



## THE PRETTY LADY OR THE TIGER

In the very olden time there lived a semi-barbaric king, whose ideas, though somewhat polished and sharpened by the progressiveness of distant Latin neighbors, were still large, florid, and untrammelled, as became the half of him which was barbaric. He was a man of exuberant fancy, and, withal, of an authority so irresistible that, at his will, he turned his varied fancies into facts. He was greatly given to self-communing, and, when he and himself agreed upon anything, the thing was done. When every member of his domestic and political systems moved smoothly in its appointed course, his nature was bland and genial; but, whenever there was a little hitch, and some of his orbs got out of their orbits, he was blander and more genial still, for nothing pleased him so much as to make the crooked straight and crush down uneven places.

Among the borrowed notions by which his barbarism had become semified was that of the public arena, in which, by exhibitions of manly and beastly valor, the minds of his subjects were refined and cultured.

But even here the exuberant and barbaric fancy asserted itself. The arena of the king was built, not to give the people an opportunity of hearing the rhapsodies of dying gladiators, nor to enable them to view the inevitable conclusion of a conflict between religious opinions and hungry jaws, but for purposes far better adapted to widen and develop the mental energies of the people. This vast amphitheater, with its encircling galleries, its mysterious vaults, and its

unseen passages, was an agent of poetic justice, in which crime was punished, or virtue rewarded, by the decrees of an impartial and incorruptible chance.

girlplays

When a subject was accused of a crime of sufficient importance to interest the king, public notice was given that on an appointed day the fate of the accused person would be decided in the king's arena, a structure which well deserved its name, for, although its form and plan were borrowed from afar, its purpose emanated solely from the brain of this man, who, every barleycorn a king, knew no tradition to which he owed more allegiance than pleased his fancy, and who ingrafted on every adopted form of human thought and action the rich growth of his barbaric idealism.

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When all the people had assembled in the galleries, and the king, surrounded by his court, sat high up on his throne of royal state on one side of the arena, he gave a signal, a door beneath him opened, and the accused subject stepped out into the amphitheater. Directly opposite him, on the other side of the enclosed space, were two doors, exactly alike and side by side. It was the duty and the privilege of the person on trial to walk directly to these doors and open one of them. He could open either door he pleased; he was subject to no guidance or influence but that of the aforementioned impartial and incorruptible chance. If he opened the one, there came out of it a hungry tiger, the fiercest and most cruel that could be procured, which immediately sprang upon him and tore him to pieces as a punishment for his guilt. The moment that the case of the criminal was thus decided, doleful iron bells were clanged, great wails went up from the hired mourners posted on the outer rim of the arena, and the vast audience, with bowed heads and downcast hearts, wended slowly their homeward way, mourning greatly that one so young and fair, or so old and respected, should have merited so dire a fate.

But, if the accused person opened the other door, there came forth from it a lady, the most suitable to his years and station that his majesty could select among his fair subjects, and to this lady he was immediately married, as a reward of his innocence. It mattered not that he might already possess a wife and family, or that his affections might be engaged upon an object of his own selection; the king allowed no such subordinate arrangements to interfere with his great scheme of retribution and reward. The exercises, as in the other instance, took place immediately, and in the arena. Another door opened beneath the king, and a priest, followed by a band of choristers, and dancing maidens blowing joyous airs on golden horns and treading an epithalamic measure, advanced to where the pair stood, side by side, and the wedding was promptly and cheerily solemnized. Then the gay brass bells rang forth their merry peals, the people shouted glad hurrahs, and the innocent man, preceded by children strewing flowers on his path, led his bride to his home.

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This was the king's semi-barbaric method of administering justice. Its perfect fairness is obvious. The criminal could not know out of which door would come the lady; he opened either he pleased, without having the slightest idea whether, in the next instant, he was to be devoured or married. On some occasions the tiger came out of one door, and on some out of the other. The decisions of this tribunal were not only fair, they were positively determinate: the accused person was instantly punished if he found himself guilty, and, if innocent, he was rewarded on the spot, whether he liked it or not. There was no escape from the judgments of the king's arena.

The institution was a very popular one. When the people gathered together on one of the great trial days, they never knew whether they were to witness a bloody slaughter or a hilarious wedding. This element of uncertainty lent an

interest to the occasion which it could not otherwise have attained. Thus, the masses were entertained and pleased, and the thinking part of the community could bring no charge of unfairness against this plan, for did not the accused person have the whole matter in his own hands?

This semi-barbaric king had a daughter as blooming as his most florid fancies, and with a soul as fervent and imperious as his own. As is usual in such cases, she was the apple of his eye, and was loved by him above all humanity. Among his courtiers was a young man of that fineness of blood and lowness of station common to the conventional heroes of romance who love royal maidens. This royal maiden was well satisfied with her lover, for he was handsome and brave to a degree unsurpassed in all this kingdom, and she loved him with an ardor that had enough of barbarism in it to make it exceedingly warm and strong. This love affair moved on happily for many months, until one day the king happened to discover its existence. He did not hesitate nor waver in regard to his duty in the premises. The youth was immediately cast into prison, and a day was appointed for his trial in the king's arena. This, of course, was an especially important occasion, and his majesty, as well as all the people, was greatly interested in the workings and development of this trial. Never before had such a case occurred; never before had a subject dared to love the daughter of the king. In after years such things became commonplace enough, but then they were in no slight degree novel and startling.

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The tiger-cages of the kingdom were searched for the most savage and relentless beasts, from which the fiercest monster might be selected for the arena; and the ranks of maiden youth and beauty throughout the land were carefully surveyed by competent judges in order that the young man might have a fitting bride in case fate did not determine for him a different destiny. Of course, everybody knew that the deed

with which the accused was charged had been done. He had loved the princess, and neither he, she, nor any one else, thought of denying the fact; but the king would not think of allowing any fact of this kind to interfere with the workings of the tribunal, in which he took such great delight and satisfaction. No matter how the affair turned out, the youth would be disposed of, and the king would take an aesthetic pleasure in watching the course of events, which would determine whether or not the young man had done wrong in allowing himself to love the princess.

