarily, and careworn lines revealed themselves on his thin face. He wished that he shared the ability of this unknown Harry, the ability of the average unimaginative, tranquil husband, to shut domestic cares behind him when he stepped out over his threshold in the morning. He wished that just for one busy, harassed day, he might forget that there was such a person as Nora in existence. He knew that it would be better for his peace of mind, better for his business interests, if Nora's face did not hover so often between him and the letters he wrote, the sales he made, the contracts that demanded undivided thought—Nora, with her small, red, mutinous mouth, her aureole of hair like spun copper, her childlike appeal, her wide, gray eyes, avidious of admiration. He wondered vaguely whether other men, outwardly happily married, had their joy cankered by gnawing suspicions, intangible doubts, insidious as microbes, that found a lodgment in the brain, and thrived and bred a fever of unrest.

THE wife of the absent-minded Harry, having at last won attention from the box office, and accepted, under protest, an exchange for the third row in the balcony, made way for Mellish. With the spasmodic brusqueness of natural timidity he demanded the tickets she had just surrendered, and somewhat to his surprise, obtained them. They were splendid seats, nine rows from the stage, on the middle aisle; the sort of seats that Nora always expected him to get. It was characteristic of Nora always to expect the best of everything, and usually to end by getting it. Equally characteristic was her pretty imperiousness, which for a time had almost blinded him to her inborn selfishness.

From the theatre, Mellish turned down Madison Avenue to Twenty-sixth Street, and thence westward along the northern boundary of Madison Square, not because it was a shorter way to his home,

but in obedience to a sudden, unreasoning impulse to pass the restaurant where his wife had told him she would be lunching. At this late hour it was quite possible that he had missed her; yet Nora was one who loved to linger over a lunch table, forgetful of the flight of time. There was still a chance that he might catch a glimpse of her through the windows on the Fifth Avenue side, or even have the luck to meet her just coming out, in all the pride of her new raiment. He knew already how extremely well it became her. It had come home from the dressmaker's only the night before, and had put her in a gracious mood for the whole evening. She had even donned it for his private benefit, and had mocked him gaily because he kept forgetting that the right name of all that gorgeousness was a lizard green moire. How she loved the pleasant, luxuriant things of life; dainty viands, lavish clothes, the glitter of many gaslights, the adulation of the passing glance! She was not made for domesticity, she was too exotic—that was the initial fault, the source of his unrest. She craved the stimulus of perpetual excitement; the showy, outside life of theatre, restaurant, hotel; the champagne atmosphere of the modern caravansary. It was in a public restaurant that he had first met her, five years ago—a dinner at Sherry's, where he had first listened to those mutinous red lips, first been dazzled by the coppery glint of her hair, first looked into those wide, gray eyes, and answered their appeal for flattery. She was little more than a child in years—he had realized that at the time—just a tall, slim thing, with a face that robbed him of his sleep. He could smile now, grimly, remembering how he had fought against the piquant spell of her precocity, her nascent grace of womanhood. It was not normal, he had told himself, for a young girl in the butterfly days of life to care seriously for a shy, reserved man like himself, already verging upon forty and settling down to staid bachelor habits. But Nora's family had smiled approval upon the junior member of the established house of Marvin & Mellish, and cleverly manoeuvred to make his courtship easy. He had not been blind to their diplomacy. He had simply allowed himself to be cajoled, deluded, hypnotized into the belief that, through some modern miracle, some special dispensation, Nora really loved him. Even now, after five years, there were fleeting hours, halcyon days, when such a belief ceased to seem absurd. Yet, almost from the first, the discrepancy in age had rankled in him, begetting vague suspicions, morbid doubts, symptoms of which he was slow to guess the meaning. Then, one day he realized, with a wave of self-contempt, that he was jealous—he, Mellish, in his sober middle age, jealous of callow youths, with the bloom of undergraduate conceit fresh upon them, the jargon of football in their speech; jealous of every compliment murmured in her ear; jealous of every stranger's flattering glance. That was the burden that he carried secretly, the incubus of an undefined, unjustified jealousy. At times more definite images, ugly thoughts with ugly names, had threatened to crystallize. But he had never quite put them into words, even beneath his breath, never narrowed down his fears to a specific accusation. Above all, he had sought to hide his burden from Nora herself, as one hides a physical deformity.

Before the solid, unpretentious building on the corner, a landmark of fashion and conviviality to an earlier generation, Mellish paused uncertainly, peering blindishly, with near-sighted eyes, wonder-

ing whether somewhere behind that broad expanse of spotless window Nora was still there; wondering, indeed, if she had been there at all. He realized that the thought was an epitome of his chronic frame of mind. Between what Nora said she was going to do, and what Nora afterwards did, he felt that there was no fixed ratio. How many times he had sought to meet her, as he was now doing, 'risking the chance of being inopportune, merely for the sake of seeing her an hour sooner! How many times he had found to his chagrin that the day's plans, gaily rehearsed across the breakfast table, had been discarded for others which took her among scenes and people quite foreign to those among whom he had all day pictured her—equally foreign, the demon of suspicion whispered, to those of whom she afterwards told him in the evening. And always there was a reason for her change of plans, so plausible that it seemed to put him in the wrong for having expected to find her where she had told him she was to be.

WITH characteristic self-consciousness, Mellish found himself uncomfortably conspicuous, waiting on the corner of the avenue. Yet he could not make up his mind to enter. Instead, he turned westward again, and loitered slowly along the upper side of the cross street, straining his near-sighted eyes each time the wide portals of the restaurant emitted any of its guests, in couples or in groups. He was not sure whom he expected to see, but he knew that he vaguely dreaded their appearance. What was the use of keeping up the pretense with himself? He doubted the truth of what Nora had said—that was the unvarnished, ugly fact. Mrs. Faversham was giving a small luncheon party, Nora had said. Well, in his inmost heart he was by no means sure whether he was expecting to see Mrs. Faversham and the women of her set. He questioned whether Nora would have mentioned this luncheon at all, if he had not in a measure surprised it from her. She had been in the hall, telephoning, when he quietly let himself into the apartment the night before, just before dinner. She had stood beyond the bend in the hall, that threw him partly into shadow. But the full light of the electric shone upon her, emphasizing every change of expression on her mobile face. He had felt a singular clutch at his heart, as he stood there, unseen, and watched her. Nora always had one manner for women and another manner for men. It was only when she talked with men that her gray eyes widened, only when she talked with men that her red lips curved into mutinous pouts. How often he had watched, with feigned indifference, that same scintillating play of her features as she laughed up in the face of some other man, Jack Elting, Ted Voorhis, Windon Hinckley—always just Jack and Ted and Windon, on Nora's lips, never by any accident the formality of a surname. How long she had been there in the hall, talking, wasting her graces on the unseeing telephone, he could only guess. The conversation was about to close. She was saying, with a curious little laugh, "That is all just between us two, of course," adding "to-morrow, then, at one-thirty," and had named the restaurant as she hung up the receiver. Then, suddenly, she gave a queer, little, startled cry, "Paul, dear, how you frightened me, creeping in upon me like that, as though you were stalking game!" and then, with nervous haste, she explained that Mrs. Faversham had planned a little luncheon of six, to meet a cousin she was expecting