

CHAPTER XXXIII. - WHEN MY WIFE IS ASLEEP AND ALL THE HOUSE IS STILL.

Perhaps the heading of this paper will deceive some readers into thinking that I smoke nowadays in camera. It is, I know, a common jest among smokers that such a promise as mine is seldom kept, and I allow that the Arcadians tempt me still. But never shall it be said of me with truth that I have broken my word. I smoke no more, and, indeed, though the scenes of my bachelorhood frequently rise before me in dreams, painted as Scrymgeour could not paint them, I am glad, when I wake up, that they are only dreams. Those selfish days are done, and I see that though they were happy days, the happiness was a mistake. As for the struggle that is supposed to take place between a man and tobacco, after he sees smoking in its true colors, I never experienced it. I have not even any craving for the Arcadia now, though it is a tobacco that should only be smoked by our greatest men. Were we to present a tin of it to our national heroes, instead of the freedom of the city, they would probably thank us more. Jimmy and the others are quite unworthy to smoke it; indeed, if I had my way they would give up smoking altogether. Nothing, perhaps, shows more completely how I have severed my bonds than this: that my wife is willing to let our friends smoke in the study, but I will not hear of it. There shall be no smoking in my house; and I have determined to speak to Jimmy about smoking out at our spare bedroom window. It is a mere contemptible pretence to say that none of the smoke comes back into the room. The curtains positively reek of it, and we must have them washed at once. I shall speak plainly to Jimmy because I want him to tell the others. They must understand clearly on what terms they are received in this house, and if they prefer making chimneys of themselves to listening to music, by all means let them stay at home.

But when my wife is asleep and all the house is still, I listen to the man through the wall. At such times I have my brier in my mouth, but there is no harm in that, for it is empty. I did not like to give away my brier, knowing no one who understood it, and I always carry it about with me now to remind me of my dark past. When the man through the wall lights up I put my cold pipe in my mouth and we have a quiet hour together.

I have never, to my knowledge, seen the man through the wall, for his door is round the corner, and, besides, I have no interest in him until half-past eleven P.M. We begin then. I know him chiefly by his pipes, and then I know by his taps on the wall as he knocks the ashes out of them. He does not smoke the Arcadia, for his temper is hasty, and he breaks the coals with his foot. Though I am compelled to say that I do not consider his character very lovable, he has his good points, and I like his attachment to his brier. He scrapes it, on the whole, a little roughly, but that is because he is so anxious to light up again, and I discovered long ago that he has signed an agreement with his wife to go to bed at half-past twelve. For some time I could not understand why he had a silver rim put on the bowl. I noticed the change in the tap at once, and the natural conclusion would have been that the bowl had cracked. But it never had the tap of a cracked bowl. I was reluctant to believe that the man through the wall was merely some vulgar fellow, and I felt that he could not be so, or else he would have smoked his meerschaum more. At last I understood. The bowl had worn away on one side, and the silver rim had been needed to keep the tobacco in. Undoubtedly this was the explanation, for even before the rim came I was a little puzzled by the taps of the brier. He never seemed to hit the wall with the whole mouth of the bowl, but of course the reason was that he could not. At the same time I do not exonerate him from blame. He is a clumsy smoker to burn his bowl at one side, and I am afraid he lets the stem slip round in his teeth. Of course, I see that the mouth-piece is loose, but a piece of blotting-paper would remedy that.

His meerschaum is not such a good one as Jimmy's. Though Jimmy's boastfulness about his meerschaum was hard to bear, none of us ever denied the pipe's worth. The man through the wall has not a cherry-wood stem to his meerschaum, and consequently it is too light. A ring has been worn into the palm of his left hand, owing to his tapping the meerschaum there, and it is as marked as Jimmy's ring, for, though Jimmy tapped more strongly, the man through the wall has to tap oftener.

What I chiefly dislike about the man through the wall is his treatment of his clay. A clay, I need scarcely say, has an entirely different tap from a meerschaum, but the man through the wall does not treat these two pipes as if they were on an equality. He ought to tap his clay on the palm of his hand, but he seldom does so, and I am strongly of opinion that

when he does, it is only because he has forgotten that this is not the meerschaum. Were he to tap the clay on the walls or on the ribs of the fireplace he would smash it, so he taps it on a coal. About this there is something contemptible. I am not complaining because he has little affection for his clay. In face of all that has been said in honor of clays, and knowing that this statement will occasion an outcry against me, I admit that I never cared for clays myself. A rank tobacco is less rank through a church-warden, but to smoke the Arcadia through a clay is to incur my contempt, and even my resentment. But to disbelieve in clays is one thing and to treat them badly is another. If the man through the wall has decided, after reflection and experiment, that his clay is a mistake, I say let him smoke it no more; but so long as he does smoke it I would have it receive consideration from him. I very much question whether, if he reads his heart, he could learn from it that he loves his meerschaum more than his clay, yet because the meerschaum cost more he taps it on his palm. This is a serious charge to bring against any man, but I do not make it lightly.

The man through the wall smokes each of these three pipes nightly, beginning with the brier. Thus he does not like a hot pipe. Some will hold that he ought to finish with the brier, as it is his favorite, but I am not of that opinion. Undoubtedly, I think, the first pipe is the sweetest; indeed, I feel bound to make a statement here. I have an uneasy feeling that I never did justice to meerschaums, and for this reason: I only smoked them after my brier was hot, so that I never gave them a fair chance. If I had begun the day with a meerschaum, might it not have shown itself in a new light? That is a point I shall never be able to decide now, but I often think of it, and I leave the verdict to others.

Even though I did not know that the man through the wall must retire at half-past twelve, his taps at that hour would announce it. He then gives each of his pipes a final tap, not briskly as before, but slowly, as if he was thinking between each tap. I have sometimes decided to send him a tin of the only tobacco to smoke, but on the whole I could not undertake the responsibility of giving a man whom I have only studied for a few months such a testimonial. Therefore when his last tap says good-night to me, I take my cold brier out of my mouth, tap it on the mantelpiece, smile sadly, and go to bed.