

# THE DISTAFF.

By GEORGE HIBBARD.

WHEN Gilbert returned from down-town, he certainly—no, Pamela would not for a moment concede that he was cross. Such a direful extremity was not admissible.

Assuredly, though, the serenity which had persisted without interruption during the honeymoon, and for more than two years afterward, had been suddenly disturbed. A rift was painfully evident in the colour de rose with which the earth, and all therein contained, had been enwrapped. Through it poured a clear, hard light, disclosing a world full of sharp edges and corners.

Even as Gilbert descended from the automobile, his mood was indicated by the unprecedented sharpness with which he spoke to the chauffeur in regard to his lateness in arriving at the office. The vision of Pamela in crisp, cool white, awaiting him on the steps, appeared to pacify him for a moment. He kissed her, and smiled with almost his customary good-humour. Later, however, when he subsided into the deepest and softest chair in his den, the consciousness of his wrongs obtrusively returned.

"If you had been through such a morning and afternoon of wear and tear, and hurry and worry—"

"Oh," she exclaimed cheerfully and with manifest relief, "I was afraid you might be ill!"

"It's been enough to make anyone sick as a dog. Such a dog's life!" he continued, ungratefully unimpressed by her solicitude. "Everything went wrong from the word go. A woman hasn't any idea of what a man's hourly business existence is!"

"No, dear," she assented dutifully. "A day at the office is one torment after the other. For example, to-day—the Atlas Company raising the mischief for its shipment of goods, and no cars in which to send them; the raw material coming from Pennsylvania held up on the way; that new machine, with which our experts have been fussing, turning out wrong, and needing changes which will take six months at least. It's all very well for you here, quietly without a thing to worry you!"

"I'm sure, dear—" she began timidly. "I'm doing what you want and seeing the people you like all day. Of course," he added hastily, "that's the way it should be; only naturally you can't understand my coming back tired out and used up."

"Poor boy!" she murmured. "And" — she ventured forth the words as she might tentatively put out her hand to feel if the rain had ceased falling — "the Mortimers telephoned just now. They're having some private theatricals to-night, and wanted us to be certain to come."

"Not by the ghost of Hamlet's father!" he answered emphatically. "They don't drag me into that!"

"But—" she protested mildly. "Not!" thundered Gilbert. "When a man's had a hard day's work down-town, he can't be expected to be taken out and slaughtered to make a society hullabaloo! As I say, when you've had nothing to do you can't understand it. I don't want to be selfish, Pamela, but I think I've a right to a little peace and rest!"

"Of course," she replied readily. "I'll let Florence know at once that we can't be there, though I had promised—"

"Very well," he returned casually, as he unfolded the newspaper.

No sooner had she left the room, however, than he put the paper down. He sat staring irritably before him at a row of books which he did not see; then he rose hastily, and tramped out into the hall and through to the smoking-room, where Pamela stood, with the receiver in her hand, waiting for the response to her call.

"See here!" he exclaimed. "Of course, if you want to go—"

"Not for the world," she answered hurriedly. "I shouldn't think of such a thing."

"All right," he replied disconsolately.

"Only when a man's been slaving as I have, it might seem that there should be a little let up in the evening."

"You imagine that I've nothing to annoy me!" she exclaimed, whirling about on him suddenly.

"Why," he replied blankly, "how can you—just at home!"

"I believe," she answered vigorously, "that's just what all men think. They expect us always to be smiling and sympathetic over their difficulties. Oh, a man's a big baby in the way he cries out when he fancies he has a hard time of it. 'Yes,' she said to the telephone.

"Now, Pamela," he protested, "remember I said I was willing."



"Don't any of you know? Doesn't any one know anything?"

The rest of the evening was hardly a success. Both felt a growing constraint, which was even more oppressive through the careful mutual avoidance of any avowal or recognition of such a thing. A chill penetrated and pervaded the domestic atmosphere, rendering advisable the withdrawal of any tender blooms of sentiment, and indicating the wisdom of covering up even the hardier perennial flowers of everyday association.

## II.

At half past nine of the following morning, the automobile stood under the porte cochere on the broad drive which swept up from the gates.

Neither Pamela nor Gilbert quite knew how it happened, nor did subsequent discussion fully elucidate the matter. Perhaps he tripped on his untied shoe-string, or his heel caught in a turning. Whatever was the cause, before Pamela's horrified eyes he stumbled and fell down the steps, landing with considerable violence on the great flagstone below.