The appointed day arrived. From far and near the people gathered, and thronged the great galleries of the arena, and crowds, unable to gain admittance, massed themselves against its outside walls. The king and his court were in their places, opposite the twin doors, those fateful portals, so terrible in their similarity.

All was ready. The signal was given. A door beneath the royal party opened, and the lover of the princess walked into the arena. Tall, beautiful, fair, his appearance was greeted with a low hum of admiration and anxiety. Half the audience had not known so grand a youth had lived among them. No wonder the princess loved him! What a terrible thing for him to be there!

As the youth advanced into the arena he turned, as the custom was, to bow to the king, but he did not think at all of that royal personage. His eyes were fixed upon the princess, who sat to the right of her father. Had it not been for the moiety of barbarism in her nature it is probable that lady would not have been there, but her intense and fervid soul would not allow her to be absent on an occasion in which she was so terribly interested. From the moment that the decree had gone forth that her lover should decide his fate in the king's arena, she had thought of nothing, night or day, but this great event and the various subjects connected with it. Possessed of more power, influence, and force of character than any one who had ever before been interested in such a

case, she had done what no other person had done – she had possessed herself of the secret of the doors. She knew in which of the two rooms, that lay behind those doors, stood the cage of the tiger, with its open front, and in which waited the lady. Through these thick doors, heavily curtained with skins on the inside, it was impossible that any noise or suggestion should come from within to the person who should approach to raise the latch of one of them. But gold, and the power of a woman's will, had brought the secret to the princess.

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And not only did she know in which room stood the lady ready to emerge, all blushing and radiant, should her door be opened, but she knew who the lady was. It was one of the fairest and loveliest of the damsels of the court who had been selected as the reward of the accused youth, should he be proved innocent of the crime of aspiring to one so far above him; and the princess hated her. Often had she seen, or imagined that she had seen, this fair creature throwing glances of admiration upon the person of her lover, and sometimes she thought these glances were perceived, and even returned. Now and then she had seen them talking together; it was but for a moment or two, but much can be said in a brief space; it may have been on most unimportant topics, but how could she know that? The girl was lovely, but she had dared to raise her eyes to the loved one of the princess; and, with all the intensity of the savage blood transmitted to her through long lines of wholly barbaric ancestors, she hated the woman who blushed and trembled behind that silent door.

When her lover turned and looked at her, and his eye met hers as she sat there, paler and whiter than any one in the vast ocean of anxious faces about her, he saw, by that power of quick perception which is given to those whose souls are one, that she knew behind which door crouched the tiger, and behind which stood the lady. He had expected her to know it. He

understood her nature, and his soul was assured that she would never rest until she had made plain to herself this thing, hidden to all other lookers-on, even to the king. The only hope for the youth in which there was any element of certainty was based upon the success of the princess in discovering this mystery; and the moment he looked upon her, he saw she had succeeded, as in his soul he knew she would succeed.

Then it was that his quick and anxious glance asked the question: "Which?" It was as plain to her as if he shouted it from where he stood. There was not an instant to be lost. The question was asked in a flash; it must be answered in another.

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Her right arm lay on the cushioned parapet before her. She raised her hand, and made a slight, quick movement toward the right. No one but her lover saw her. Every eye but his was fixed on the man in the arena.

He turned, and with a firm and rapid step he walked across the empty space. Every heart stopped beating, every breath was held, every eye was fixed immovably upon that man. Without the slightest hesitation, he went to the door on the right, and opened it.

Now, the point of the story is this: Did the tiger come out of that door, or did the lady ?

The more we reflect upon this question, the harder it is to answer. It involves a study of the human heart which leads us through devious mazes of passion, out of which it is difficult to find our way. Think of it, fair reader, not as if the decision of the question depended upon yourself, but upon that hot-blooded, semi-barbaric princess, her soul at a white heat beneath the combined fires of despair and jealousy. She had lost him, but who should have him?

How often, in her waking hours and in her dreams, had she started in wild horror, and covered her face with her hands as

she thought of her lover opening the door on the other side of which waited the cruel fangs of the tiger!

But how much oftener had she seen him at the other door! How in her grievous reveries had she gnashed her teeth, and torn her hair, when she saw his start of rapturous delight as he opened the door of the lady! How her soul had burned in agony when she had seen him rush to meet that woman, with her flushing cheek and sparkling eye of triumph; when she had seen him lead her forth, his whole frame kindled with the joy of recovered life; when she had heard the glad shouts from the multitude, and the wild ringing of the happy bells; when she had seen the priest, with his joyous followers, advance to the couple, and make them man and wife before her very eyes; and when she had seen them walk away together upon their path of flowers, followed by the tremendous shouts of the hilarious multitude, in which her one despairing shriek was lost and drowned!

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Would it not be better for him to die at once, and go to wait for her in the blessed regions of semi-barbaric futurity?

And yet, that awful tiger, those shrieks, that blood!

Her decision had been indicated in an instant, but it had been made after days and nights of anguished deliberation. She had known she would be asked, she had decided what she would answer, and, without the slightest hesitation, she had moved her hand to the right.

The question of her decision is one not to be lightly considered, and it is not for me to presume to set myself up as the one person able to answer it. And so I leave it with all of you: Which came out of the opened door – the lady, or the tiger?





## THE WICKER HUSBAND

Once upon a time, there was an ugly girl. She was short and dumpy, had one leg a bit shorter than the other, and her eyebrows met in the middle. The ugly girl gutted fish for a living, so her hands smelt funny and her dress was covered in scales. She had no mother or brother, no father, sister, or any friends. She lived in a ramshackle house on the outskirts of the village, and she never complained.

