

The Bonds of Marriage A Romantic Farce in One Act

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JOHN SAMPSON (*Jack*) a man of business; age 30.

MARY, his wife; age 25.

SLYMAN SQUIFF, master detective.

(Sampson's apartment, in any city of the United States.)

(Jack is putting on his overcoat with Mary's aid.)

JACK: Well, good-bye, dear. Remember, I may be a little late for dinner; I'm rushed to death this week, you know, what with four men called to the colors, and three of the girls gone for the Red Cross.

MARY: Good-bye, Jack. Take care of yourself. This is dreadfully treacherous weather, dear, and you with your weakness!

(While helping him she has dexterously extracted his wallet. She embraces him warmly.)

Good-bye, darling!

JACK: Good-bye, sweetheart, good-bye!

(He goes. She immediately searches the wallet. It contains a large number of bills, of which she thrusts a goodly proportion into her stocking, and a memorandum, which she reads, sitting.)

MARY: Monday L. B. 100, Wednesday L. B. 50, Thursday L. B. 200, Saturday L. B. 200. Oh, God! Oh, God! That it should have come to this!

(The bell rings sharply. She puts the wallet in the pocket of a second overcoat, and conceals the paper. She then touches the button which releases the door, and begins to put away the breakfast things. Enter Jack.)

JACK: Darling, I've left my wallet, or it's been stolen. I must be crazy. I could have sworn I had it on me.

MARY: Oh, I guess it's in the overcoat you wore yesterday.

(Jack finds it.)

JACK: So it is! Stupid of me! I must run. Good-bye again, dear girl!

MARY: Good-bye, Jack!

(He goes. She sinks into the chair.)

He didn't even kiss me! Oh, the mask's off the viper now! The veil has fallen from the rat! He and his L. B. — the fifties and hundreds he's spending on her — and I haven't a rag to my back. Well, I'll know the worst — and then go back to mother — mother — mother.

(The bell rings sharply. She touches the button and returns, half fainting.)

Oh, Mother! come and comfort me! Mother! Mother!

(Enter Slyman Squiff. He is a tall, pale man. His face and feet are large and flat. He wears huge brown horn spectacles and wide red whiskers, an old battered Derby hat, a frock coat with a pale yellow waistcoat and lavender pants, all cut in the most fashionable style, new patent leather boots, frayed and dirty linen, new white kid gloves. He carries a cane, which can be used as a periscope, gun, or cigar holder. On his entry it is a cigar

holder. His flowery language is spoken as if by a rather effete dandy, his slang in tones of cunning and vulgarity. His high notes of protest or affirmation reach the level of a lugubrious bellow. His costume can be varied if any items of it are difficult to obtain, but in any case it should be notably incongruous.)

SQUIFF: Good morrow, madam! May all blessings flow upon that dainty dome of thine. Indeed, ahem!

MARY: Good morning, Mr. Squiff! Do sit down! Have you found out anything?

SQUIFF: Say everything, fair lady. What a question to ask of me, the master detective, the man who arrested Edward Kelly! I am indeed delighted to be able to inform you that your humble and devoted servant is now able to vindicate that pledge of confidence which you so amicably honored me by hypothecating — hum! I've got the dope on the slob, madam, permit me to assure you on the faith of a master detective!

MARY: Tell me the worst, quickly, for pity's sake!

SQUIFF: Alas! that these lips should needs profane their sanctity with such a tale of treachery and infamy. Kid, it's the limit, believe me! Yes, madam, I deeply regret to have to inform you that he who pledged his honor to his marriage vows is no better than — ah! how can I frame the phrase without wounding that sensitive soul of yours? — no better than a-a-a-coquette!

MARY: Then you can interpret this? (*She hands him the memorandum.*)

SQUIFF: Madam, I can. What a question to ask me, the master detective, the man who arrested Edward Kelly! L. B. is Laura Brown. Yet not so brown — she is a blonde!

MARY: Heavens above! a blonde!

SQUIFF: A blonde! She is employed in the office itself as a stenog.

MARY: A stenog?

SQUIFF: A stenog. Well may we say og — she is a swine!

MARY: Did you make her confess?

