

The Man Who Married His Cook

by **Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932**

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One afternoon in May, in such a season as the mind of youth turns upon tender matters. Professor Tremlow interrupted his study of *dactylopterus volitans* and sat staring in his absent way at a piece of yellow paper outspread upon the desk before him.

He remained in this attitude for the greater part of ten minutes; then he rose, walked slowly across the threadbare carpet which covered the floor of his study, and gazed upon himself in the mirror which overhung the mantelpiece. Whether he remained staring at the lined face, the horn-rimmed spectacles, and the thin, grey-shot beard for more than a second is doubtful. It happened that, perched upon the frame, was a peculiarly interesting specimen of May-fly. He did not think

of this tiny stranger as a May-fly, but automatically placed it within the *pseudoneuroptera*, a suborder of *Orthoptera*.

He was back at his desk before he realised that he had not taken stock of himself, and sighed. He got up again and walked to the mantelpiece, forgot what he had risen for, and pushed the bell which was embedded in the wall.

His one man-servant answered and found the professor with his short-sighted eyes glued to the treatise he was writing.

„You rang, sir?“

Professor Tremlow blinked up.

„Eh?“ he said, startled. „What do you want. Thomas—William?“

„Ernest, sir,“ said the patient butler. „You rang.“

„Did I?“ The professor sat up and screwed up his forehead. „Yes—yes-cook—tell the cook I want to see her.“

„Certainly, sir,“ said Ernest, and went kitchenward, hoping.

„Wants *me*?“ said Mary Ann, paling a little.

She was a plump, red-faced woman with small eyes, and had kept her family for ten years on the overplus from the professor's kitchen. She had a conscience, it seemed, for there had been butcher's bills throughout Lent.

„It's my day out, too. How did he know I was back?“

„Gawd knows!“ answered Ernest piously.

She slipped off her best coat and put an apron over her best skirt, patted her hair before the kitchen mirror, and pattered out.

„If Willie knew what I knew about the grocer's account,“ said Ernest to the kitchen-maid, „he'd take that old geezer and kick her into the middle of next week.“

The professor's name was William, and, did Ernest but know, he was at that precise moment planning to kick his cook into the middle of next week—figuratively.

The professor swung round in his chair as the cook came in, the chair having been designed for such an operation, and he glared at Mary Ann Dobbs in so ferocious a manner that the poor woman had a cold feeling in her stomach and speculated frantically upon who had turned traitor. Was it the coal-man or the religious Mr. Smith, the grocer? Such is the sceptic tendency of modern thought that she had unjustly condemned a good Christian man when the professor spoke.

„Er—Martha—“ he began.

„Mary Ann,“ smirked the cook apologetically.

„Oh, yes, Mary Ann. I knew it was a Biblical name. Er—sit down, Mary Ann.“

In all the ten years she had preyed upon the professor, he had never asked her to sit down, and she obeyed quaking.

„You have been with me several weeks now,“ he began. „When was it you came?“

„Ten years ago last February,“ said Mary Ann gently.

„Indeed, indeed!“ said the absent-minded professor. „Yes, of course, it was ten years ago.“

He ruminated, looking down at his boots for some time, and then:

„Clara,“ he said, „I have decided to get married.“

Illustration:

„Clara,“ he said, „I have decided to get married.“

She gasped. That meant an end to all her forays and barratries.

„I have decided to get married,“ said the professor in a tone of surprise, as though he had only just realised what a remarkable decision he had reached.

„I want somebody who is faithful to me, Alice—Clara, I mean.“

„Mary Ann,“ murmured the cook faintly.

„Somebody who knows my ways,“ said the professor. „I am not a young man, I am not a rich man, Mary,“ he said, and added, „Ann“ with an effort.

„No, sir,“ said the wondering Mary Ann.

„I cannot give you the—er—affection and demonstrations of affection which are peculiar to the youthful mammal.“

„Me, sir?“ Mary Ann got up, her mouth open, and the professor nodded.

„But I can give you my name. I can make you Mrs.—er—er—“

„Tremlow,“ squeaked Mary Ann, mouth and heart at their widest.

„My lawyer shall come down—I have been trying all day to remember his name—and he shall fix—er—a mutual deed of gift. That will be—er—more satisfactory, Annie—Clara, I mean.“

Mary Ann said nothing, but swallowed hard.

„I believe in community of interest,“ said the professor, „er—that is all, Clara,“ and he waved her out of existence.

Mary Ann went down to the kitchen like a woman in a dream and gave the kitchen-maid notice.

Next day came a lawyer, who fixed deeds of gift and settlement, bestowing upon Mrs. Tremlow-to-be one-half of the professor's fortune, amounting to nearly £ 500, some well-worn furniture, and his copyrights in three volumes dealing with the science of Zootomy.

