

By Sidney Smith

# THE MAN WHO WAS TIRED OF HIS WIFE

By LUCILLE VAN SLYKE  
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"YOU'RE lots more difficult to manage than I anticipated." She was breathing hard. "Oh, you're more of a man than I thought!" She dared to admit his strength, his power over her. "But there's something you're forgetting. That you armed me for this kind of encounter years and years ago. That first day that you found me crying—P. S., she interrupted herself to add, "Those weren't real tears, Charles. I never could cry. I took those tears off the wet dish towels and hung 'em on my cheeks to get your sympathy! That very first day you told me to buck up and remember what Bill Shakespeare said about living."

"Bill says, 'All the world's a stage,' you told me. 'Whenever you're in a tight corner pretend you're an actor and that there's an audience watching. It's liable to make quite a difference in the way you behave,' you said. And the other thing you taught me, that I never, never forgot, you didn't know you taught me. You had a shabby copy of Montaigne, you'd underlined, 'As soon as women become ours, we are no longer theirs.' Well, think it over, Charles. You're going to be mine forever."

"You don't think I'm going to let you get away with that sort of thing?" "You're Bertha Shirley's husband?" "Look out!" he warned her. "I tell you it's too late for you to pull this kind of stuff."

"It's exactly the right time," "Bertha's husband! Why, Bertha hasn't meant anything to me for years and years!" He began to pace about. "We had that all out this spring. I told you the first night we talked together how I felt about her and that I knew she didn't give a darn about me. I played fair from the start. So you can't begin hedging at this stage of the game. Gad, if you do, you're a worse graffer than Bertha's been! She only grabbed a house and lot and a few clothes, but you've deliberately snatched at everything I had that was worth while to give." He strode toward her angrily. "I tell you I'll make you pay!" His fingers brushed her arm. "Why, Imp dear, you can't mean that you've been playing with me—that you don't care about me!"

"Look here," he pulled a string of white pearls from his pocket. "I've been carrying these around like a sentimental fool for the last two weeks. They're the pearls I forgot to get for you when you were little. And—and—the feeling I have for you now is so big—that I was afraid to try to give them—afraid to try to give you anything—afraid to speak or breathe a word, for fear I'd offend you—"

She took them from him. She said a lovely thing as she pressed her lips against their cool, pink-flecked surfaces. "They wouldn't offend the little girl I used to be! I'll let her wear them always."

"You can't work on my sympathies any longer," he retorted. "You put down your cards too soon. Give me back those beads!"

"She hid them in her bosom." "I love them too much," she smiled. "You let me moon around all summer with your pearls, and now you stand there in cold blood and make fun of me!"

"I do care," Her voice was gentle. "How much I care you can never understand. But a girl who loves you, I shall always love you. I love you the way Aunt Debs loved you. I love the boy you are and not the man. It's exactly the way you loved me once. You loved the little girl in me and not the woman."

"I love the woman now," "You only think that first day in the woods when I kissed your hair."

"You knew it that first day in the woods when I kissed your hair." She blew him an airy kiss from her fingertips. "Take it back, you stingy dear! It was such a sketchy, scared little kiss that I won't miss it! Besides, you didn't kiss me, you kissed spring. And you'll forget all about it the very next time you kiss Bertha. Oh, don't look like that! Before you know it you'll be back again at her side. You'll find yourself picking up your fingers and her chin, you'll hear yourself saying, 'Old lady, feeling better?' Oh, you could no more desert her than I could let you. Why, if you did, the minute it rained you'd find yourself worrying about whether she'd remembered to put on her rubbers or if somebody had put them on for her. I've watched you do it. I know how vain you are of her pretty feet. I know, too, how much she needs you."

"Poor Bertha! She's had very little in life! She's been cheated out of all the things that matter most—tied by the stupid tyranny of little things from the big gorgeous world—"

"She's too late now to take away the little she has; she wouldn't know how to find anything else. And you needn't wax sentimental about your ridiculous madness. Your feelings may have fooled you, old dear, but they never fooled me."

"Come now, sit down on this hair-cloth sofa a minute. It's as shiny and hard and secure as a New England conscience. It's a good place to take inventory. You're admittedly forty-seven, and you had let yourself get bored with life. You were tired of yourself and everybody, so like the blessed goose you were you blamed it on your innocent wife and decided you were tired because of her."

"Spring and I had to come to your rescue. It was very lucky for you that spring and I came along when we did. But, oh, how bored you'd be, Charles, if it stayed spring forever. For you really are almost forty-eight and there's years and years ahead when it will be far pleasanter for you to sit by the fire than it would be to dash about with a violent wind who wanted to romp all day! And who wanted to hear all those noisy animals and kiddies about when you've learned to like a quiet, well-ordered house."

"Oh, think of the chilly fall days coming right now, when you'd hate paying golf in the rain with me, but when you'd love to hurry home to a pretty woman beside a fire, a woman who doesn't want to know just that—you and her little fireside. How easy it is for you to give her that! You meant to do much, much more for her the day you promised to love and honor and cherish her."

