

Tale of the Crimson Sock || A Short Story by Marian West

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MURIEL was late, as usual. Being given a slow, dawdly sort of name, she never came on time to anything. I don't suppose Muriel could be alert and businesslike any more than a Kate could be vague and dreamy. But she might have fought against the name a little, especially on her own wedding day. The groom had walked a track into the vestry carpet and I was getting uncomfortable myself when the organ gave a great thump of relief and the tum, tum, tarum! of the wedding march told me it was time to take Louis out and stand him up to be married.

The best man always has a superior sort of air in the church. He isn't going to make a little show of himself to amuse a church full of people and then strut down the aisle, arm in arm, with a white mound of fluff, looking and feeling like a toy figure on a wedding cake. He can get behind the palms if he is embarrassed, or study the white ribbon guests if he has done it often enough before, or make eyes at the maid of honor, if he's interested in the girl in the fifth pew. I wasn't especially excited over this wedding, Muriel being the least congenial of my sisters, and Louis not a bit my sort though a good fellow in his way, and the front of the church being all jammed with relatives, who some way always look jay en masse. Still, it wasn't a bad show.

We took our places, Louis and I, and everybody rustled around to see the bridal procession which was crawling up the aisle, the kids leading off, very much pleased with themselves, then Muriel, looking vague and heavenly, but apparently all there. At least I thought so the first glance; the second made me uneasy. Surely it wasn't right that her feet, as they came out from under her skirt, should be different colors. I couldn't make it out. One foot would come forward white and small and shiny, and then the other, red and clumsy and twice as big. Louis was too nervous to notice anything and most of the people didn't look down, but I saw several girls turn and pinch the persons next to them and bite their lips. When the procession was nearly at the chancel the truth suddenly dawned on me. Muriel had put on those red, woolly, knitted things she calls bed socks to save her slippers, and, of course, had forgotten to take them off. One was probably between us and the sidewalk and the other had stayed nobly by her.

As Louis, prompted by a dig from me, went down the steps to meet her, she gave him one lovely, angel look, then dropped her eyes. The Harvard foot was just coming forward.

She stopped short, and her face became unrapt as if she had stepped into ice water. She looked dismayed, then, for the first time in her life, almost practical, and started on in a hitching fashion, so that only the white foot showed. All through "I, Muriel," and the rest of it she worked one foot gently against the other, and when she turned to go down she gave me an expressive glance. She didn't know whether she had been married or not, but she knew that the thing was off. I stooped as though to straighten her train, picked up the sock and stuffed it into my pocket; then we all sailed proudly down, I with my eyes on the maid of honor, since Kate in the fifth pew was badly in need of discipline.

As I put Muriel into the carriage she caught my arm.

"Oh, did any one see it?" she whispered imploringly.

"Not a soul," I answered promptly. "What's the good of spoiling a girl's wedding day? Having real lace saved you, for nobody looked at anything else." And I shut the carriage door, knowing that I had restored a bride to her husband's arms—for she had forgotten all about Louis. You could not have fooled Kate like that, even for her own comfort.

This explains why the next afternoon, as I was hurrying up to take Kate to the dog show, a bright, crimson sock flew out of my pocket, where I was exploring for a handkerchief. As a knitted sock is not the sort of convenience a man usually carries with a frock coat and a top hat, I put it back rather hurriedly. A policeman who was ruminating on the corner motioned me to stop.

"Will you be kind enough to let me see that?" he said.

I gave him a look that suggested I would not be kind enough, and started on, but he put his hand on my arm. I didn't care for a scene, so I stopped.

"It is nothing that concerns any one else," I said impatiently. "Merely a thing of my sister's." And I gave him the red sock. He looked at it inside and out, and tried to do the same with me.

"I have no objections to your keeping that, but I wish you wouldn't keep me any longer," I exclaimed. "Kate is not inclined to be easy on people who are late to appointments with her. I have an engagement."

"It will have to wait," he interrupted. "I must ask you to come along and explain this."

"Explain what? To whom?" I de-

manded, so evidently amazed that he became suddenly deferential.

His explanation was not flattering. It seems that the evening before a woman had invited herself to a big wedding in the house on the corner and had tried to walk off with some wedding presents. She had been caught, but a confederate was suspected, since a diamond star and several other valuables had not turned up. In her pocket had been found a red sock suspiciously like the one that had dropped out of mine. And the policeman would not be doing his duty if he did not take me down and have the matter looked into.

"To be sure, I may be on my way to another wedding," I suggested. "Perhaps you will find a whole ring of us carrying these—the Order of the Crimson Sock. It is the first time I was ever considered to look like a thief."