She, for her part, gave him a half-right in two silk dresses, certain other articles of wear, a cameo brooch and two gold drop ear-rings, and such other property as she might acquire.

They were married by a horrified curate of souls and Ernest gave the professor away.

He would have preferred giving the new Mrs. Tremlow away.

A week later, despite his attachment to the house and fortune of Professor Tremlow, Ernest came to the professor's study and asked for his wages. Mechanically the professor paid him a full month, not realising that he had paid him a full month only the week before.

„I'm going, sir,“ said Ernest, with a tremor in his voice.

„That's right, shut the door,“ said the professor.

„I'm leaving your employment, sir,“ said Ernest.

Professor Tremlow looked round in astonishment. If Ernest had said that he was developing into a chrysalis, the professor would not have been astonished, because such things happen.

„Going, Thomas?“ he said mildly. „Going to leave me, Thomas?“

„Yes, sir,“ said Ernest, not troubling to correct his master. „I can't stand the missus.“

The professor looked at him over his spectacles and through his spectacles. He lifted his glasses to his forehead and looked at him under his spectacles. Then he sighed and turned to the table.

„She’s a good cook, Thomas, a very good cook. I think you will admit that?“

„She’s roasted us all right,“ said Ernest bitterly.

„You must be patient—er—I don’t know your name—you must be patient. William, isn’t it? She’s a woman of character, is Mary Ann—er—I’m married to her. You should study patience, study the bees, Thomas!“

Ernest choked.

„She’s a proper bee, she is,“ he said with a trace of venom. „She’s made this ‘ive ‘um.“

„Well, it’s a great pity, a very great pity—Snellgrove is your name, isn’t it?“

„Marshall, sir, Ernest Marshall.“

The professor nodded. „I knew it was something to do with tobacco.“

And then it was that Mrs. Tremlow flounced in, and Mrs. Tremlow, at the sight of Ernest, trembled with wrath.

„What are you nosing and prying round my ‘usband for?“ she demanded.

„I have come for my wages, madam,“ replied Ernest, emphasising the „madam“ so that it was almost an offensive word.

Her little eyes screwed up till they were almost invisible.

„You’re leaving, eh? A lady can’t go into her own kitchen but the servants give notice.“

She jerked her thumb to the door.

„Push off!“ said Mrs. Tremlow, and followed him to the door. „Go ‘ome and take your mother out of the workhouse!“ she advised him humorously. „If I had a face like yours, I’d have the gas cut off.“

The professor, roused by voices pitched higher than the ordinary, turned.

„Are you saying good-bye, my love?“ he asked.

Mrs. Tremlow had come stalking back, fists on hips, triumphant.

„My brother is coming to-day,“ she said brusquely, and rather wondered how he would take the news.

Professor Tremlow accepted the tidings in the same spirit as he would have accepted the news that there was a rainbow in the sky or that a flight of locusts had fallen upon the kitchen garden.

„How interesting,“ he said vaguely. „So you have a brother, and I think you told me you had a mother, too! That’s remarkable.“

He took up his pen and wrote a few words, and she watched him in silence.

„Look here!“ she said desperately. „Willie!“

„Willie?“ said the professor in amazement.

„That’s your name, isn’t it?“

She was not quite sure of herself.

„Yes, I think it is,“ said the professor, „but you may continue to call me Mr. Tremlow as heretofore.“

She seated herself upon the identical chair on which she had received the marriage proposal.

„I can't make you out," she said. „Of course, I know these things happen in books, Willie—Mr. Tremlow—a gentleman married beneath himself, so to speak; but I don't understand why you married your cook."

„Ah, yes," nodded the professor, „a very good cook."

„Mind you," said Mrs. Tremlow, „I'm not expecting you to gush over my relations. They ain't the kind of people you would gush over, anyway, but Tom's a very nice-spoken young fellow, and you needn't see him if you don't want to."

The professor did not reply. He had reached the interesting stage in his monograph on *chocrocampa tersa* where the caterpillar develops into the pupae suspensae, which is analogous to that stage in the cinema film where the murderer is discovered to be, not the masked butler, but the bishop, whom nobody suspected, except the people who had seen the film before.

She had other things to say about her relations, for she felt it wise to prepare him for Tom, who had not reached the stage of sartorial refinement where he was prepared to abandon his variegated choker and adopt the white dicky of civilisation. But she missed her chance.

A tall man was ushered into the room by the new housemaid, and he greeted Mrs. Tremlow with that geniality which is part of the stock-in-trade of the family lawyer.

„Well, Mrs. Tremlow," he said, with a smile, „you are settling down, I see. Have you quite got used to the new life?"

The professor turned his head.