One by one, the village girls married the local lads, and up the path to the church they'd prance, smiling all the way. At the weddings, the ugly girl always stood at the back of the church, smelling slightly of brine. The village women gossiped about the ugly girl. They wondered what she did with the money she earnt. The ugly girl never bought a new frock, never made repairs to the house, and never drank in the village tavern.

Now, it so happened that outside the village, in a great damp swamp, lived an old basket-maker who was famed for the quality of his work. One day the old basket-maker heard a knock on his door. When he opened it, the ugly girl stood there. In her hand, she held six gold coins.

'I want you to make me a husband,' she said.

'Come back in a month,' he replied.

Well, the old basket-maker was greatly moved that the ugly girl had entrusted him with such an important task. He resolved to make her the best husband he could. He made the wicker husband broad of shoulder and long of leg, and all the other things women like. He made him strong of arm and elegant of neck, and his brows were wide and well-spaced. His hair was a fine dark brown, his eyes a greenish hazel.

When the day came, the ugly girl knocked on the basket-maker's door.

'He says today is too soon. He will be in the church tomorrow, at ten,' said the basket-maker. The ugly girl went away, and spent the day scraping scales from her dress.

Later that night, there was a knock on the door of the village tailor. When the tailor opened it, the wicker husband stood outside.

'Lend me a suit,' he said. 'I am getting married in the morning, and I cannot go to church naked.'

'Aaaaaaargh!' yelled the tailor, and ran out the back door.

The tailor's wife came out, wiping her hands. 'What's going on?' she said.

'Lend me a suit,' said the wicker husband. 'I am getting married tomorrow, and I cannot go to my wedding naked.'

The tailor's wife gave him a suit, and slammed the door in his face.

Next, there was a knock on the door of the village shoe-maker. When the shoe-maker opened it, the wicker husband stood there.

'Lend me some shoes,' he said. 'I am getting married in the morning, and I cannot go to church barefoot.'

'Aaaaaaargh!' yelled the shoe-maker, and he ran out the back door.

The shoe-maker's wife came out, her hands trembling.

'What do you want?' she said.

'Lend me some shoes,' said the wicker husband. 'I am getting married in the morning, and I cannot go to my wedding barefoot.'

The shoe-maker's wife gave him a pair of shoes, and slammed the door in his face. Next, the wicker husband went to the village inn.

'Give me a drink,' said the wicker husband. 'I am getting married tomorrow, and I wish to celebrate.'

'Aaaaaaargh!' yelled the inn-keeper and all his customers, and out they ran. The poor wicker husband went behind the bar, and poured himself a drink.

When the ugly girl got to church in the morning, she was mighty pleased to find her husband so handsome, and so well turned-out.

When the couple had enjoyed their first night of marriage, the wicker husband said to his wife: 'This bed is broken. Bring me a chisel: I will fix it.'

So like a good husband, he began to fix the bed. The ugly girl went out to gut fish. When she came back at the end of the day, the wicker husband looked at her, and said: 'I was made to be with you.'

When the couple had enjoyed their second night of marriage, the wicker husband said: 'This roof is leaky. Bring me a ladder: I will fix it.'

So, like a good husband, he climbed up and began to fix

the thatch. The ugly girl went out to gut fish. When she returned in the evening, the wicker husband looked at his wife, and said: 'Without you, I should never have seen the sun on the water, or the clouds in the sky.'

When the couple had enjoyed their third night of marriage, the ugly girl got ready to out. 'The chimney needs cleaning,' she said, hopefully, 'And the fire could be laid...' But at this, the wicker husband – she was just beginning to learn his expressions – looked completely terrified. From this, the ugly girl came to understand that there are some things you cannot ask a man to do, even if he is very kind.

Over the weeks, the villagers began to notice a change in the ugly girl. If one of her legs was still shorter than the other, her hips moved with a swing that didn't please them. If she still smelt funny, she sang while she gutted the fish. She bought a new frock and wore flowers in her hair. Even her eyebrows no longer met in the middle: the wicker husband had pulled them out with his strong, withied fingers. When the villagers passed the ugly girl's house, they saw it had been painted anew, the windows sparkled, and the door no longer hung askew. You might think that all these changes pleased the villagers, but oh no. Instead, wives pointed out to husbands that their doors needed fixing, and why didn't they offer? The men retorted that maybe if their wives made an effort with new frocks and flowers in their hair, then maybe they'd feel like fixing the house, and everybody grumbled and cursed each other, but secretly, in their hearts, they blamed the ugly girl and her husband.

As to the ugly girl, she didn't notice all the jealousy. She was too busy growing accustomed to married life, and was finding that the advantages of a wicker husband outweighed his few shortcomings. The wicker husband didn't eat, and never complained that his dinner was late. He only drank water, the muddier the better. She was a little sad that she could not cook him dinner like an ordinary man, and watch him while he ate. In the cold nights, she hoped they would sit together close to the fire, but he preferred the darkness, far from the flames. The ugly girl got in the habit of calling across the room all the things she had to say to him. As winter turned to spring, and rain pelted down, the wicker husband became a little mouldy, and the ugly girl had to scrub him down with a brush and a bottle of vinegar. Spring turned to summer, and June was very dry. The wicker husband complained of stiffness in his joints, and spent the hottest hour of the day lying in the stream. The ugly girl took her fish-gutting, and sat on the bank, keeping him company.

Eventually the villagers were too ridden with curiosity

to stand it any longer. There was a wedding in the village: the ugly girl and her husband were invited. At the wedding, there was music and dancing, and food and wine. As the musicians struck up, the wicker husband and the ugly girl went to dance. The villagers could not help staring: the wicker husband moved so fine. He lifted his dumpy wife like she was nought but a feather, and swung her round and round. He swayed and shimmered; he was elegant, he was graceful. As for the ugly girl: she was in heaven.

The women began to whisper behind their hands. Now, the blacksmith's wife was boldest, and she resolved to ask the wicker husband to dance. When the music paused she went towards the couple. The ugly girl was sitting in the wicker husband's lap, so he creaked a little. The blacksmith's wife was about to tap the wicker husband on the shoulder, but his arms were wrapped round the ugly girl.

