

A White Precipitate

by Rex Stout, 1886-1975

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„EVANS!“

„Yes, sir.“

„Take these papers out of the room.“

Without a sign of surprise at the unusual order, the servant gathered up the four morning newspapers and started to leave. As he reached the door he was again halted by his master's voice:

„And, Evans!“

„Yes, sir.“

„If Mrs. Reynolds asks for them, tell her they haven't come.“

„Yes, sir.“

Left alone, Bernard Reynolds crossed to a chair by the open fire and seated himself thoughtfully. Even such a catastrophe as this of which he had just read failed to move him from his accustomed calm. Of course, the news must be told to his wife; how, was the difficulty. For himself, he was almost glad; materially

inconvenient though it was, it meant the removal of a barrier which he had already found an impediment in his search for happiness. Further, he knew that Paula herself would find the immediate loss an ultimate benefit; but he also knew that, coming thus suddenly, the blow would be a hard one. It was with such methodical reflection that he met a shock which to most men would have meant keen disappointment, and to some despair.

As he extended his hand to lower the flame in the coffee-lamp. Evans reentered the room, bearing a loaded tray. Soon after, Paula came in. Bernard crossed the room to greet her, and escorted her to her chair at the table.

In the six months since the Reynoldses' wedding, the ceremony of breakfast had undergone a gradual but complete change. At the first dozen or so there had been very little eaten, and a great deal of foolishness. It had assumed the character of a morning worship, and Evans, who was orthodox, had been much disturbed by the order to place both chairs at one end of the table. At the present time, it was solely a matter of mastication and digestion. And yet Bernard declared—to himself—that the first had been by far the better, which seems to be a pretty good refutation of that disagreeable saying about men's stomachs.

On this particular morning the silence was oppressive. Even Evans seemed cast down by something unusual in the air, and was moved out of his habitual solemnity and dignity to an unheard-of sprightliness. When he served the jelly fifty seconds too soon, in a valiant attempt to start something, and received no notice whatever for his effort, he gave up in despair, and received his nod of dismissal with gratitude. When he had gone Paula raised her eyes from her plate for the first time and looked at Bernard. Her eyes were red, and her lips were set in a firm, straight line.

„I suppose,“ she said, „that last night settles it.“

Bernard returned her gaze calmly. „What do you mean?“

„For six months we've been trying to decide whether we've made a mistake. There is no longer any doubt about it.“

Bernard hesitated a moment before replying „Paula, you've said something like this twice before. You know how I've tried—but it's useless. It's purely your imagination. You've discovered somehow that it's bad form to have dreams come true, and all I can do is to wait till you get over it.“

„And last night—was that only my imagination?“

Bernard sighed hopelessly. „Will you never understand? Haven't I told you what my future demands?“ Then, in a softer tone, „You know very well it's all for you. In order to succeed in my profession, a man must have friends. I'm trying to make them—that's all.“

„And, I suppose, in order to be useful, they must be agreeable and—attractive.“

„I've told you before that that's nonsense. It's pure rot. If you knew how silly—“ He checked himself. „But I don't wish to be rude. There is a particular reason why I can't be. Only, for God's sake, have a little sense!“

For a full minute Paula was silent. The line of her mouth trembled, then tightened, and her hands, resting before her on the table, were clenched. Then, as though with an effort, she spoke slowly and calmly:

„Aren't you just a little tired of being a hypocrite, of living a lie?“

Bernard rose to his feet, astonished. „Paula!“

„That’s what it amounts to. You may as well sit down and talk it over calmly. Ever since we were married, you’ve done nothing but lie and pretend.“

„Paula! For God’s sake—“

„Please listen. I’m not going to descend to heroics, and I don’t care to listen to any. We may as well face the truth. We made a bad bargain, but we may as well admit it was a bargain. You pretend to love me, and I—she caught her breath, and then went on calmly—„I pretended to love you. I don’t know why I did it, but I know why you did. Of course, you wanted my money. As for me, I suppose it was your talent, your career.“

Bernard, still sitting opposite her, controlled his voice with an effort. „You seem to have analyzed us thoroughly,“ he said dryly. „And you—you are sure it was only pretense?“

„Have I not said so?“ Paula laughed harshly. „Of course, it hurts your vanity. But you’ll soon get over it. Besides, it will restore your peace of mind. You will no longer be under the necessity of attempting to deceive me. Our marriage becomes purely a business partnership, to which you furnish the brains and I the money. There will be no more nonsense about an affection that doesn’t exist.“

„Paula, I don’t believe you.“ The voice was strained, appealing. „Whatever you may think of me, I can’t believe you to be—as you say you are. I won’t!“

„I have said—“ Paula began coldly.