SQUIFF: I wouldn't go near her for a million dollars. Blondes are more terrible than tigers, more ruthless than rattlesnakes, more squamacious than skunks — oh, madam! Ahem!

MARY: I wish I had never been born. Oh, mother! mother!

SQUIFF: But, madam, calm your agitation, I beg of you. Open fire with anti-aircraft guns! What must be done? Ah, what?

MARY: I shall go home to mother.

SQUIFF (*exhibiting alarm*): But not today; oh, not today, let me beg of you! Trust me! Trust the master detective, the man who arrested Edward Kelly! There is much yet to do. Possess yourself awhile. We must have yet more proof — prehoof! Prehoof's the one best bet!

MARY: Laura Brown! It is for her that he has cut my allowance, moved into this tiny flat, made me turn my old dresses and do my own housework. Laura Brown! I've been starving, Mr. Squiff, literally starving, and he earning fifty a week!

SQUIFF: Indeed, madam, the worst is yet to come. For four months he has been branch manager, at two hundred a week, and three per cent commission into the bargain.

MARY: Oh, perfidy! perfidy!

SQUIFF: A raw deal, madam, as I live. I am the master detective! I arrested Edward Kelly, and I never heard a tale more pitiable!

MARY: Tonight I will confront him.

SQUIFF (*in a hollow voice*): 'Tis well. 'Tis well. Until tomorrow's sun, then, gild the horizon with his rays from the same elevation as at present, I bid you most respectfully adieu. I'll beat it, madam. Beat it! Ahem!

(He goes. Mary sinks in grief, and begins to sob. The clock strikes ten.)

chopathy of the neurological diathesis of dipsomania and parallel noioplegias, b'gosh!

JACK: God! it's too dreadful. Is there no doubt possible?

SQUIFF: It is not possible for a sound ratiocinatory apparatus which is functioning normally to enter a caveat against the ipse dixit of my ex-cathedra pronunciamiento. Holy smoke, no, ahem! It's a sure thing, babe, she's doing the hula-hula with the demon Rum.

JACK: How can you be so sure?

SQUIFF: You forget! I am the master detective. I am the man who arrested Edward Kelly! And so — ah, so! Well? Ahem! I listened in. I did. It may have been unworthy, but I listened in! Ahem! Only yesterday! No sooner had your manly foot spurned the threshold of this your mansion in disdain and haste as you fled swiftly to your house of affairs — ahem! — than — ting! the masterpiece of Morse and Bell resounded. 'Twas even the sweet voice of your fair spouse — wife of your bosom, alas; that I should say it. She called one Joe — I know not who he may be, this pandar to unhallowed vice and debauchery of drunkenness. She gave her order in terms that she thought darkly hidden, but to me, the master detective, the man who arrested Edward Kelly, they were alas! too clear — ahem! Too plain! Too evident! Too damnably damning, damn it! Oh, yes, ahem! "Joe!" cried she, "two hundred bucks. Wilson — that's all!" My innocent friend, "Wilson — that's all" is the advertisement of a famed brand of whiskey. It was enough. She rang off. I swooned.

JACK: Two hundred dollars worth of whiskey! The woman must be a barrel!

SQUIFF: 'Tis the dread truth! 'Twill out, wil't not, indeed, ahem?

JACK: My God, can nothing be done?

SQUIFF: First, brother in distress, we must prehoove it on her. Prehoof! Prehoof's the one best bet. Hark! my trained ear perceives a fairy foot fall. Camouflage, Mr.

Samson, camouflage! Quick — in the window — bay, behind you Arras tapestry!

(They hide behind the window curtain, in the recess. Squiff keeps watch through the periscope. Enter Mary with parcels, which she leaves on the table. She looks round, as if fearing observation.)

MARY: All safe here! *(Aside.)* Yet I am the most wretched of women. At this very moment my husband — my own husband — is ensconced within the arms of that vile sorceress, Laura Brown. The fly is in my ointment, and I cannot swat it! Accursed be him that invented hydrogen peroxide with a little ammonia in it, to be combed through the hair carefully, well into the roots! Blondes! Blondes! Blondes! Oh, mother! mother! *(aloud)*. But to my secret joy, my only compensation in this valley of woe!