'You are the only reason that I live and breathe,' the wicker husband said to his wife.

The blacksmith's wife heard what he said, and went off, sulking. The next day there were many frayed tempers in the village.

'You've got two left feet!' shouted the shoe-maker's wife at her husband.

'You never tell me anything nice!' yelled the blacksmith's wife.

'All you do is look at other women!' shouted the baker's wife, though how she knew was a mystery, as she'd done nothing but stare at the wicker husband all night. The husbands fled their homes and congregated in the tavern.

'T'aint right,' they muttered, 'T'isn't natural.'

'E's showing us up.'

'Painting doors.'

'Fixing thatch.'

'Murmuring sweet nothings.'

'Dancing!' muttered the blacksmith, and they all spat.

'He's not really a man,' muttered the baker. 'An abomination!'

'He don't eat.'

'He don't grumble.'

'He don't even fart,' added the tailor, gloomily.

The men shook their heads, and agreed that it couldn't go on.

Meanwhile the women congregated in each other's kitchens.

'It's not right,' they muttered. 'Why does she deserve him?'

'It's an enchantment,' they whispered. 'She bewitched him.'

'She'll be onto our husbands next, I expect,' said the baker's wife. 'We should be careful.'

'She needs to be brought down a peg or two.'

'Fancies that she's better than the rest of us, I reckon.'

'Flowers in her hair!!'

'Did you see her dancing?'

And they all agreed that it couldn't go on.

One day the wicker husband was on his way back from checking the fish-traps, when he was accosted by the baker.

'Hello,' said the baker. The wicker husband was a little surprised: the baker never bothered to speak to him. 'You made an impression the other night.'

'I did?' said the wicker husband.

'Oh yes,' continued the baker. 'The women are all aflutter. Don't you ever think – well...'

'What?' said the wicker husband, completely confused.

'Man like you,' said the baker. 'Could do well for himself. A lot of opportunities...' He leaned forward, so the wicker husband recoiled. The baker's breath smelt of dough, which he found unpleasant. 'Butcher's wife,' added the baker meaningfully. 'Very taken. I know for a fact that he's not at home. Gone to visit his brother in the city. Why don't you go round?'

'I can't,' said the wicker husband. 'My wife's waiting for me at home.' And he strode off, up the lane. The baker went home, annoyed.

Now the wicker husband, who was too trusting, thought less of this of this than he should, and did not warn his wife that trouble was brewing. About a week later, the ugly girl was picking berries in the hedgerow, when the tailor's wife sidled up. Her own basket was empty, which made the ugly girl suspicious.

'My dear!' cried the tailor's wife, fluttering her hands.

'What d'you want?' said the ugly girl.

The tailor's wife wiped away a fake tear, and looked in both directions. 'My dear,' she whispered. 'I'm only here to warn you. Your husband – he's been seen with other women.'

'What other women?' said the ugly girl.

The tailor's wife fluttered her hands. This wasn't going as she intended. 'My dear, you can't trust men. They're all the same. And you can't expect – a man like him, and a woman like you – frankly -'

The ugly girl was so angry that she hit the tailor's wife with her basket, and ran off, up the lane. The ugly girl went home, and – knowing more of cruelty than her husband did – thought on this too much and too long. But she did not want to

upset her husband, so she said nothing.

The tailor's wife came home fuming, with scratches all over her face. That night, the wives and husbands of the village all agreed – for once – that something drastic had to be done.

A few days later the old basket-maker heard a knocking at his door. When he opened it, the villagers stood outside. Right on cue, the tailor's wife began to weep, pitifully.

'What's the matter?' said the old basket-maker.

'She's childless,' said the baker's wife, sniffing.

'Not a son,' said the tailor, sadly.

'Or a daughter.'

'No-one to comfort them in their old age,' added the butcher.

'It's breaking their hearts,' went on the baker.

'So we've come to ask -'

'If you'll make us a baby. Out of wicker.'

And they held out a bag of gold.

'Very well,' said the old basket-maker. 'Come back in a month.'

Well, one dusky day in autumn, the ugly girl was sitting by the fire, when there came a knock at the door. The wicker husband opened it. Outside, stood the villagers. The tailor's wife bore a bundle in her arms, and the bundle began to whimper.

'What's that?' said the ugly girl.

'This is all your fault,' hissed the butcher, pointing at the wicker husband.

'Look what you've done!' shouted the baker.

'It's an abomination,' sneered the inn-keeper. 'Not even human!'

The tailor pulled away the blanket. The ugly girl saw that the baby was made of wicker. It had the same shaped nose, the same green eyes that her husband did.

'Tell me it's not true!' she cried.

But the wicker husband said nothing. He just stared at the baby. He had never seen one of his own kind before, and now – his heart filled up with tenderness. When the ugly girl saw this on his face, a great cloud of bitterness came upon her. She sank to the floor, moaning.

'Filthy, foul, creature!' cried the tailor. 'I should burn it!' He seized the baby, and made to fling it into the blaze. At this, the wicker husband let out a yell. Forward he leapt.

The ugly girl let out a terrible cry. She took the lamp, and flung it straight at her husband. The lamp burst in shards of glass. Oil went everywhere. Flames began to lick at the

wicker husband's chest, up his neck, into his face. He tried to beat at the flames, but his fingers grew oily, and burst into fire. Out he ran, shrieking, and plunged into the river.

'Well, that worked well,' said the butcher, in a satisfied manner.

The villagers did not spare a second glance for the ugly girl, but went home again to their dinners. On the way, the tailor's wife threw the wicker baby in the ditch. She stamped on its face. 'Ugh,' she said. 'Horrible thing.'

The next day the ugly girl wandered the highways, weeping, her face smeared in ashes.