"Oh, Gilbert!" she cried in terrified tones. "Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit," he answered, and laugh-

ed a little ruefully as he rose. "Except in pride, which has had such a fall."

He took a step and winced. "What is it?" she inquired with renewed agitation.

"I think my ankle's sprained." "I'll telephone—oh," she called back to the hall, "Martina, telephone to Dr. Stacey and say that he must come instantly! I'll help you, dear, to walk. You are sure you can?"

"All right, sweetheart, if you'll keep me steady on my pins."

Half-an-hour later, Dr. Stacey, raising his head from his finished bandaging, issued his pronouncement.

"You'll have to stay here for a day or two. Of course, you're perfectly able to go to the office; but the less you move about, the quicker you'll be rid of this."

"There's nothing in particular requiring my attention," acceded Gilbert reluctantly. "At least—oh, those blue-prints ought to be in Messner's hands this morning! They're too important to trust to any messenger, who might lose them. I've got to take them!"

"Let me," Pamela suggested eagerly.

usually austere Maria in a state verging upon hysterical perturbation.

"Please, sir," she announced, "Mrs. Hale's gone out, and there's no one to come to but you, and I don't know what to do."

"Yes, yes," he replied impatiently. "The iceman, sir," poured forth Maria, "failed to leave the ice yesterday afternoon, and it slipped the cook's mind, so that all there is for the dinner to-night is spoiled, sir."

"With the Ashley Coopers coming!" muttered Gilbert to himself. "What's to be done?" he demanded.

"That's for you to say, sir," Maria replied promptly, and with the impersonal passivity of absolute helplessness. "And Mrs. Hale's taken such pains!"

"Never mind—never mind," he fumed. "What is usual under such circumstances?"

"I doubt 'twill be too late," Maria responded, "for replace" any of what was made ready for some of the grand dishes."

"Nonsense!" Gilbert asserted as he got up. "There must be some way. I have it!" he cried quickly, as an inspiration masculine in its source and character suddenly struck him. "I'll see about this at once!"

By the aid of the stick which had been left with him, he hobbled through the window to the smoking-room, the maid following him with no great reassurance of manner.

"Is this the club?" he demanded, when the desired connection had been established. "Very well! Is this the steward? All right! I want you to send at once to my house—Mr. Gilbert Hale's, you know—the best man you have, and also one of the under cooks, if the chef himself can't leave. There's some hitch about a dinner-party, and I want your men to come here, find out what is wanted, bring out things from the club, and have everything arranged. I'll send the automobile for them, and they can have it to use. You'll see about this at once!"

Housekeeping, he reflected, really was not so difficult. All that was needed was a little presence of mind and a business habit of getting results.

A hurry-scurry of hasty footsteps, of rustling skirts, of raised voices, caused him to look quickly toward the door.

"Mr. Hale! Mr. Hale!" the leading parlour-maid panted, as she entered, breathless, following by Pamela's own aristocratic English tirewoman. "Oh, sir, the hot-water faucet of the bathtub in the front bath-room, sir, is got turned on and fixed so as it can't be turned off—"

"And," the other broke in, taking up the tale of disaster, "the bath-tub's that full and overflowing that it's run over, sir, and already it's a-drippin' through the ceiling of the drawing-room!"

Gilbert responded to the call of danger as rapidly as his disabled condition permitted. Up the front stairs he stomped, the attendant Maria now joined by the others, forming an agitated and ejaculatory train. From the threshold of the room at which he paused, he could already see thick clouds of steam issuing from an inner doorway. Reaching this, he found the vapour so dense that he was able only faintly to discern any object within. Intrepidly plunging into the whirling reek, he made a dash for the bath-tub, but at the first touch withdrew his hand from the faucet.

"Send for the plumber!" he cried, jamming his fingers in his mouth.

The boiling water pouring through the pipe had heated the metal to such a degree that he felt the scald painfully as he splashed back through the rising flood, from which the blinding exhalations rose in ever greater volume.

"Send immediately!" he cried in the hall, surrounded by his fluttering satellites. "But he wouldn't be here in an hour! It's got to be turned off at the head. There must be a place—where is it?"

"Mrs. Hale knows," replied Maria promptly, with the manner of one offering important and opportune assistance.

"But she isn't here!" shouted Gilbert. "Don't any of you know? Doesn't anyone know anything?"

"I think," blandly volunteered Pamela's maid, urged to a tremendous effort of thought, "that Tim, the gardener, could tell."

"Run! Run! Do! Do! and find him!" Gilbert commanded. As the envoy moved away at the utmost speed which a thoroughly competent English lady's