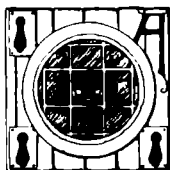


The Man Down Cellar.

BY SEWELL FORD.



MAN is liable to make mistakes during his honeymoon. Ours was six months old when I made mine. Ruth and I had just come out of the West, where we had wooed and wedded, to settle down not many miles from her old home. It was a beautiful little New England town, just the place for a charming girl like Ruth to live in. Furthermore, we had taken an artistic little cottage, and; to make everything complete, we were to have a jolly house warming, that I might meet some of Ruth's relatives and friends, especially the members of her old whist club.

All the forenoon we had been in a whirl of preparation, for we were to meet the party on the five-o'clock train, and there were the butcher, the baker, and the modern substitute for the candle-maker, to be urged into activity. Then about half past three Ruth discovered that a hand mirror was wanted, and posted off down town after it, remarking that Cousin Alice was most particular about her back hair, and never could get along without that glass.

Hardly had she turned the corner of the next street when a telegram arrived bearing her address. With that half-guilty feeling that a newly married man has on assuming such privileges, I opened it and read:—

“Theodore coming four o'clock train. Meet him. M. R. B.”

Mrs. “M. R. B.” was Ruth's mother, but who the deuce was “Theodore”? Ruth would know, but here it was within fifteen minutes of train time and she was not in sight. Well, I finally decided that Theodore must be one of Ruth's numerous relatives, and that it was my bounden duty to go to meet him.

When I was half way to the station I remembered that I had

not the faintest idea as to Theodore's looks. But on I went, determining to single out any stray male who might act as if he were looking for some one.

There was such a male. His narrow face with dark side whiskers vaguely reminded me of somebody. He acted like a stranger, too, so I rushed up to him.

"I am Mr. Crosby," I said. "Are you—er—look—"

He said he was looking for Mrs. Ruth Crosby.

"Then it's all right," said I, "for I am Ruth's husband."

We chatted pleasantly until we reached the house. Then we sat down in the ample Shaker rockers on the piazza and proceeded to become acquainted. As if to facilitate matters, Theodore suggested smoking. Even then it was not until he had produced his cigarette case, and I had noticed a yellow stain on two fingers of his right hand, that I suspected him at all. But at that point I thought of something that startled me. Hastily making a flimsy excuse, I rushed into the house and opened the big photograph album in which Ruth keeps a pictured catalogue of all her relatives, even unto the third and fourth degree of cousinship. Yes, there was his picture.

Going back to the piazza, I studied Theodore thoroughly. I noticed a nervous contraction of his forehead and a twitching of his fingers which convinced me that it was as I feared. This must be my wife's Uncle Theodore, — the skeleton of the family closet.

I had often heard his history. He had been a bank clerk whose mind had been unbalanced by a number of causes. Some said it was because he had worked too hard in trying to untangle a set of books which had been hopelessly muddled by an absconding cashier. Others laid his mental collapse to an enthusiastic study of whist problems; while the doctors had ascribed his condition to excessive cigarette smoking. Anyway, he had, to put it bluntly, gone crazy.

True, Theodore had been discharged as cured and had left the asylum about a year ago; but I couldn't run the risk of having my wife humiliated by his presence. And already I began to think of all sorts of unpleasant things that might happen.

What if he should get hold of the carving knife and run amuck

during dinner? Worse yet, what if he should smash some of Ruth's cut glass ware, or slash her drawn work doilies (wedding presents, both), or, most horrible of all, what if he should trump his partner's ace?

Urged to the point of desperation by a thought of this last possibility, I made up my mind to get him to a safe place and keep him there until Ruth arrived. From the brief, non-committal remarks with which he met my attempts to draw him out, I felt that something was brewing in his irresponsible mind. Even then I could detect a queer look in his eye. I must act promptly.

"Let's take a look through the house," I suggested craftily.

It was an innocent proposition, but Theodore declined. He was quite comfortable on the piazza.

"But you haven't been inside at all," I urged.

"Oh, the house will keep."

There, he was going to be obstinate and perhaps violent. I am not much of a diplomat, but on that occasion I mustered up all my powers of persuasion. The enticements held out to the fly by the historic spider were nothing to my efforts. There was a sinister gleam in his eye when he finally consented. Once we were inside I breathed easier, and led the way straight towards a door at the rear of the hall.

"We will begin with the cellar," I said with a wink, "Rare old wine, you know."