„Bless my life. Still!" he said, and he looked at his watch. „It's half-past five, and you said you weren't Tuesday. You know my cook?"

„Your wife, Willie," said Mrs. Tremlow with gentle savagery.

„Yes, yes," said the professor hastily, „My wife, to be sure."

„I have met you lots of times, Mrs. Tremlow," said Still, putting down his bag and snapping open the catch.

Mary Ann smiled archly.

„You're the gentleman who used to like my apple fritters," she said.

„A very good cook," murmured the professor, his pen poised in his hand.

„I see I am not going to get anything out you," laughed Still, and walked to the long French windows which afforded a view of the professor's restricted demesne.

„I suppose you were surprised, Mr. Still?" Mary Ann joined him and lowered her voice, though there seemed no necessity for this precaution, „It was a bit of a surprise to me."

„I expect it was," said Still, who had been concerned in so many divorce cases, criminal conspiracies, and actions to restrain nuisances that he was surprised at nothing.

Mary Ann coughed, feeling that her own condescension called for a word of approval.

„He's a bit old in the tooth, you understand, Mr. Still, but I've lost a lot of chances through being too particular."

Mr. Still was staring out into the garden. „Your husband is under sixty," he protested in a spirit of loyalty to his client „His father lived to eighty-nine and his grandfather was ninety-three when he was killed in a wrestling match."

Mrs. Tremlow's jaw dropped.

„You're a ray of sunshine, ain't you?“ she said, and Still laughed.

„He's very much in love with you, isn't he, Mrs. Tremlow?“ he asked, as he began to sort out the contents of his bag.

Mary Ann sniffed.

„I wouldn't say that. You see, it is a sort of morganatic marriage.“

„A what?“ asked the startled lawyer.

„I mean,“ said Mrs. Tremlow, whose knowledge of the English language was hazy, „he might be Johnny Morgan, so far as I am concerned.“

Still shot a swift glance towards the bowed head of the professor, and Mary Ann sniffed again.

„Oh, don't worry about him,“ she said. „When he gets into his books he's as deaf as a bat.“

„I'm rather glad of that, Mrs. Tremlow, for I want to speak very plainly. May I?“

„Plain speaking is my vice,“ said Mary Ann truthfully.

„Well, I'm going to be frank.“ The lawyer was half-serious and half-humorous. „I have known you led the professor a—er—well, not the cheeriest of lives as his cook. When I came down here two years ago to look into his affairs, I found that you had been systematically—er—“

„Say overcharging him,“ said Mary Ann placidly. „It sounds better. Well, I admit that. A girl has got to look after herself in this world, Mr. Still, and I hadn't any idea that I was going to get my chance, A girl throws away lots of opportunities.“

„A girl!“ said the puzzled Mr. Still. „What girl are you talking about?“

„Me,“ said Mrs. Tremlow with some asperity.

„Oh, yes, I suppose so. You used to twist him rather round your finger, Mrs. Tremlow.“

Mrs. Tremlow smiled proudly.

„And yet,“ mused the lawyer, „he knew this and married you?“

Mary Ann drew a long breath.

„Well,“ she said, „love's a funny thing.“

Mr. Still scratched his chin. „He hasn't shown any other form of—er I mean, he hasn't been hearing voices at night or acted strangely in any way?“

„What do you mean?“ demanded the bridling Mary Ann. „If you mean to suggest that my husband's off his rocker, pardon the vulgarity—daft—“

„I don't mean anything of the sort.“ The lawyer was balancing a paper in his hand.

„Here is the deed of gift, Mrs. Tremlow, a fair copy, whereby he transfers half his property and fortune—which, by the way, amounts to very little—to you. Was that your idea?“

„Well, it was and it wasn't.“ Mrs. Tremlow was on safe ground. „He's a bit near, Mr. What-d'ye-call-it, you understand. A bit difficult to get money out of, so I didn't object when he made over his bit of property to me. Being a lady now“—she coughed—„I've got to live up to my station, if you understand, and he's that absent-minded he would see me walking about the house without anything on and take no notice.“

„That is his salvation,“ said the lawyer earnestly, „I mean his—er—ability to abstract himself from the humdrum, mundane affairs of life and bury himself in science.“

He laid his hand on the professor's shoulder.

„Mr. Tremlow,“ he said, and the professor looked up with a start.

„Hullo, Still!“ he said. „When did you come?“

Mrs. Tremlow made a clucking noise with her tongue to express her good-natured tolerance.

„Here are the deeds we settled the other day. This is your wife's, which she had better keep, and this is yours, in which she transfers half her property to you. You quite understand that you have given over to Mrs. Tremlow half your worldly possessions? You will see the schedule attached.“

„Yes, yes,“ said the professor, glancing at the paper and thrusting it into a pigeonhole. „Good-bye, Still; I hope you have a pleasant voyage.“

The lawyer shifted uncomfortably.