'Have you seen my husband?' she asked passing travellers, but they saw madness in her eyes, and spurred their horses on. Dusk fell. Stumbling home, scarce knowing where she was, the ugly girl heard a sound in the ditch. Kneeling, she found the wicker baby. It wailed and thrashed, and held up its hands. The ugly girl saw in its face her husband's eyes, and her husband's nose. She cuddled it to her chest and took it home.

Now, the old basket maker knew nothing of all this. One day, the old man took it into his head to see how his creations were faring. He walked into town, and knocked on the tailor's door. The wife answered.

'How is the baby?' he said.

'Oh that,' she said. 'It died.' And she shut the door in his face. The old basket-maker walked on, till he came to the ugly girl's place. The door was closed, the garden untended, and dirt smeared the windows. The old basket-maker knocked on the door. No-one answered, though he waited a very long time.

The old-basket maker went home, disheartened. He was walking the long dark road into the swamp, when he heard something in the rushes. At first he was afraid: he wrapped his scarf closer round his face. But the thing seemed to follow him. From time to time, it groaned.

'Who's there?' called the old man.

Out onto the roadway staggered the most broken and bedraggled, the most pathetic and pitiful thing. The old basket-maker stared at what was left of the wicker husband: his hands consumed by fire, his face equally gone. Dark pits of scorched wood marred his chest. Where he had burnt, he had started to rot.

'What have they done to my children?' cried the old basket-maker.

The wicker husband said nothing: he had lost his tongue.

The old basket-maker took the wicker husband home. As daylight came, the old basket-maker sat down to repair him. But as he worked, his heart grew hot with anger.

'I made you, but I failed you,' he said. 'I will not send

you there again.'

Eventually, the wicker husband looked as good as new, though the smell of burning still clung. But as the days passed, a damp black mould began to grow on him. The old basket-maker pulled out the rotting withies and replaced them. But it seemed useless: the wicker husband rotted from the inside, outwards.

At last, the old basket-maker saw there was nothing else to be done. He took up his travelling cloak, set out at night, and passed through the village. He came to the ugly girl's house. In the garden, wreathed in filth, stood the ugly girl, cuddling a child. She was singing the saddest lullaby he had ever heard. The old basket-maker saw that the child was the one he'd made, and his heart softened a little. He stepped out of the shadows.

'Why do you keep the baby,' he said, 'when you cast your husband from home?'

The ugly girl cried out, to hear someone speak to her.

'It is all I have left of my husband,' she said at last. 'Though it is proof he betrayed me, I could not leave it in the ditch to die.'

'You are a fool,' he said. 'It was I that made the child. Your husband is innocent.'

At this, the ugly girl let out a cry, and ran towards the river. But old basket-maker caught her arm. 'Wait – I have something to show you,' he said.

The ugly girl walked behind him, through the swamp where the water sucked and burbled, carrying the baby. As the sun rose, she saw that its features were only those of the old basket-maker, who, like any maker, had passed down his face to his creations.

When they came to the dwelling, the ugly girl opened the door, and saw her husband, sitting in darkness.

'It cannot be you,' she said. 'You are dead. I know: I killed you myself.'

'I was made for you alone,' said the wicker husband, 'But you threw me away.'

The ugly girl let out a cry so loud, birds surfaced from the marches for miles around, and threw herself at her husband's feet.

A few days later, the villagers were surprised to see the old basket-maker standing outside the church.

'I have something to say,' he said. 'Soon I will retire. But first, I am making my masterwork – a woman made of wicker. If you want her, you can have her. But you must bring me a gift for my retirement. Whoever brings me the best gift can have the wicker woman.'



Then he turned round and went back to the swamp.

Behind him, the villagers began to whisper. Hadn't the wicker husband been tall and graceful? Hadn't he been a hard worker? Hadn't he been handsome, and eager to please his wife?

Next day, the entire village denied any interest in the wicker lady, but secretly began to plan. Men eyed up prize cows; women sneaked open jewellery boxes.

'That wicker husband worked like a slave, and never even ate,' said the shoe-maker's wife to her husband. 'Get me the wicker woman as a servant, I'll live like a lady, never lift a finger.'

'That wicker husband never quarrelled with anyone, never even raised his voice. Not like you, you old fishwife,' the inn-keeper said to his wife.

'That wicker husband never tired, and never had a headache,' said the butcher to the baker. 'Imagine...!'

'Lend me a shilling, cousin,' said the shoe-maker's wife. 'I need a new petticoat.'

'I can't,' lied the blacksmith's wife. 'I spent it on medicine. The child was very sick.'

'I need that back-rent you owe me,' said the butcher, who owned the tailor's house.

'Been a very bad season in the tailoring trade,' muttered the tailor. 'You'll get it soon.'

The butcher went into town, hired a lawyer, and got the tailor evicted from his house. The tailor and his wife had to go and live in the shoe-maker's shed.

'But what are you going to do with the empty house?' asked the butcher's wife.

'Nothing,' said the butcher, who thought the place would do admirably to keep a mistress. The butcher's wife and the tailor's wife had a fight in the market, and went home with black eyes. In the tavern, no-one spoke, but only eyed each other, suspiciously. The lawyer was still in town. Rumour had it that the tailor's wife was suing for divorce: the inn-keeper's wife had her husband arrested after she found the stairs had been greased. In short, the fields went uncut, the cows went unmilked, ovens uncleaned: the village was obsessed.

When the day came, the old basket-maker came to town, and sat on the churchyard wall. The villagers brought their gifts. First the tailor, who'd made a luxurious coat. Next the miller, bringing twelve sacks of grain. The baker made the most extravagant cake; the carpenter brought a table and chairs, the carter a good strong horse. The blacksmith's wife staggered up with a cheese the size of a millwheel. Her cousin, the tailor's wife, arrived with a bag of gold.

'Where d'you get that, wife?' said her husband, amazed.

'Never you mind,' she snapped.

The inn-keeper's wife wasn't there: she'd slipped while climbing the stairs.

Last to come was the butcher. He'd really outdone the others: two oxen, four cows, and a dozen sheep.