"Well, sir, if they always looked their trade, we'd have less trouble," was the dubious answer. "I don't for a moment say it's you, but my duty," etc.

It was clear enough to me. The woman had been in the sidewalk crowd a few hours earlier, when Muriel was married, and had picked up the other sock as it dropped off. But I couldn't get this through the man's head, so, very savage, I took him to the police station to get him discharged for officiousness and stupidity. At least, that is the way I explained the trip to myself.

The magistrate laughed good naturedly over my tale.

"I guess you've barked up the wrong tree this time, Sam," he said. "That's the other sock, sure enough. It probably happened just as the young gentleman says—she picked it up at the church. I wish you would go up and take a look at her, and see if you noticed her there yesterday. She's an odd looking fish. You'd remember her."

"I'm in a good deal of a hurry," I protested.

"Oh, it won't take a minute. We want to find out if there was any one with her and you may just happen to have noticed. She won't open her head."

I followed, unwillingly enough, through

the dismal stone corridors to a door which was unlocked and flung open.

"Here's your partner in crime," said the magistrate, facetiously.

It was half a moment before the girl sitting on the narrow bed lifted her face and looked at me. When she did she sprang to her feet, then rushed toward me and flung both arms about my neck.

"Oh, Tom, Tom; I knew you wouldn't go back on me!" she cried. "I knew you'd be true to me and not let me take all the blame. Ah, Tom, I knew it!"

"What the devil!" I exclaimed, pushing her away. "What are you trying to do? Who do you take me for?"

The magistrate's face was a study. "Do you know this young man?" he asked, sternly.

She looked straight up into my eyes and an odd look crossed her face. For a moment she hesitated. Then she clutched me again.

"Why, it's Tom," she said. And I don't blame any man for believing her.

I shook her off and turned to the others.

"I don't know what she's trying to do, but I know I never saw her before," I shouted. "I'm not Tom. It's some sly game."

"Oh, Tom! how can you?" came a wail from the bed.

The magistrate eyed me coldly.

"You will have to prove it," he said.

"I have told you who I am. I can get all the people you want to prove it."

"It isn't a question of who you are. You have simply got to show that you were not with this young woman between 8 and 10 last night, when the things were swiped. If you can prove an alibi, well and good."

"Of course I can," I began, then stopped abruptly. It was the very thing I could not do. For Kate had been in a madcap mood that night, and we had run away together and done a wild, bohemian, unchaperoned thing that was always to remain a solemn secret between us, and, unluckily for me, we had not been found out. I had no alibi.

"I can't say where I was without involving someone I don't want to bring in," I explained. He looked as if he had heard that tale before, but I went on haughtily:

"The whole thing is an absurd blunder;

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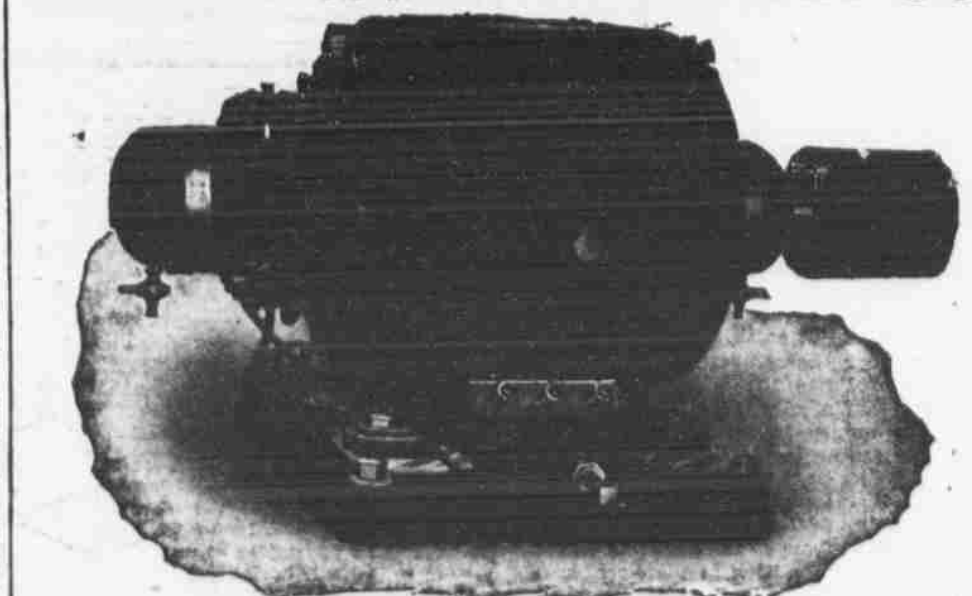
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