

The Hen

Saki

“Dora Bittholz is coming on Thursday,” said Mrs. Sangrail.

“This next Thursday?” asked Clovis

His mother nodded.

“You’ve rather done it, haven’t you?” he chuckled; “Jane Martlet has only been here five days, and she never stays less than a fortnight, even when she’s asked definitely for a week. You’ll never get her out of the house by Thursday.”

“Why should I?” asked Mrs. Sangrail; “she and Dora are good friends, aren’t they? They used to be, as far as I remember.”

“They used to be; that’s what makes them all the more bitter now. Each feels that she has nursed a viper in her bosom. Nothing fans the flame of human resentment so much as the discovery that one’s bosom has been utilised as a snake sanatorium.”

“But what has happened? Has some one been making mischief?”

“Not exactly,” said Clovis; “a hen came between them.”

“A hen? What hen?”

“It was a bronze Leghorn or some such exotic breed, and Dora sold it to Jane at a rather exotic price. They both go in for prize poultry, you know, and Jane thought she was going to get her money back in a large family of pedigree chickens. The bird turned out to be an abstainer from the egg habit, and I’m told that the letters which passed between the two women were a revelation as to how much invective could be got on to a sheet of notepaper.”

“How ridiculous!” said Mrs. Sangrail. “Couldn’t some of their friends compose the quarrel?”

“People tried,” said Clovis, “but it must have been rather like composing the storm music of the ‘Fliegende Holländer.’ Jane was willing to take back some of her most libellous remarks if Dora would take back the hen, but Dora said that would be owning herself in the wrong, and you know she’d as soon think of owning slum property in Whitechapel as do that.”

“It’s a most awkward situation,” said Mrs. Sangrail. “Do you suppose they won’t speak to one

another?”

“On the contrary, the difficulty will be to get them to leave off. Their remarks on each other’s conduct and character have hitherto been governed by the fact that only four ounces of plain speaking can be sent through the post for a penny.”

“I can’t put Dora off,” said Mrs. Sangrail. “I’ve already postponed her visit once, and nothing short of a miracle would make Jane leave before her self-allotted fortnight is over.”

“Miracles are rather in my line,” said Clovis. “I don’t pretend to be very hopeful in this case but I’ll do my best.”

“As long as you don’t drag me into it—” stipulated his mother.

“Servants are a bit of a nuisance,” muttered Clovis, as he sat in the smoking-room after lunch, talking fitfully to Jane Martlet in the intervals of putting together the materials of a cocktail, which he had irreverently patented under the name of an Ella Wheeler Wilcox. It was partly compounded of old brandy and partly of curaçoa; there were other ingredients, but they were never indiscriminately revealed.

“Servants a nuisance!” exclaimed Jane, bounding into the topic with the exuberant plunge of a hunter when it leaves the high road and feels turf under its hoofs; “I should think they were! The trouble I’ve had in getting suited this year you would hardly believe. But I don’t see what you have to complain of—your mother is so wonderfully lucky in her servants. Sturridge, for instance—he’s been with you for years, and I’m sure he’s a paragon as butlers go.”

“That’s just the trouble,” said Clovis. “It’s when servants have been with you for years that they become a really serious nuisance. The ‘here to-day and gone to-morrow’ sort don’t matter—you’ve simply got to replace them; it’s the stayers and the paragons that are the real worry.”

“But if they give satisfaction—”

“That doesn’t prevent them from giving trouble. Now, you’ve mentioned Sturridge—it was Sturridge I was particularly thinking of when I made the observation about servants being a nuisance.”

“The excellent Sturridge a nuisance! I can’t believe it.”

“I know he’s excellent, and we just couldn’t get along without him; he’s the one reliable element in this rather haphazard household. But his very orderliness has had an effect on him. Have you ever considered what it must be like to go on unceasingly doing the correct thing in the correct manner in the same surroundings for the greater part of a lifetime? To know and ordain and superintend exactly what silver and glass and table linen shall be used and set out on what occasions, to have cellar and pantry and plate-cupboard under a minutely devised and undeviating administration, to be noiseless, impalpable, omnipresent, and, as far as your own department is concerned, omniscient?”

“I should go mad,” said Jane with conviction.

“Exactly,” said Clovis thoughtfully, swallowing his completed Ella Wheeler Wilcox.

“But Sturridge hasn’t gone mad,” said Jane with a flutter of inquiry in her voice.

“On most points he’s thoroughly sane and reliable,” said Clovis, “but at times he is subject to the most obstinate delusions, and on those occasions he becomes not merely a nuisance but a decided embarrassment.”

“What sort of delusions?”