The old-basket maker looked around him. 'Well,' he said. 'I think the prize goes to... the butcher. I'll just take these and be back, with the wicker lady.'

The butcher was so pleased, spittle ran from his mouth.

'Can I have my grain back?' said the miller.

'No no,' said the old man. 'That wasn't the bargain.' And he began to load all the goods onto the horse. The villagers would have fallen on each other, fighting, but they were so desperate to see the wicker lady, they just stood there, to wait.

It was dusk by the time the basket-maker returned. The wicker woman was seated on the horse, shrouded in a cloak, veiled like a bride. From under the cloak, white flowers fell. As she passed the villagers, a most marvellous smell drifted down.

The butcher stood outside the tailor's old house. He'd locked his wife in the coal cellar in preparation.

The old basket-maker held out a hand, and helped the lady dismount. The butcher smelt her fragrance. From under the veil, he thought he saw her give him a saucy glance. He was so excited, he hopped from foot to foot.

The wicker lady lifted her veil: she took off her cloak. The butcher stared at her. The wicker lady was short of stature and twisted of limb, her face was dark and rough. But worse than that – from head to foot, she was covered in thorns.

'What have you done?' shrieked the butcher.

'Ah,' said the old basket-maker. 'The wicker husband was made of willow. Willow is the kindest of trees: tall, elegant, pliable, of much assistance in easing pain. But I saw that you did not like him. Therefore I made you the wicker lady from blackthorn. Blackthorn is cold, hard, and thorny – it will not be killed, either by fire or frost.'

The villagers would have fallen on the old basket-maker there and then, had not the wicker lady stepped forward. She seized hold of the butcher and reached up to kiss him. The butcher let out a howl. When he pulled his lips away, they were shredded and tattered: blood ran down his chin. Then, with a bang, the butcher's wife broke out of the coal cellar, and ran down the road. Seeing the wicker lady kissing her husband, she screamed, and fell on her. The two of them rolled in the gutter, howling and scratching.

Just then, the lawyer piped up. 'Didn't you check the details first?' he said. 'It's very important. You should always check the small print.'

The men of the village took their butcher's knives and pitchforks and tailoring shears, and chased the lawyer out of town. When they'd run out of breath, they stopped.

'That old fraud the basket-maker,' said the baker. 'He tricked us.'

So they turned round and began to go back in the other direction, on the road into the swamp. In the darkness they stumbled and squelched, lost their way and nearly drowned. It was light by the time they came to the old basket-maker's dwelling, but the old basket-maker, the wicker husband, the ugly girl and the baby, as well as all the villagers' goods, had already upped, and gone.



## PARIS AT NIGHTS

Today was rice day, fifty-pound sacks of white rice in trucks bearing an elephant logo. The same happy elephant appeared on the bags, its head raised to the sky, the trunk curved like an S.

"Elephant," Todd said.

He said it because a laborer was staring at it intently. Which meant he wasn't working.

"That's right," the man said. "I couldn't remember the word."

He was the only other human at the loading dock this morning. The man didn't have a name, just a number, like the rest of the robots.

"Let's get back to it, 8831, okay?"

"Yessir," the man said.

That could be me, Todd thought as he watched him work side by side with his silent mechanical counterparts, lifting, carrying, and dropping bags of rice from the back of the truck

to the warehouse. A bad car accident, a bad fall from a ladder, and that could be me.

Or a bad memrip.

AT LUNCH, Todd thought of things he could sell. Everything he owned of any value, he could touch: his grandfather's watch, his grandmother's wedding ring, a gold necklace belonging to some forgotten relative. His car, too, but that was out of the question as he needed it to work.

He got up from his chair and scanned the floor below, the robots still working away, a sea of metallic shoulders rising and falling in unison, strangely beautiful in a way. Over by the forklift sat 8831, his eyes as blank as the piece of bread he was eating.

Two weeks from today was Todd's thirtieth wedding anniversary, and even if he were to pawn the watch, the ring, and the necklace, he knew he wouldn't even come close to having enough for Paris. That's where Sue had wanted to go for as long as he could remember. They didn't have the money to honeymoon there, but that was okay because back then, there had been plenty of time. They were young, both healthy and working, so they would save a little here and there and in a couple of years, they would be walking up to the Eiffel Tower at night arm in arm, find themselves underneath the arch and look up at the beacon that shined on this city of lights.

But then came two sons and three recessions and a second mortgage. A hysterectomy for her, a double bypass for him, and now here he was, nine years short of retirement, supervising a team of robots and a retarded man, thinking about folks who could sell things they couldn't touch, like stocks and bonds and whatever else he couldn't even fathom, people with money who would pay to experience another's most cherished moments.

Silly. That would be Sue's word for it if this were a story she'd overheard. *For a trip, a goddamn trip, what a silly thing to do.*

But it was more than a trip. It was their life together. There was life and there was death, and it seemed to Todd that if he waited any longer, there wouldn't be a difference between the two.

He opened the filing cabinet and rifled through the folders. In all the years he'd been here, only a handful of human workers had come and gone. All of them were handicapped

in some way; they came through the city welfare program, and 8831 was no exception.

Name: Lopez, Manny

Age: 46

Tax Status: Married

Disability: Neural Trauma

Neural Trauma. It was worth a shot.

Manny's wife picked up on the second ring. Todd told her who he was, and after he assured her that her husband was not hurt, he was fine, he was a great worker, he asked her what he wanted to know. She listened without interrupting him, then there was a lengthy silence.

"Why?" she asked.

"Does it matter?"

"I can report you."

"I know."

More silence.

"He did it because he loved me. Loved," she said, hardening. "Not loves."

"I heard you."

Then she hung up on him, and for the rest of the day, Todd replayed the conversation in his mind. Should he have lied to her, made up some story about a sick mother, a dying child? He wasn't good at talking, especially on the phone. People thought he was unfriendly, hostile. A woman once told him his voice sounded like broken stones rattling in a cage.

