

MRS. PAWLING'S SUBTERFUGE

By Frederic Taber Cooper

DOWN the sparsely lit monotony of Madison avenue Mrs. Pawling had passed, in somnambulist blindness to the foulness of the night. A fine, insistent rain was coating the pavement with a congealing film. It penetrated, unheeded, the thin soles of her shoes, which slipped at the heel with an almost audible suction. It barely stirred her to a dumb resentment against the clinging folds of sodden silk that gripped her ankles, retarding progress. But as she rounded the corner of Forty-second street and merged in the full tide of cross-town traffic, she awoke to a chilled consciousness of her environment.

The cheerful flare from the portals of the Manhattan Hotel evoked responsive gleams from the taut surfaces of dripping umbrellas, held slantwise to the northern wind. An endless chain of stalled cars was working its slow way westward, in spasmodic jerks, outdistanced by the hurrying tramp of the army of pleasure-seekers on the sidewalk. At half-past eight the flood of human life was setting strongly toward Broadway, where the blatant glare of giant theatre signs shone, softened by distance to a shimmering haze. The vigorous stamping of chilled motormen, the insistent clangor of their bells, the raucous cries of ubiquitous newsboys, the whole strident symphony of metropolitan life came to her ear in a faint, far-off hush, drowned by the louder, more vociferous message of a phrase that echoed in her brain unceasingly, beating home its meaning with parrot-like iteration: "Bradley—Hitchcock—

died—last—night; Bradley—Hitchcock—died—last—night."

Mrs. Pawling shivered and drew her damp furs closer. She had been walking, so it seemed to her, for unnumbered hours, keeping time to the rhythm of those five words as children keep time to a counting-out rhyme. A morbid fancy assailed her that for the past two years she and Bradley had been playing a mad, bacchanalian game with fate, and that now it was Bradley whom fate had counted out.

Her husband had flung the bare, brutal fact at her, across the dinner-table, between the news of a victory in the Court of Appeals and a change of officers in his golf club. He had stabbed her with it, in the very act of carving the roast. She could see him yet as he paused, with the carving-knife half raised, and faced her squarely, his keen eyes on a level with her own. As she recalled it now, there seemed to lurk, behind the even indifference of his tone, a suggestion of ironical curiosity as to how she would take the news. Not once, in the last two reckless years, had Leslie Pawling found herself asking, in such a panic of sudden fear, how much her husband really knew.

His systematic avoidance of Bradley had been natural enough. He had the practical man's intolerance of the artistic temperament, the successful man's contempt for one whom prosperity has passed by on the other side, an artist whose pictures seldom sold. Yet hard and narrow as John Pawling was—a man, so his wife scornfully judged him, whose intellectual life

knew no higher joy than the Revised Statutes, and whose physical passions spent themselves in golf—the callousness of his announcement struck her as forced and overdone. “Oh, by the way, your friend, Bradley Hitchcock, died last night.” He said it just like that. A human being, a boyhood friend, a client of the office, was dead; and John reduced his death to the level of the jottings, the marginal notes, the by-the-ways of life! He had drawn Bradley’s will; he had won the suit that secured him the small income on which he lived; and now he deliberately said, “your friend,” shutting himself out from all participation in the loss. Then followed a pause, in which it seemed as though he must be counting her very heart-beats. How much had he been able to read in her face, during the tense, interminable moment while they looked into each other’s eyes across the table? She knew, with something akin to self-wonder at the knowledge, that she had neither fainted nor cried out. She had sat there dumbly, with a half-smile frozen on her lips, until sheer terror, forcing grief into the background, stung her into action, and she heard her own voice, sounding from an infinite distance, framing obvious, commonplace questions, the answers to which were of such vital import.