“Unfortunately they usually centre round one of the guests of the house party, and that is where the awkwardness comes in. For instance, he took it into his head that Matilda Sheringham was the Prophet Elijah, and as all that he remembered about Elijah’s history was the episode of the ravens in the wilderness he absolutely declined to interfere with what he imagined to be Matilda’s private catering arrangements, wouldn’t allow any tea to be sent up to her in the morning, and if he was waiting at table he passed her over altogether in handing round the dishes.”

“How very unpleasant. Whatever did you do about it?”

“Oh, Matilda got fed, after a fashion, but it was judged to be best for her to cut her visit short. It was really the only thing to be done,” said Clovis with some emphasis.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” said Jane, “I should have humoured him in some way. I certainly shouldn’t have gone away.”

Clovis frowned.

“It is not always wise to humour people when they get these ideas into their heads. There’s no knowing to what lengths they may go if you encourage them.”

“You don’t mean to say he might be dangerous, do you?” asked Jane with some anxiety.

“One can never be certain,” said Clovis; “now and then he gets some idea about a guest which might take an unfortunate turn. That is precisely what is worrying me at the present moment.”

“What, has he taken a fancy about some one here now?” asked Jane excitedly; “how thrilling! Do tell me who it is.”

“You,” said Clovis briefly.

“Me?”

Clovis nodded.

“Who on earth does he think I am?”

“Queen Anne,” was the unexpected answer.

“Queen Anne! What an idea. But, anyhow, there’s nothing dangerous about her; she’s such a colourless personality.”

“What does posterity chiefly say about Queen Anne?” asked Clovis rather sternly.

“The only thing that I can remember about her,” said Jane, “is the saying ‘Queen Anne’s dead.’ ”

“Exactly,” said Clovis, staring at the glass that had held the Ella Wheeler Wilcox, “dead.”

“Do you mean he takes me for the ghost of Queen Anne?” asked Jane.

“Ghost? Dear no. No one ever heard of a ghost that came down to breakfast and ate kidneys and toast and honey with a healthy appetite. No, it’s the fact of you being so very much alive and flourishing that perplexes and annoys him. All his life he has been accustomed to look on Queen Anne as the personification of everything that is dead and done with, ‘as dead as Queen Anne,’ you know; and now he has to fill your glass at lunch and dinner and listen to your accounts of the gay time you had at the Dublin Horse Show, and naturally he feels that something’s very wrong with you.”

“But he wouldn’t be downright hostile to me on that account, would he?” Jane asked anxiously.

“I didn’t get really alarmed about it till lunch to-day,” said Clovis; “I caught him glowering at you with a very sinister look and muttering: ‘Ought to be dead long ago, she ought, and some one should see to it.’ That’s why I mentioned the matter to you.”

“This is awful,” said Jane; “your mother must be told about it at once.”

“My mother mustn’t hear a word about it,” said Clovis earnestly; “it would upset her dreadfully. She relies on Sturridge for everything.”

“But he might kill me at any moment,” protested Jane.

“Not at any moment; he’s busy with the silver all the afternoon.”

“You’ll have to keep a sharp look-out all the time and be on your guard to frustrate any murderous attack,” said Jane, adding in a tone of weak obstinacy: “It’s a dreadful situation to be in, with a mad butler dangling over you like the sword of What’s-his-name, but I’m certainly not going to cut my visit short.”

Clovis swore horribly under his breath; the miracle was an obvious misfire.

It was in the hall the next morning after a late breakfast that Clovis had his final inspiration as he stood engaged in coaxing rust spots from an old putter.

“Where is Miss Martlet?” he asked the butler, who was at that moment crossing the hall.

“Writing letters in the morning-room, sir,” said Sturridge, announcing a fact of which his questioner was already aware.

“She wants to copy the inscription on that old basket-hilted sabre,” said Clovis, pointing to a venerable weapon hanging on the wall. “I wish you’d take it to her; my hands are all over oil. Take it without the sheath, it will be less trouble.”

The butler drew the blade, still keen and bright in its well-cared for old age, and carried it into the morning-room. There was a door near the writing-table leading to a back stairway; Jane vanished through it with such lightning rapidity that the butler doubted whether she had seen him come in. Half an hour later Clovis was driving her and her hastily-packed luggage to the station.

“Mother will be awfully vexed when she comes back from her ride and finds you have gone,” he observed to the departing guest, “but I’ll make up some story about an urgent wire having called you away. It wouldn’t do to alarm her unnecessarily about Sturridge.”

Jane sniffed slightly at Clovis' ideas of unnecessary alarm, and was almost rude to the young man who came round with thoughtful inquiries as to luncheon-baskets.

The miracle lost some of its usefulness from the fact that Dora wrote the same day postponing the date of her visit, but, at any rate, Clovis holds the record as the only human being who ever hustled Jane Martlet out of the time-table of her migrations.

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