The horn blared at five, time for the two humans to go home and the robots to be reconditioned and put in standby.

Todd was walking out to his car when Manny touched his shoulder.

"Boss," he said, sounding uncertain. He held out his phone. "My wife, she wants to talk to you?"

THE HOUSE was quiet when he returned, and it seemed to Todd that he wanted to keep it that way. Take small, measured steps, like a thief. He carefully pulled the door shut, holding onto the doorknob and turning it by hand until it locked.

Above, the floorboards creaked, Sue's footsteps as she walked from their bedroom to the bathroom. Then a flush, and the trill of water climbing up to refill the toilet tank. And now the muffled voice of the late-show host on TV, the encouraging laughter of the studio audience, the one-two punch repeating until they cut to commercial.

Todd sat at the dining table and peeked inside the microdome, at the plate Sue had made for him. Pork chops, a bunch of broccoli spears, a hill of mashed potatoes with a well of gravy. He touched the REHEAT button and watched his

plate spin slowly, the inside of the dome steaming up.

*One thing for sure, my clients never tire of wedding proposals.*

The man Todd had met after work was funny, friendly, utterly normal. It didn't seem possible that they were talking about something that could land both of them a minimum of two years in prison.

*I'm not going to lie to you, Todd. There's a risk to this. People do get hurt, like your friend Manny. But keep in mind that Manny didn't follow our simple yet extremely important directions. We told him over and over again that he wasn't to consume any alcoholic beverages twenty-four hours before the procedure. We even hired a Portuguese translator to make sure he understood what was required of him. See, this is why Mrs. Lopez still led you to us, because she knows we do good work. Her cousin's a regular sourcer, comes in once a month, has been for years. We don't mess up, Todd. It's the sourcers who mess up. And I can see we'll have a smooth ride, because you're a smart guy.*

Though he introduced himself as Richard Gibbons, he also immediately admitted that it was an alias.

*In my opinion, Todd? In my opinion, I think it's something the government should regulate. Because let's face it, everybody's doing it. But think how long it took for marijuana to become legalized. Hell, it's still not legal in Alabama.*

Todd opened the microdome and took out the plate. The pork had gotten a little tougher, but it still tasted wonderful, his wife's signature flavors of mint and garlic in every bite.

*The way I see it, you're getting peak value for something that is going to eventually disappear. I'm not just talking about Alzheimer's. Once you go past sixty, memories fade at an alarming clip. It's what happens because the brain can only retain so much. Like all of our other organs, it's about usage. When was the last time you thought about your honeymoon? Honestly? The less you use, the more you lose. It's the foundation of how our bodies work. The health benefits of memripping, they're not some urban legend. You're cleaning house. You're taking out the garbage and putting it out on the curb, but here's the difference: you're getting paid for that trash.*

It was a painless, quick procedure. All you had to do was remember what you wanted to have ripped while the machine was plugged into you. The surgery was completely automated and technologically sound.

*Memory is free. Not for our clients, of course, haha! But*

for you, Todd. Think of all the new memories you'll create with the money you'll have. Our government wants to equate our enterprise to organ trafficking, but nothing could be further from the truth. You grow memory like a crop, and when you want to, you harvest it. Are there people picketing against farmers every time they cut down a bushel of corn? Of course not. It's natural. It's life.

"Todd?"

Sue met him at the sink. She reached for the dish towel hanging off the hook, but Todd angled his body to block her.

"It's just one dish," he said. "You can let it dry."

"You had a long day."

Todd wiped his hands on the towel and turned around to face her. Even though she looked prettier with her makeup on, he also liked seeing his wife like this, right before they went to bed, because only he saw her like this. Nobody else in the world knew this Sue, only him.

Though it was possible that wouldn't be true after the memrip. But was that a bad thing? Was it so terrible to share his love for his wife with someone else?

Todd waited to turn off the kitchen lights, for Sue to switch on the lamp at the landing of the staircase. It was their unspoken routine to retire to their bedroom. There were many other small routines like that one, and now, as he climbed the stairs with her, Todd thought how wonderful it was to know another person so well, that this was comfort, that this was home.

TRIANGULAR BOXES. That was the shipment that waited for him when he arrived at work the following morning. There were blue ones and red ones and yellow ones and green ones, and each contained a like-colored chair from a Korean designer. Todd couldn't see how a box like that could hold a comfortable chair, so he opened one up and sat in it.

"Jesus Christ," he said.

Four auto-adjusting palm-shaped prongs supported him in ways that seemed impossible: his lower back, his love handles, and his neck. If he had his way, he would sit here forever. But he couldn't, as the whistle blew and the robots came to life.

He thought the oddly-shaped boxes might pose a challenge for them, but they didn't miss a step. The robots saw the way the boxes were stacked inside the truck, right side up and upside down, staggered to maximize space, and they replicated the exact pattern in the warehouse.

Manny worked in perfect tandem with his mechanized brothers as the morning turned into afternoon. Like yesterday, he went back to the forklift to eat his lunch, and Todd

wondered if perhaps he used to run one of those. He considered asking him but changed his mind. If Manny did so before, he certainly didn't now, so what was there to talk about?

In his office, Todd dug into the brown paper bag of his own lunch and thought that today was very much like yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that. But tomorrow would be different because tonight would be different. If the memrip went according to plan – and he had no reason to believe it wouldn't, because he hadn't had a beer in the last twenty-four hours, hadn't washed his hair this morning, followed everything Gibbons had told him – tomorrow he would call up that travel agent who advertised in the paper and tell her to book the platinum romantic getaway to Paris for two.

*For a trip, a goddamn trip, what a silly thing to do.*

He could almost hear her say it. But she would be telling him as they were flying over the Atlantic in first-class seats. They'd never sat in those large leather chairs, only walked past them on their way to the narrow discomforts of coach.