„I know.“ There was a sudden change in Bernard’s voice. „And it would hardly be a compliment to suppose you are lying now. Very well; I accept your terms. It is strictly a business partnership. You admit I have the brains?“

„Of course.“

„And you the money?“

„That is what I said.“

„And the one, I believe, balances the other?“

„What is the use of repeating it all?“ Paula’s voice held both weariness and despair.

„I just want to get it straight. I want to know exactly where I stand. You are sure I am furnishing my full share?“

„What do you mean?“ cried Paula, startled by his tone.

Bernard, ignoring her question, struck the bell on the table sharply, and when Evans appeared, almost immediately, turned to him.

„Bring me the *Morning News*.“

Evans disappeared, and a minute later returned with one of the newspapers which he had previously been told to remove. Bernard, his hand slightly trembling, handed it across the table to Paula, indicating with his finger a double-column head on the first page. His voice was tense with feeling as he said:

„That is what I mean.“

As her eyes caught the headline Paula gave a little involuntary cry, and the paper fell from her hands. Then, as she read the first two or three paragraphs, and realized the full meaning of them, her face grew pale and her eyes sought Bernard’s in a sort of dumb protest.

„It isn’t true!“ she cried.

Bernard was silent.

„It can’t be true! It means—everything is gone! It can’t be true!“

Then, while Bernard sat silently regarding her, she bent over the paper and read the article through to the end. When she spoke her voice was dry and hard. „If—but there are no ifs. It is all gone. I have nothing. I am a pauper.“

„Worse than that.“ Bernard spoke grimly. „You are in debt. I spoke to Grimshaw an hour ago over the telephone. Dudley has disappeared—which means that his liabilities must be met by you. Grimshaw says there is absolutely no hope.“

Paula stared at him as though fascinated, unable to speak.

„Well?“ she said finally.

Bernard arose and, passing around the table, stood by her chair. „It is well,“ he said, looking down at her. „Our partnership is dissolved.“

Paula recoiled as though he had struck her. „You mean—“

„What I say. And I thank God for it! Do you think I haven't known what you've been thinking all these months? A thousand times I have read in your eyes all—and more—that you have said this morning. It has made my life unbearable. That is why I'm glad it's all over—that the weary farce is ended.“

„Then—you are through?“

„With the partnership, yes. Your share of the capital has disappeared; therefore the firm belongs to me. My first care will be to keep it intact.“ He stood silent for a moment, regarding her gravely.

„It isn't what you said that hurts. Your every action and thought has been a silent accusation which it was impossible for me to answer. I have been dumb, but not blind. You have condemned me without a hearing. You needn't have told me that you have never loved me; if you had, you could never have believed me to be—what you have said.“

Paula lifted her eyes slowly, and tried in vain to meet his. Then, suddenly, the strength of her lie failed her; she buried her face in her hands and sobbed brokenly. „I can't give you up! I can't!“ she moaned.

Then, as though by magic, Bernard's face cleared, and was filled with light. „Good God! Of course not!“ he exclaimed fiercely. „I won't let you! Didn't I say the firm belongs to me?“

When Evans answered the bell, ten minutes later, he stopped short in the doorway and viewed the scene before him with unconcealed dismay. Both chairs—occupied—were placed squarely together at the farther end of the table.

„Evans,“ said Bernard, „I want to ask you a question. I suppose you have read the papers?“

„Yes, sir.“

„Then, you know of our—good fortune. Thank God, we have to economize! Your—er—pickings will probably be reduced. The question is, do you want to stay?“

„No, sir,“ said Evans promptly. „Not if I have to serve breakfast. I can stand the rest.“

„Evans!“

„How can I help it, sir? Look at that!“ He pointed at the chairs indignantly. „You know, sir, I've always tried to keep my self-respect, which I can't do going into rooms backwards. And even for the sake of your father—“

„Very well.“ Bernard grinned happily. „We'll have Maggie serve breakfast after today.“

Evans turned to go.

„But,“ Bernard continued, „this morning you‘ll have to suffer. Bring back the fruit tray and make another pot of coffee. We‘re going to celebrate.“