"The cellar?" There was a queer ring in Theodore's voice as he said this. "I don't think I care to look at your cellar, Mr. Crosby. I don't drink; and I haven't the slightest interest in cellars in general or your cellar in particular."

"Oh, but you must see it. This is an extraordinary cellar. There's not another one like it. I insist, now."

I tried to say this pleasantly, and opened the door for Theodore to pass down first, thinking, as I did so, that the rollway door was locked, and that the windows were too small for him to get out of.

Whether Theodore read my thoughts or not, he drew back in haste. By a quick movement I jumped between him and the front door.

"What does this mean, sir?" he asked.

"It means, my dear fellow, that you've got to go into that cellar and stay there until Ruth comes back."

"What nonsense is this? Are you crazy?"

I had to smile at his question.

"You'd better go peaceably," I told him.

Theodore stared wildly at the cellar door and then at me.

"You blithering idiot! Stand aside and let me out."

"Not much."

Then he made a rush to get past me.

"No, you don't," said I.

I caught him fairly around the shoulders, and the scrimmage was on. It was as pretty a rough and tumble as I had been in since my football days. Theodore was no weakling. He jammed me up against the hat-rack, and it went over with a crash. Then I squirmed behind him, and tried to rush him towards the cellar door, but he grabbed the hall seat and handicapped me. But after a few moments of this, during a wild struggle at the inner end of the hall, I managed to shove him through the cellar door onto the stair landing. Before he could face about I had turned the key in the lock.

I was still breathing hard when Ruth, leading a small boy of ten by the hand, and heading a jolly party of young folks, appeared in the door. I was scarcely prepared to play host at that particular moment, but there was no escape. I noticed a startled look on the faces of the guests nearest the door as they peered over Ruth's shoulder. A glance which I caught of myself in the pier glass explained it. My collar was gone, my vest ripped open, my hair ruffled, and my coat torn. I certainly hardly looked the happy young husband welcoming his wife's friends.

Ruth gave one glance at the wreck in the hall, another at me, and then shrieked, "Why, George! What has happened?"

"I—I've been meeting Theodore," I gasped, fishing the telegram out of my trousers' pocket.

"Theodore! Why, here is Theodore with me—my little brother, you know."

By this time the visitors were exchanging mystified glances.

"That may be your Theodore," said I, "but mine is in the cellar."

"In the cellar?" gasped Ruth.

"Yes; I was afraid he might have one of his — er — spells, so I got him down there, though it was hard work. Perhaps I mussed him up a bit, but he has done as much for me."

"George," said Ruth desperately, trying to be calm, "whom are you talking about?"

"Why, Theodore, your crazy uncle. A telegram came while you were away, saying that he was coming on the four o'clock train, so I went down and met him."

"But Mrs. Crosby's uncle is at home," exclaimed one of the guests, who until now had stood spellbound with amazement at this strange reception.

"And it was my little brother Theodore that the telegram was about," chimed in Ruth. "Mamma was going to send him on the four o'clock train to stay a week with us, but when she found out that Cousin Alice and the rest were coming on the next train she asked them to take charge of him, and here he is. I met them all at the station."

I gazed blankly at Ruth during this explanation.

"Then perhaps the man I've got in the cellar isn't your uncle at all!" I suggested feebly.

"Perhaps? Of course it isn't," said Ruth with fine scorn. "But who is it?"

"Look here," I said. "I'll show you who it is." Leading the way to the parlor, I opened Ruth's album, pointed out the photograph, and remarked triumphantly to the encircling group, "There, that's the man down cellar."

"Goodness! That's Mr. Webb," chorused half a dozen voices.

"Idiot," said Ruth in a stage whisper.

"That's just what he called me, dear," I replied.

They all left me and rushed to open the cellar door.

"Has he gone?" came in a trembling voice from below.

"No, but it is all a —" began Ruth.

"Tell him, then," interrupted the voice, "that I am armed. I have found the wood axe."

After they had assured him that it was all a mistake and that he would not be harmed Mr. Webb came up. Then it was I learned that he was a member of the whist club, and later, that he was engaged to Ruth's Cousin Alice, and had thus earned a place in

the family album. His early appearance was explained by the fact that he had taken what he supposed was an accommodation train, with the idea of stopping for Alice, and had discovered too late that it was a through express.

Well, the tangle was straightened out after awhile, and I did my best to fix things up with Ruth's Cousin 'Alice's future husband. He said he didn't mind it a bit, but I noticed that he kept at a safe distance, and not once during the evening did "the man down cellar" happen to play at my table.

