

# Le Mari Terrible

By H. G. Wells

“You are always so sympathetic,” she said; and added, reflectively, “and one can talk of one’s troubles to you without any nonsense.”

I wondered dimly if she meant that as a challenge. I helped myself to a biscuit thing that looked neither poisonous nor sandy. “You are one of the most puzzling human beings I ever met,” I said,—a perfectly safe remark to any woman under any circumstances.

“Do you find me so hard to understand?” she said.

“You are dreadfully complex.” I bit at the biscuit thing, and found it full of a kind of creamy bird-lime. (I wonder why women *will* arrange these unpleasant surprises for rue—I sickened of sweets twenty years ago.)

“How so?” she was saying, and smiling her most brilliant smile.

I have no doubt she thought we were talking rather nicely. “Oh!” said I, and waved the cream biscuit thing. “You challenge me to dissect you.”

“Well?”

“And that is precisely what I cannot do.”

“I’m afraid you are very satirical,” she said, with a touch of disappointment. She is always saying that when our conversation has become absolutely idiotic—as it invariably does. I felt an inevitable desire to quote bogus Latin to her. It seemed the very language for her.

“*Malorum fiducia pars quosque libet*,” I said, *in* a low voice, looking meaningly into her eyes.

“Ah!” she said, colouring a little, and turned to pour hot water into the teapot, looking very prettily at me over her arm as she did so.

“That is one of the truest things that has ever been said of sympathy,” I remarked. “Don’t you think so?”

“Sympathy,” she said, “is a very wonderful thing, and a very precious thing.”

“You speak,” said I (with a cough behind my hand), “as though you knew what it was to be lonely.”

“There is solitude even in a crowd,” she said, and looked round at the six other people—three discreet pairs—who were in the room.

“I, too,” I was beginning, but Hopdangle came with a teacup, and seemed inclined to linger. He belongs to the “Nice Boy” class, and gives himself ridiculous airs of familiarity with grown-up people. Then the Giffens went.

“Do you know, I always take such an interest in your work,” she was saying to me, when her husband (confound him!) came into the room.

He was a violent discord. He wore a short brown jacket and carpet slippers, and three of his waistcoat buttons were (as usual) undone. “Got any tea left, Millie?” he said, and came and sat down in the arm-chair beside the table.

“How do, Delalune?” he said to the man in the corner. “Damned hot, Bellows,” he remarked to me, subsiding creakily.

She poured some more hot water into the teapot. (Why must charming married women always have these husbands?)

“It *is* very hot,” I said.

There was a perceptible pause. He is one of those rather adipose people, who are not disconcerted by conversational gaps. "Are *you*, too, working at Argon?" I said. He is some kind of chemical investigator, I know.

He began at once to explain the most horribly complex things about elements to me. She gave him his tea, and rose and went and talked to the other people about autotypes. "Yes," I said, not hearing what he was saying.

"'No' would be more appropriate," he said. "You are absent-minded, Bellows. Not in love, I hope—at your age?"

Really, I am not thirty, but a certain perceptible thinness in my hair may account for his invariably regarding me as a contemporary. But he should understand that nowadays the beginnings of baldness merely mark the virile epoch.

"I say, Millie," he said, out loud and across the room, "you have n't been collecting Bellows here—have you?"

She looked round startled, and I saw a pained look come into her eyes. "For the bazaar?" she said. "Not yet, dear." It seemed to me that she shot a glance of entreaty at him. Then she turned to the others again.

"My wife," he said, "has two distinctive traits. She is a born poetess and a born collector. I ought to warn you."

"I did not know," said I, "that she rhymed."

"I was speaking more of the imaginative quality, the temperament that finds a splendour in the grass, a glory in the flower, that clothes the whole world in a vestiture of interpretation."

"Indeed!" I said. I felt she was watching us anxiously. He could not, of course, suspect. But I was relieved to fancy he was simply talking nonsense.

"The magnificent figures of heroic, worshipful, and mysterious womanhood naturally appeal to her—Cleopatra, Messalina, Beatrice, the Madonna, and so forth."

"And she is writing—"

"No, she is acting. That is the real poetry of women and children. A platonic Cleopatra of infinite variety, spotless reputation, and a large following. Her make-believe is wonderful. She would use Falstaff for Romeo without a twinge, if no one else was at hand. She could exert herself to break the heart of a soldier. I assure you, Bellows "

I heard her dress rustle behind me.

"I want some more tea," he said to her. "You misunderstood me about the collecting, Millie."

"What were you saying about Cleopatra?" she said, trying, I think, to look sternly at him.

"Scandal," he said. "But about the collecting, Bellows "

"You must come to this bazaar," she interrupted.

"I shall be delighted," I said, boldly. "Where is it, and when?"

"About this collecting," he began.

"It is in aid of that delightful orphanage at Wimblingham," she explained, and gave me an animated account of the charity. He emptied his second cup of tea. "May I have a third cup?" he said.

The two girls signalled departure, and her attention was distracted. "She collects—and I will confess she does it with extraordinary skill—the surreptitious addresses—"

"John," she said over her shoulder, "I wish you would tell Miss Smithers all those interesting things about Argon." He gulped down his third cup, and rose with the easy obedience of the trained husband. Presently she returned to the tea-things. "Cannot I fill your cup?" she asked.

“I really hope John was not telling you his queer notions about me. He says the most remarkable things. Quite lately he has got it into his head that he has a formula for my character.”

“I wish *I* had,” I said, with a sigh.

“And he goes about explaining me to people, as though I was a mechanism. ‘Scalp collector,’ I think is the favourite phrase. Did he tell you? Don’t you think it perfectly horrid of him?”

“But he does n’t understand you,” I said, not grasping his meaning quite at the minute.

She sighed.

“You have,” I said, with infinite meaning, “my sincere sympathy—” I hesitated—“my whole sympathy.”

“Thank you *so much*,” she said, quite as meaningly. I rose forthwith, and we clasped hands, like souls who strike a compact.

Yet, thinking over what he said afterwards, I was troubled by a fancy that there was the faintest suggestion of a smile of triumph about her lips and mouth. Possibly it was only an honourable pride. I suppose he has poisoned my mind a little. Of course, I should not like to think of myself as one of a fortuitously selected multitude strung neatly together (if one may use the vulgarism) on a piece of string,—a stringful like a boy’s string of chestnuts,—nice old gentlemen, nice boys, sympathetic and humorous men of thirty, kind fellows, gifted dreamers, and dashing blades, all trailing after her. It is confoundedly bad form of him, anyhow, to guy her visitors. She certainly took it like a saint. Of course, I shall see her again soon, and we shall talk to one another about one another. Something or other cropped up and prevented my going there on her last Tuesday.