Sue had made him the perfect egg salad sandwich, just enough mayo to keep the egg bits and chopped slivers of celery together. As he ate, he took out his flexphoto to watch the twelve-picture slideshow from Uncle Patrick's wedding. Gibbons had given him the paper-thin disposable device, which was programmed to turn on just once. According to Gibbons, the worst thing a sourcer could do was overprepare, try to remember too much and turn an emotional memory into an intellectual exercise.

*My client has been waiting seven years for this, Todd.*

Each picture only stayed on for five seconds, but it seemed much longer than that when the first one came up. How was it possible that they were both so thin, so young? Sue was in a blue sleeveless dress. She was in attendance because she was a friend of Uncle Patrick's sister. She was nineteen years old, and Todd was twenty. In the picture, they were both in the frame, sitting down at adjacent tables as dinner was being served. They had yet to meet, and somehow that made the moment even more special.

*Love at first sight. People say it, but they rarely mean it. My client has gone through sixteen memrips and still has yet to find a real one. That's why he's willing to pay big.*

He and Sue dancing, his left hand clasping her right hand, his right arm around her waist, their youthful faces glowing like a pair of full moons.

*I know the risk is more on your side, but you have to understand, the destinator also faces dangers. Emotional dangers. The disappointment can be so crushing that they often*



*need to seek psychological and spiritual guidance. This client who'll be installing your memrip, he's got one therapist and two holistic advisors on permanent payroll. So needless to say, he's counting on you.*

Their first kiss, and the angle showed Sue's surprise and delight. She was slightly drunk and so was he, but Todd remembered that moment more than any other, the warmth and wetness of her lips, the way they parted as the kiss transformed into a smile.

*I know you'll do your best. That's all we ask.*

The flexphoto blinked off, and lunch was over. "READY?" Gibbons asked.

They were in a dentist's office, and from the looks of it, not a very successful dentist. There was a leak in the corner of the ceiling, turning half of the tile brown, and the muzak that flowed out of the speakers was at times staticky.

Todd sat in the chair, his head tipped back and immobilized inside an octagonal metal cage. He couldn't see the machine anymore, but he knew it was there, a black cylinder with a silver arm. At the end of the arm was a clear tube too thin for the naked eye to see, which would enter through his left ear, travel through the auditory nerve, and make its way to his brain.

"You're not gonna feel a thing."

"Okay," Todd said, and soon there was a whirring in his left ear.

Indeed, he felt nothing as the tube burrowed inside. The pills Gibbons had given him were working, too, making his eyes a little dry but calming him.

"And we're in," Gibbons said.

Gibbons slid a flexphoto into a slot in front of the cage, filling Todd's view with blackness. Then the slideshow started again, and this time Todd held nothing back. Uncle Patrick's wedding, thirty-two years ago, meeting his future wife for the first time. Realizing he'll never again remember this moment filled him with regret, and for a second he felt an intense desire to scream, that he didn't want to do this, that his memory was his and no one else's, but then the feeling passed.

Just buyer's remorse, Todd thought, and went back to the task at hand, which was to remember.

At some point, Gibbons said, "The buffer's getting full, so it's going to scrape."

Scrape.

Todd didn't think there were words that could describe it. Clean? Was that what it was, that he felt clean? But it wasn't like washing his hands or taking a shower. Suddenly

there was a lightness in him, fresh, impossible pockets of air inside his mind. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation because it wasn't a sensation at all. That was it: whatever this was, it was the antithesis of something, but it wasn't exactly nothing, because the concept of nothingness existed in relation to a somethingness before it. What the scrape did was more than just remove his personal history; it removed the concept of history itself.

This should hurt, Todd thought. Something like this should be painful.

The next photo came into his vision, he and Sue at the bar, waiting for their drinks, but what had he been thinking about just before?

"Don't back up, just see forward, Todd," Gibbons said. "Let it go."

There were two more scrapings, and then they were done. The whirring in his ear stopped, and Gibbons unlatched the harness around his head. Todd rotated his neck left and right and back again, stiff from two hours of stillness.

On the top of the memrip machine was a round clear disc, a petri dish, with just a smidge of gray matter. PARIS WAS stubborn. While other cities around the world were busy upgrading concrete with organic alloys and replacing old street lamps with compact photon bulbs, this city looked no different than the way it did a hundred years ago. The stone bricks, the gargoyles, the wrought-iron fences, they looked like they'd always been here.

"Are you sure we're going the right way?" Sue asked.

Paris, at night. It was what she had always wanted, wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

These questions, these doubts. If only he could make them disappear.

"I think so," Todd said, walking past signs he couldn't read.

For a while things were fine, and then they weren't. Gibbons found a neurologist who was willing to examine Todd without notifying the authorities. Just bad luck, the doctor had said. You can never tell how these things will go. That's why it's not legal.

*Memory is like a million little houses. Taking one out is like lifting a house from a community. Not a big deal, because you can just build another in its place. The community remains unaffected.*

*But some memories are like skyscrapers. If you're careful, you might be able to take away the first floor of a tall building and leave it standing, but never for long.*

Sooner than later, walls start to crack. Ceilings leak. It's just a matter of time until the structure groans and loses integrity.

You still have lots of houses, though, Todd. A strong, stable community. That's why you're capable of doing everything else, like your job, like walking and eating and enjoying a movie. But your wife will remain problematic. Even new memories you form with her, they're going to reference this skyscraper because the damage was so extensive.

I'm so sorry.

Just one more street, Todd thought. When he glanced at Sue, he saw the way she was favoring her left leg. Why was that?

He didn't know.

If only they could find their way. How could they be lost, trying to find the tallest structure in the city? It was stupid. It was infuriating.

"Oh my," Sue said, pointing.

And there it was, finally, having hidden behind a row of buildings on this side street. There was no buildup to their encounter: the tower was not there, not there, and then...just there, in its entirety, tall and strong and sharp.

And still far away. It would take another fifteen minutes for them to reach the Eiffel Tower, where Todd would stand with the woman he was supposed to love underneath the arch, holding her hand, and listen to the wind whipping through the girders