He walked to the window and folded his arms. He stared out into the blankness of the darkened garden for a long time. She held her breath as she watched him. She dreaded to look in his eyes when he turned. "Imp," he stammered, "perhaps you're right. But even if you are, there's something that bothers me. You—you've worn such shabby clothes all

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summer; you're had mighty little to spend and you're had somebody else's roof over your head. What is going to become of you—if I let you go?" "I'll always have your hyacinths to feast my soul!"

"But I mean regular things—" he gestured awkwardly. "You let slip one time, when you weren't thinking, that you'd worked pretty hard for your living. I'd like to know that everything was going to be all right with you—perhaps I—"

"Bless you, don't worry," she answered steadily. She put her hand in his for the last time. "With folks like me it doesn't really matter whether the purse is empty or filled. Either way, everything will always be quite all right with me."

It might have been an hour later that he tramped up his own path. He moved toward the threshold mechanically. He was dog-tired; he felt desolate, deserted, as though all the joy had gone from life.

Through the porch window he caught a glimpse of a supper table beside a lighted wood fire. It looked as though Aunt Deborah's loving hands had spread it—bread and butter cut as she had so often cut it, thin slices of pink ham, a ruddy gleam that meant currant jelly, a great pitcher of milk and a plate of thick molasses cookies. Margery had done it very well indeed. She had even dared to put a pipe and a tobacco pouch beside his plate! And beyond the table in the big armchair, with her head bent over her embroidery, sat Bertha.

"Hello!" he stammered. "Feeling better, old lady? When did you get home?"

"About ten o'clock," Her voice sounded small and thin after Margery's deep contralto; it startled him. He made no move toward her; not until she leaned forward in the light to thread her needle. It was then that he rubbed his eyes incredulously. It was then that he discovered how appealingly pretty she looked. There was a dear familiarity about her.

"Why," he ejaculated, staring down at the comb like Aunt Deborah's silver comb. "You vain thing! You've been powdering your hair!"

"It's not powder," Her voice was tremulous. "It's just that I'm getting old, Charles."

"Old!" he scoffed. "You aren't old." He was beginning to exult again in her beauty. His fingers lifted her chin.

She wanted, oh, how she wanted, to be laughed with him! She wanted to make him suffer. And yet she had to look. The sweet humility of her eyes broke down the last barrier between them.

"He knelt awkwardly at her side." "Bertha," he said slowly, with her hands against his lips. "I guess it's right what they say about there being no fool like an old fool. I've acted like an old fool all summer, and the worst part of it is I can't say I'm sorry. But if you could forgive me—"

"For being tired of me?" "Tired of you?" He was on his feet, his hands pressed against his eyes, none the less. "What rubbish! I wasn't tired of you. I was just sort of disgusted with life generally. I didn't mean to take it out on you—I'm actually thought I meant it—"

"I'm pretty much of a grouch, and you've been a patient little life to put up with me all these years." "You're not an old grouch—" she murmured.

"A hungry old grouch," he insisted as he reached to pull a plate toward him and seated himself casually on the arm of her chair. "Where'd you dig up all this food? There wasn't a thing in the house. Jimmie's hungry!"

He manched contentedly. "Open your mouth, old lady. Have a bite?" And it was that glimpse of that Margery caught as the taxi rattled her toward the train.

"The dearest!" she murmured, and shook hands with herself cordially, just as he had taught her. "They're letter perfect!"

It might have been a week later that the bromide neighbor sat down beside Charles on the eight-ten.

"Why didn't you tip us off that your cousin was a celebrity? I made one of myself all right yesterday afternoon in the Vendome. The wife and I were waiting for some one when along blew Mrs. Dearborn. I wouldn't have known her at first, but of course the wife spotted her. The wife said she had on about a thousand dollars' worth of clothes, but I didn't see anything but a stylish hat and some blue serge and white bands. She bowed as pleasant as you please. Chap next to me says, 'Y'seen to know her well.'"

"Name's Dearborn," says I. "Dearborn nothing," says he. "That's Midge Sherman. Gee, she just comes money hand over fist!"

"Doing what?" says I. "Producing plays. Why, man alive, in another five years she'll be the foremost theatrical producer in America! She's got a string of successes now that would make you blink. Money-makers. Just simple little plays that don't take much scenery or such big actors, but she's got the trick of putting them across and getting the crowds to go see 'em. Kind of a wit' at it. They say it doesn't make a difference how crude the actors are or how small the part they're going to play—she polices 'em into thinking they're important. Everybody who works for her gets hip on her. They eat out of her hand."

Charles was no longer listening to the neighbor's tale. Again he thrilled with emotions. Again she had roused him, angered him, baffled him and in the end soothed him, just as she always had. He fancied he could hear her voice.

"Blessings on Bill Shakespeare for giving us all the world's a stage! It makes life a cinch to know that all you have to do is play your little part."

How deftly she had shown him his part!

How beautifully she had canceled her fancied debt!

The peace that passeth all understanding encompassed his soul. At last he knew the meaning of that sweet "after called friendship" with its never quite balanced accounts, with its eternal give and take. He knew that the fragrance of the hyacinths with which he had feasted her soul would last through all his tomorrow.

(THE END.)

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## The Young Lady Across the Way



## THE TOONERVILLE TROLLEY



## SCHOOL DAYS



## PETEY—Nothing to Worry About Now



## GASOLINE ALLEY—Merely a Gasoline Instinct

