

GEORGE ADE

*The Set of Poe*



MR. WATERBY remarked to his wife: “I’m still tempted by that set of Poe. I saw it in the window to-day, marked down to fifteen dollars.”

“Yes?” said Mrs. Waterby, with a sudden gasp of emotion, it seemed to him.

“Yes—I believe I’ll have to get it.”

“I wouldn’t if I were you, Alfred,” she said. “You have so many books now.”

“I know I have, my dear, but I haven’t any set of Poe, and that’s what I’ve been wanting for a long time. This edition I was telling you about is beautifully gotten up.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t buy it, Alfred,” she repeated, and there was a note of pleading earnestness in her voice. “It’s so much money to spend for a few books.”

“Well, I know, but—” and then he paused, for the lack of words to express his mortified surprise.

Mr. Waterby had tried to be an indulgent husband. He took a selfish pleasure in giving, and found it more blessed than receiving. Every salary day he turned over to Mrs. Waterby a fixed sum for household expenses. He added to this an allowance for her spending money. He set aside a small amount for his personal expenses and deposited the remainder in the bank.

He flattered himself that he approximated the model husband.

Mr. Waterby had no costly habits and no prevailing appetite for anything expensive. Like every other man, he had one or two hobbies, and one of his particular hobbies was Edgar Allan Poe. He believed that Poe, of all American writers, was the one unmistakable “genius.”

The word “genius” has been bandied around the country until it has come to be applied to a long-haired man out of work or a stout lady who writes poetry for the rural press. In the case of Poe, Mr. Waterby maintained that

“genius” meant one who was not governed by the common mental processes, but “who spoke from inspiration, his mind involuntarily taking superhuman flight into the realm of pure imagination,” or something of that sort. At any rate, Mr. Waterby liked Poe and he wanted a set of Poe. He allowed himself not more than one luxury a year, and he determined that this year the luxury should be a set of Poe.

Therefore, imagine the hurt to his feelings when his wife objected to his expending fifteen dollars for that which he coveted above anything else in the world.

As he went to his work that day he reflected on Mrs. Waterby’s conduct. Did she not have her allowance of spending money? Did he ever find fault with her extravagance? Was he an unreasonable husband in asking that he be allowed to spend this small sum for that which would give him many hours of pleasure, and which would belong to Mrs. Waterby as much as to him?

He told himself that many a husband would have bought the books without consulting his wife. But he (Waterby) had deferred to his wife in all matters touching family finances, and he said to himself, with a tincture of bitterness in his thoughts, that probably he had put himself into the attitude of a mere dependent.

For had she not forbidden him to buy a few books for himself? Well, no, she had not forbidden him, but it amounted to the same thing. She had declared that she was firmly opposed to the purchase of Poe.

Mr. Waterby wondered if it were possible that he was just beginning to know his wife. Was she a selfish woman at heart? Was she complacent and good-natured and kind only while she was having her own way? Wouldn’t she prove to be an entirely different sort of woman if he should do as many husbands do—spend his income on clubs and cigars and private amusement, and gave her the pickings of small change?

Nothing in Mr. Waterby’s whole experience as a married man had so wrenched his sensibilities and disturbed his faith as Mrs. Waterby’s objection to the purchase of the set of Poe. There was but one way to account for it. She wanted all the money for herself, or else she wanted him to put it into the bank so that she could come into it after he—but this was too monstrous.

However, Mrs. Waterby’s conduct helped to give strength to Mr. Waterby’s meanest suspicions.

Two or three days after the first conversation she asked: “You didn’t buy that set of Poe, did you, Alfred?”

“No, I didn’t buy it,” he answered, as coldly and with as much hauteur as possible.

He hoped to hear her say: “Well, why don’t you go and get it? I’m sure that you want it, and I’d like to see you buy something for yourself once in a while.”

That would have shown the spirit of a loving and unselfish wife.

But she merely said, “That’s right; don’t buy it,” and he was utterly unhappy, for he realised that he had married a woman who did not love him and who simply desired to use him as a pack-horse for all household burdens.

As soon as Mr. Waterby had learned the horrible truth about his wife he began to recall little episodes dating back years, and now he pieced them together to convince himself that he was a deeply wronged person.

Small at the time and almost unnoticed, they now accumulated to prove that Mrs. Waterby had no real anxiety for her husband’s happiness. Also, Mr. Waterby began to observe her more closely, and he believed that he found new evidences of her unworthiness. For one thing, while he was in gloom over his discovery and harassed by doubts of what the future might reveal to him, she was content and even-tempered.

The holiday season approached and Mr. Waterby made a resolution. He decided that if she would not permit him to spend a little money on himself he would not buy the customary Christmas present for her.

“Selfishness is a game at which two can play,” he said.

Furthermore, he determined that if she asked him for any extra money for Christmas he would say: “I’m sorry, my dear, but I can’t spare any. I am so hard up that I can’t even afford to buy a few books I’ve been wanting a long time. Don’t you remember that you told me that I couldn’t afford to buy that set of Poe?”

Could anything be more biting as to sarcasm or more crushing as to logic?

He rehearsed this speech and had it all ready for her, and he pictured to himself her humiliation and surprise at discovering that he had some spirit after all and a considerable say-so whenever money was involved.

Unfortunately for his plan, she did not ask for any extra spending money, and so he had to rely on the other mode of punishment. He would withhold the expected Christmas present. In order that she might fully understand his purpose, he would give presents to both of the children.

It was a harsh measure, he admitted, but perhaps it would teach her to have some consideration for the wishes of others.

It must be said that Mr. Waterby was not wholly proud of his revenge when he arose on Christmas morning. He felt that he had accomplished his purpose, and he told himself that his motives had been good and pure, but still he was not satisfied with himself.

He went to the dining-room, and there on the table in front of his plate was a long paper box, containing ten books, each marked "Poe." It was the edition he had coveted.

"What's this?" he asked, winking slowly, for his mind could not grasp in one moment the fact of his awful shame.

"I should think you ought to know, Alfred," said Mrs. Waterby, flushed, and giggling like a schoolgirl.

"Oh, it was you——"

"My goodness, you've had me so frightened! That first day, when you spoke of buying them and I told you not to, I was just sure that you suspected something. I bought them a week before that."

"Yes—yes," said Mr. Waterby, feeling the saltwater in his eyes. At that moment he had the soul of a wretch being whipped at the stake.

"I was determined not to ask you for any money to pay for your own presents," Mrs. Waterby continued. "Do you know I had to save for you and the children out of my regular allowance. Why, last week I nearly starved you, and you never noticed it at all. I was afraid you would."

"No, I—didn't notice it," said Mr. Waterby, brokenly, for he was confused and giddy.

This self-sacrificing angel—and he had bought no Christmas present for her!

It was a fearful situation, and he lied his way out of it.

"How did you like *your* present?" he asked.

"Why, I haven't seen it yet," she said, looking across at him in surprise.

"You haven't? I told them to send it up yesterday."

The children were shouting and laughing over their gifts in the next room, and he felt it his duty to lie for their sake.

"Well, don't tell me what it is," interrupted Mrs. Waterby. "Wait until it comes."

"I'll go after it."

He did go after it, although he had to drag a jeweller away from his home on Christmas-day and have him open his great safe. The ring which he selected was beyond his means, it is true, but when a man has to buy back his self-respect, the price is never too high.