The policeman guarding the Fifth avenue crossing eyed doubtfully the blond young woman with bedraggled skirts, pursuing her unseeing way, careless of spattering mud and horses’ hoofs. Noting her evident refinement, he checked his first impulse to speak to her; then hesitated again, as the rays of an arc-light revealed the blind, stricken look in her eyes. Mrs. Pawling was scarcely aware of the friendly hand he laid upon her arm, guiding her across. Memories were racing at express speed through her brain, like the whirring wheels of a clock the escapement of which has been broken. John had answered her questions with expansive freedom; but the quizzical satisfaction that she seemed to read

in his face haunted her yet. While his ponderous tones droned on, her own thoughts had kept up a running accompaniment. The searchlight of intimate knowledge transmuted his bare details into pictures of poignant clearness. The correct appointments of her own cozy dining-room faded from her sight. Instead, she saw the big, old-fashioned room, converted to a studio by a huge, well-like skylight. She saw again its dominant note of chaotic confusion, its paradoxical medley of the debris of a workshop and the luxury of a boudoir; a score of canvases, finished and unfinished, studies in the nude for the most part, touched elbow with photographs of favorite Botticellis, framed with unquestioned taste. A rare old Horace, a Dante in Florentine vellum kept company with a shelf of French novels, Zola, Maupassant, *Les Diaboliques* of Barbey d’Aurévilly. The cheap, uneven floor of stained pine had worn lines across his few choice pieces of Eastern carpeting—Khiva, Bokhara, Daghestan—for whose time-mellowed coloring he had taught her to share his passion. And everywhere, on shelves and tables, on floor and wall, were strewn and scattered the silks and bronzes and carved wood, the pipes and swords and strings of beads, the strange, bizarre flotsam which a lifetime of wandering gathers together from the wreckage of bohemia.

In these surroundings Bradley died alone, sitting at his table, writing a letter—of course, it was the big table before the fire, on which he had so often written to her. The “dago janitor” had found him there in the morning—that was John’s jarring phrase for discreet, smiling Paolo, the heavy-browed Sicilian who tended Bradley’s rooms, gliding in and out so silently that his presence had not seemed an intrusion. She pictured to herself Paolo’s mild surprise at finding the gas still burning, his sudden start at sight of the inert, huddled figure in the chair, his flood of voluble Italian, apostrophizing all the saints at once when he realized that Bradley was dead.

The first that John had heard was when Dr. Sands had called up their office, Pawling & Parker, on the telephone, not knowing whom else to notify. The doctor thought that Hitchcock must have been dead since midnight. He said that there was nothing surprising in the death; he had been expecting the man's heart to give out suddenly any day. Parker had attended to the details. The brother, Seth, the clergyman, had been notified, and was coming down from Schenectady to take him back to the old family home, where the funeral would be held. "He'll be here tonight," Pawling had concluded, with the heavy deliberation that his wife at all times found peculiarly irritating; "Parker and I are to meet him at the studio and help him overhaul Bradley's things, so that he won't have to come down again right after the funeral." The words seemed to give him some inward satisfaction, for, after a moment's pause, he repeated them, adding in further elucidation, "His sketches and letters and private papers."

All the while her husband talked, somewhere in the back of Mrs. Pawling's brain a still, small voice had been persistently asking just what the fact of Bradley Hitchcock's death meant to her. Not in the way of personal loss—that was something she must not, dared not, think of yet. Later on, when the time for action was over, when she could escape from the torture of inquisitorial eyes, she might open the floodgate of these thoughts, the whole tumultuous, pent-up torrent of them. What she had waited for was a threat, a danger, a crisis to be met. Now it had come. The thought of her husband there tonight, in those rooms, seemed the one thing too much, the last unbearable turn of the screw.

A merciful interruption came. The telephone in the hall rang with a teasing insistence. With every sense on a strain she heard Pawling's heavy voice engaged in a one-sided conversation. "Yes, this is eleven-one-three. Yes, I said so. This is Mr. Pawling at the 'phone. Oh, hello, Jim, I didn't recog-

nize your voice. What's that? Can't you meet me?"