„My train doesn't go for an hour,“ he said.

„I'm sure it doesn't,“ said the courteous professor, applying himself again to his paper. „Trains never do go for an hour.“

Still shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

„All right, then, I'll go along,“ he said, „Good-bye, Mrs. Tremlow.“

„Good-bye, love,“ said the professor.

„Ain't he the most absent-minded man you ever saw in your life?“ asked Mary Ann in tones of admiration as she stood upon the front-door step of the house. „He's always telling me to be careful how I cross the road, because it's so dark. He don't know the war's started, let alone over.“

Still offered his hand.

„I think you ought to have a very quiet and peaceful life, Mrs. Tremlow,“ he said. „I don't think you will have a very luxurious one, because the professor's income is not as large as it was.“

„We'll manage,“ replied Mrs. Tremlow determinedly, meaning thereby that she, at any rate, would manage.

He walked down the flagged path to the garden gate and collided with a young man who was coming in. He was a burly young man in a ready-made suit, and his hair, as the lawyer saw—for in the collision the stranger's hat had been knocked off—was parted symmetrically in the middle, so that one long but well-plastered curl dipped over his forehead, and then, as though repenting its rashness, curled backward to his almost shaven head.

„Whinecherlookwhereyagoin?“ said the young man rapidly, and Mr. Still, who understood the language, for his practice had extended even to the lower courts of judicature, replied courteously after his kind.

At the sight of the newcomer Mrs. Tremlow had come rapidly down the three steps from the door.

„Why, Tom?“ she said, holding out her hand. „Well, I am glad to see you. How did you leave Mother?“

„She's all right,“ said Tom in a tone of disgust, as though the matter of his mother's good health were a sore point with him. „I want—“ began Tom.

„Come and see my husband, Professor Tremlow,“ said Mary Ann, shivering with pride. „He's a real gentleman, Tom, though he's a bit over the age limit.“

She dragged the reluctant young man into the study, and it happened that the mind of the professor was momentarily disengaged.

„Willie, this is my brother Tom.“ She introduced the young man with a certain defiance.

„Your—er—brother? Glad to see you. Sit down, will yo? Have you any sisters?“ Mrs. Tremlow looked sideways and significantly at her relative.

„Absent-minded,“ she whispered.

„So you’re married?“ said Tom—who was a slow thinker, and on whom the news had just dawned.

„Married? Of course I’m married,“ said Mary Ann with a toss of her head. „I sent you a bit of the wedding cake.“

A light broke in upon Tom, whose other name was Dobbs.

„Oh, that’s what it was!“ he said ungraciously. „But what did you get married to him for? Did you get my telegram?“

„Well, he’s better than nothing,“ said Mary Ann tartly, „and I didn’t get your telegram.“

Tom looked at the professor, who had resumed his work.

„Don’t take any notice of him,“ said Mrs. Tremlow, lowering her voice. „He don’t belong to this world, in a manner of speaking, though from what I’ve heard from his lawyer to-day—“ she shook her head.

„Well,“ said Tom grudgingly, „I don’t think you’ve done a bad thing. After all, you had to marry a gentleman of position, and I don’t know any other gentleman of position who would have married you, with your disposition.“

„Don’t say anything against the professor, Tom,“ said Mrs. Tremlow virtuously, „As soon as I was married he handed over half his property to me and I handed over half of mine to him, so you might call it a love match.“

„I might and I might not,“ said the careful Tom.

He was a slow thinker, as has been remarked before, and suddenly he rose and clasped his forehead.

„You gave him half yours?“ he said in a hollow tone.

Illustration:

„You gave him half yours?“ he said in a hollow tone.

„Yes. What’s up?“ asked the alarmed Mrs. Tremlow.

„When did you marry?“ said Tom in a deep-set voice.

„Last Friday.“

„And last Wednesday I sent him a wire—emotion prevented his continuing for a moment—„asking him,“ he went on, „to break the news to you that old Uncle Joe in Australia had died and left you £100,000. You was always his favourite, Mary Ann.“

Mrs. Tremlow grasped the window for support The room spun round and round, and then her shaking knees brought her to her husband’s side.

„Willie,“ she said, and her voice was very shrill and squeaky. „He sent you a wire telling you I was worth £100,000!“

The professor looked at her and looked at her brother, then he looked at his boots, and then he looked at the ceiling, and then he scratched his nose.

„Dear, dear,“ he said in a tone of surprise. „Yes, yes, I remember.“

„But you—you didn’t tell me,“ wailed his wife.

„No, I didn't," admitted the professor. „Absent-minded, my love, absent-minded. Take your brother down to the kitchen and give him a good time, Mary Ann. You know the way.“