So it was Parker at the telephone. For a moment a hope was kindled that something had happened to prevent the meeting tonight, that she might gain a day's respite; but her husband's next words destroyed it. "Oh, all right; never mind if you are late. I may be late myself. Sorry she felt it so. Tell her I say she always was too sympathetic. No, Leslie didn't turn a hair. You know, he never came here as he did to your place. Of course, now the poor man is dead there is no good in raking up old scores; but the fact is, he was not altogether *persona grata* in our home. All right, about eight-thirty, then. The Reverend Hitchcock can't get there before nine, even if his train isn't held up by the storm."

She hardly heard her husband saying: "That was Parker on the 'phone. He says that Laura has just gone to pieces about Hitchcock." What did she care whether Jim Parker's emotional little wife relieved a shallow grief with a few hysterical tears? The vision of her husband in Bradley's rooms drove out all other thoughts. Her husband, Bradley's executor; her husband opening desks and drawers and closets, searching, prying into the dead man's papers and finding—what would her husband find? That was the question that hammered itself home till she grew faint and dizzy. What wretched, forgotten, irrefutable bit of proof might he not discover in those rooms where she had come and gone in reckless confidence? Letters? Yes, of course, there might be letters, a single one, a score, any number of them. He might have burned them or he might not. She groped helplessly in her memory, trying to recall what written word of hers might now rise up to testify against her. But it was not alone a question of what she had written; it was the bare existence of any letters at all, the damning fact that she had written to Bradley, which, dovetailing in with other facts, might change John's doubts to certainty. In her overwrought mood

it seemed as though every chair and table in the studio, the very pictures on the walls and volumes on the shelves, had some separate betrayal to make, some subtle hint of a feminine presence.

This was the fear that had stung her, goaded her forth blindly into the storm, without definite hope or purpose. She knew only that she must follow Pawling, be near him, share the knowledge of his discoveries. The menace lurking in those old, familiar rooms fascinated her. Their lure was irresistible. Over and over again, during the walk that seemed interminable, she told herself that if her husband found her there, if he stumbled upon her at the door or on the stairs, she must be armed to parry his questions; she must have a plausible excuse, a story all cut and dried, to explain her mad pursuit of him through the storm. But her numbed brain refused to meet the need; she groped helplessly for some idea not idiotic in its flimsiness. She was still groping when she reached the oyster house that occupied the ground floor of the building in which Bradley Hitchcock had lived.

To reach the entrance of the stairway that led to the studio she must pass the windows of the oyster house. In one of them a belated couple were still lingering over the remnants of their dinner. The man, with both elbows on the table, was gazing intently into the woman's eyes. Seen through the rain-blurred window-pane, his hard features seemed, to Leslie Pawling's excited imagination, to merge into a grotesque caricature of her own husband. She shrank away and slipped furtively through the vestibule beyond. Down the vista of the dark hallway a waiter opened a door, emitting a sudden burst of sound, laughter and voices and the discreet clatter of many dishes together with the pungent odor of frying fat.

Effacing herself against the shadowed wall, the woman glided up the first short flight, reached for a small key in its hiding-place on a nail behind a molding, and let herself through the

inner door that barred the upper floors at night from trespassers. She passed the dark and silent offices on the second floor, the real estate broker in front, the postage-stamp dealer, the manicure parlors in the rear. The single gas burner was turned to a mere pin-point of light. The rickety banisters, the battered stairs, with one well-remembered step, the third from the top, that would creak despite the most cautious footstep, looked doubly shabby in contrast with the gaudy red of a new Brussels carpet flaunting itself in the light from the floor above.

Here she had reason to dread inquisitive eyes. The third floor was occupied by a Spanish instructor and his French wife, who held their classes by night as well as by day. This evening, as usual, the door of the large front room was ajar. She could plainly hear the instructor's patient voice drilling a slow-witted pupil upon Ollendorffian phrases: "What is the matter with the friend of the señora? The friend of the señora is very ill; the friend of the señora will die." Mrs. Pawling hurried desperately up the one remaining flight. The steps seemed to multiply beneath her feet. Taking a tiny pass-key from her purse, she let herself into the queer little square hallway that served as antechamber to Bradley's studio and bedroom. Between cold and fear and the effort of the long climb, she was almost sobbing for breath.

Behind the door on her left, within the larger room that served as studio, men's voices could be heard, and the occasional rustling of papers. She recognized her husband's rasping tones, and the hearty, jovial voice of Jim Parker, unwontedly subdued.

With infinite precaution, she pushed open the door of the bedroom; these old hinges creaked horribly sometimes and without warning. Suddenly she recoiled, stifling a scream, and leaned half fainting against the wall. In all the mental pictures that for the past half-hour she had conjured up, of what she should find awaiting her, curiously enough the dead man had had no share.

There, in the familiar little room, furnished with an almost feminine coquetry of form and color, the undertaker had performed his task and gone. The heavy portière in the intervening doorway shut out the light and cheer of the studio. Only the flickering flame of a Venetian lamp, hanging in the corner above the window-seat, made visible the silent outline of the coffin. The upper half was open, and the lamp's rays, shining through many-colored glass, shed a greenish light upon the upturned face, cruelly emphasizing the stamp of death, accentuating the hollows at the temples, where the black hair was tinged with gray, turning livid the thin, straight nose, the sunken cheeks, the nervous, fastidious mouth.

Shaking with a morbid dread, Mrs. Pawling dragged herself to the coffin side, and in dumb, instinctive protest raised her hand to the lamp, turning it until the green light was replaced by red. As if by magic the features of the dead man softened; the trick of light and shade, which but a moment before had writhed his lips into a sardonic sneer at fate, now wrought the equal wonder of making him seem to smile in his sleep. The woman bent tremulously over him. Here was the man she had loved. Her fear of death was forgotten; likewise the greater terror that had dogged her footsteps hither. In another moment she could have found a merciful relief in tears.

The voices behind the portière had gradually risen in tone. The two men were recalling early memories of Bradley Hitchcock, and had already forgotten the solemnity of death.

Suddenly a careless laugh awoke the woman once more to a full consciousness of her precarious position. She strained her ears to catch their next words. It was Parker who had laughed, in frank amusement, at the dead man's frailties. The careless talk ran on, in reminiscence of the days before Bradley had come into Leslie Pawling's life, days of which she had often felt an unspoken jealousy. She had few delusions about Bradley Hitchcock. Women had

always been to him a series of agreeable episodes; she realized that. She herself was at best only an episode like the rest. She had held him for two years; she might have held him a day, a month, a year longer. But while she held him she believed that she held him exclusively. This was her one remnant of pride, and she clung to it. The voices of the men ran on, cynical, amused, mocking, stirring the ashes of old scandals, stripping the dead man naked.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs and along the hall. "The Reverend Hitchcock," she heard her husband hazard as he rose to open the door. But she knew better; it was Paolo, coming to replenish the fire. Under cover of the momentary stir, the rattle of coals, the colloquy that accompanied it, Mrs. Pawling nerved herself to begin her furtive hunt through bureau, desk and closet for notes, letters, anything and everything of hers that might be there. The bureau yielded nothing but a flood of memories. The desk must contain something of what she sought; but it was locked. Jim or her husband must have the keys. For all she knew, they might have ransacked that desk already.

A moment later the absurdity of the thought struck her. If he had found those letters John would not be sitting tranquilly there, extracting a cynical amusement from the Sicilian's voluble eulogy of the dead man. In a flood of grotesque English that grew blinder and more hopeless as his earnestness increased, Paolo was trying to make clear the debt he owed to Bradley. She knew the story well: his first wretched months in America, his discouragement, his nostalgia for Palermo and Bradley's interest and aid, just when he had lost heart altogether. "I tella you, I tella you da trut', he mucha gooda man to me, Misser 'Itchacock; I tella you, he one golla darna gooda man, Misser 'Itchacock!"

The woman grew hot with indignation as she listened. Why did they keep him there answering their idle questions, making sport for them with

the grotesqueness of his sincerity? Pawling's next words enlightened her.

"I say, Paolo—your name is Paolo, isn't it?—he was a great man with women, wasn't he, your 'Misser 'Itchcock'? Plenty of them coming here to see him, I'll be bound."

So that was what John was after. He had got an important witness on the stand, and he proposed to cross-examine him.

Paolo acquiesced eagerly. "Plenta woomans coma 'ere."

He was glad to testify to Bradley Hitchcock's prowess. What were they like, these women? Were they tall or short, dark or fair? Were they pretty women or plain, according to Paolo's standard? As Pawling multiplied his questions the Sicilian became suddenly more wary; "I no tink" became the burden of all his answers.

"Oh, come, Paolo, I know better than that. You must have passed them many a time on the stairs. You probably know the originals of half those paintings on the wall. I'll wager they are not all professional models, either."

Discreet and loyal Paolo! She could almost see his deprecating shrug. He was plainly determined to know nothing that might compromise the "golla darna gooda man" lying dead in the next room.

As Paolo's footsteps died away upon the stairs, the creaking third step telling of his downward progress, Pawling continued to elaborate his train of thought. All his life women had been Hitchcock's bane. He could talk of nothing else; he could think of nothing else; he could paint nothing else. "Look at this portfolio of sketches! Look at the pictures on the wall! And Lord knows what we shall find among the man's private papers! I tell you, Parker, it would be missionary work to go through them before his brother comes, and put a lot of letters out of harm's way. He always was an absent-minded beggar about letters."

Mrs. Pawling cowered like a hunted hare into the little closet behind the head of the bed. It seemed impos-

sible that John had not heard the swish of her damp skirts as she dragged them desperately in after her.

As she waited, huddled in the stuffy darkness, pressed back by the closed door against coats, bath-ropes, jackets redolent of stale tobacco, something hard, a knife or key in a trousers pocket hurt her wrist. Almost at the same instant came the signal of her release—John's voice from the further room, saying: "We shall have to wait. None of the keys will fit."

Key, key? Where did Bradley keep his key? The next minute she had the closet door wide open and was searching in trembling haste through trousers, coats and waistcoats. At last she found it in the pocket of a smoking-jacket.

To unlock the desk was the work of a moment. As she did so Parker's voice reached her, laden with a fresh terror.

"Here is the mail I found in Hitchcock's letter-box downstairs. We may as well go through that anyhow."

When had she written her last letter to Bradley? Was it a century ago, or was it only the night before last? A fear which became at once a certainty assailed her, that it had arrived too late, that it was now among the letters which Jim Parker and her husband were now opening. The careless comments ran on:

"Bills rendered, most of them. Here's one from his dentist. Here's another from his tailor, 'Please remit.' This one is from his club; oh, it's a receipt for dues. What's that big square envelope? Looks like an invitation. Oh, I know what that is; wedding cards from Stanley Ashmead—I had some myself this morning. Here's a typical woman's note, tinted paper, no scent. Looks like another bid to something."

She heard the sound of linen paper tearing, then Parker's voice in an altered tone: "I wish I hadn't opened this. It's an intimate sort of letter, just signed, 'L. P.' Hadn't we better burn it?"

"Let me see that letter." John's tone was infinitely queerer than Park-

er's; it sounded like the embodiment of her worst fears. The silence which followed was almost tangible. Through the heavy curtain she could almost see him studying and turning that letter, dissecting, analyzing, reading between the lines. Parker's voice at last relieved the strain.

"Drop it, John. I know what you are thinking, but you will be sorry tomorrow."

"I must know my own wife's writing, even if I didn't know her initials. It's no use, Jim. This just explains a lot of things that puzzled me."

"Nonsense, man! Dozens of women write that same ugly, fashionable hand nowadays. It's as much like my wife's writing as it is like yours. I might just as well try to fasten the letter on her, if that's all you have to go on. Leslie and Laura are not the only women in the world who have a right to sign themselves 'L. P.'"

"That is kindly meant, Jim, but I don't think we will burn that letter."

Mechanically Mrs. Pawling turned back to her task. What was the use? The matter had been taken from her hands by fate, and would be settled according to fate's grim pleasure. Now that the harm was done, it was but an added irony to find in the desk only a few scattered notes, harmless invitations for the most part. But suddenly, in the depths of a pigeon-hole, she came upon a whole bundle of them. She did not know that she had written so many letters during the entire two years. Scented paper, too; she had never used scented paper; she abominated it. She leaned toward the flickering lamp. Surely this was not her writing, though oddly like it. Parker's words still echoed in her ears: "It's as much like my wife's writing as it is like yours."

Forgetful of caution she sprang upon the window-seat to get nearer to the lamp, and opened letter after letter in a silent rage. She knew, before she found it, that somewhere in that package she would find Laura's name. She strained her eyes to read the dates. The correspondence cov-

ered the last two years, and even further back. The whole wretched, intimate history lay before her. There was not room for a single flattering doubt. Laura, whom she had always despised as a weak, vain, insipid little woman, a woman eight years older than herself, who looked her age, every day of it—and he had kept Laura's letters rather than hers. Her own folly, her blindness, her stupidity loomed up colossal before her. Here she was, a rat in a trap. The letter in her husband's hands, the muddy print of her sodden shoes on the carpet, the disorder of desk and bureau—why, it was impossible that she should cover her trail. A vengeful inspiration flashed over her; the woman who had robbed her should make atonement. Laura had taken Bradley Hitchcock from her, had proved beyond a doubt a prior claim. Laura should bear the burden of the penalty, as well. Deliberately Mrs. Pawling secreted her own letters in her dress; with equal deliberation she brushed a metal paper-cutter from the desk. It fell with a clatter to the floor. Then, with a startled cry, she dashed not too silently nor too swiftly toward the hall.

For the first minute the two men were rooted to their seats with astonishment. Then they sprang forward, each through a separate door. Her husband overtook her in the hallway and drew her, none too gently, back into the studio.

"I was so frightened, John. I got into the wrong room. I was trying to find you—"

He cut her short roughly. "Don't lie about it, with those letters in your hand! We know what you came for. Give them to me, and tell the truth if you can."

"I shall tell you nothing until you let me go. You are hurting my wrist."

She wrenched herself free and faced him for a moment defiantly, then dropped both arms to her sides, as though in complete surrender, utterly discouraged with the knowledge of her failure. Her eyes traveled past her husband, as though she did not see him.

She spoke directly to Parker, who had been watching her with wondering pity.

"I see now that I did wrong to come," she said steadily. "I was trying to act for the best. I wanted to save Laura if I could. I wanted to spare you the pain of knowing." With a sudden gesture she handed the letters to Parker.

The studio was very still. The man holding the letters stood studying them, a gray look creeping over his frank, jovial face as he grasped their

import. Pawling's restless glance wandered suspiciously from his friend to his wife, unable to discredit the evidence of his own senses, yet still refusing to be convinced. The woman gazed from under lowered lids upon the havoc she had wrought. The first flush of malevolent satisfaction had faded. Already she was conscious that the knowledge that she owed her safety to a paltry vengeance was poor companionship down the vista of joyless years that stretched emptily before her.



PARTICEPS CRIMINIS

WERE you not partly to blame? Confess!
 How could I know what you really meant?
 Your lips said no; but your eyes said yes.

You sat beside me, a wind-blown tress
 Touched me with ravishing blandishment;
 Were you not partly to blame? Confess!

Why did I kiss you? A tenderness
 In your glance, I fancied, gave consent;
 Your lips said no; but your eyes said yes.

How could I help it, you sorceress?
 Your eyes—why are they so eloquent?
 Were you not partly to blame? Confess!

Of course, you didn't quite acquiesce,
 But—well, I stick to my argument:
 Your lips said no; but your eyes said yes.

Who heeds, dear heart, what the lips profess,
 When the eyes say something different?
 Were you not partly to blame? Confess!
 Your lips said no; but your eyes said yes.

CHARLES LOVE BENJAMIN.



NOT THE SAME

"SHE introduced him as her cousin once removed, didn't she?"
 "Oh, no—as her husband once removed."