SQUIFF *(in a hoarse whisper, very loud)*: Did you hear that, Mr. Samson? Prehoof! Prehoof I promised you, and there I am with the goods. Prehoof!

JACK *(very loud)*: Alas! I hear you, and I am lost. But hush! will she not hear us?

SQUIFF: No fear; her mind is on the drink. Drethink! Drethink! Oh, woe! Dre-hink!

MARY: I could have sworn that I heard voices, had I not promised mother not to swear. But nothing matters now — nothing save my secret!

(She extends her arms to heaven and gives a cry as of ecstasy) Wilson — that's all!

(She goes to a cupboard and closes the door behind her.)

SQUIFF: Now, then, Mr. Samson, to the prehoof! Confront her. I'll stay hidden, and be witness. Hullu gee! I'll reveal myself in my true form — aha! — at the

proper moment, yes, indeed, ahem! as the master detective, the man who arrested Edward Kelly!

JACK: I'll do it, if it breaks my heart.

(He comes out and leans with folded arms against the table. Mary comes out of the cupboard.)

MARY: Jack! Why, how did you get in? I never heard you!

SQUIFF *(with a loud laugh)*: What a question to ask! All things are easy when they are taken in hand by the master detective, the man who arrested Edward Kelly!

MARY: Oh, Jack, why don't you speak? I thought I heard a voice, another voice.

JACK: It was the voice of your own guilty conscience, Mary!

MARY: Jack! What do you mean? You frighten me. Why don't you kiss me? Why do you act so strangely?

JACK: Wilson — that's all!

MARY: Oh, Jack, Jack, don't!

(She comes to him, he repulses her, she begins to cry.)

SQUIFF: Aha! she trembles, she confesses, it is prehoof!

MARY: Oh, I'm sure I hear a voice!

JACK: Do you see nothing? No snakes, rats, beetles, pink toed marmosets? Drink, wretched woman, drink! These things are on your program! No day so meatless but shall show you leopards nesting in your hair! Hear voices, indeed! Ha! ha! ha!

MARY: Oh, Jack, you're crazy!

SQUIFF: 'Tis she that's smitten with the dread dementia of drink! Dre-hink! Dre-hink! She thinks others crazy, she must then be crazy herself. 'Tis all Prehoof! Prehoof! Prehoof!

JACK: Mary, we've been good friends and more for over three years now. Won't you trust me? I'd cut off my hand to save you from this ghastly thing that has come to you. Tell me the truth. Let's face it together!

MARY: Is this a practical joke?

JACK: Oh, don't try to put me off. I know you have become a secret drinker. I have proof.

SQUIFF: Pre-hoof! Prehoof! Pre-hoof!

MARY: It is a voice. It is familiar, too. Oh, this must be a joke.

JACK: Mary, you are right. It is the voice of Slyman Squiff, the master detective!

SQUIFF: The man who arrested Edward Kelly!

MARY: Then I understand. You wretch! You abandoned wretch! How low must have I fallen to have loved you! Oh, mother, mother!

JACK: Hey, what's this? That's no answer!

MARY: It is for you to answer me! Here have I been, dragged from a happy home into this cheap flat, not a rag to my back, not even a new hat, and there's a lovely one in —'s (*use name of local milliner*) at three seventy-five, marked down from eight thirty-eight; no girl help any more; no more dinners in restaurants; oh, those blondes! I suppose Laura Brown's in an apartment at a thousand a month; the little beast!

JACK: Laura Brown! Mary, you're raving.

SQUIFF: Ha! he thinks others crazy, he's crazy himself. Such is the fate of all unfaithful husbands. It is Prehoof! Prehoof! Prehoof!

JACK: Shut up, Squiff, you ass!

MARY: Then you hear voices, too! What does this all mean?

JACK (*in a low, thrilling, sinister voice*): This is a stratagem of Slyman Squiff!

MARY (*equally intense*): Traitor, it is. A stratagem of the master detective!

SQUIFF: The man who arrested Edward Kelly!

MARY: Jack, it won't do. Your best chance is to confess. Otherwise I go straight home to mother. Oh, mother! mother!

JACK: Stop talking nonsense!

MARY: Confess! I have proof.

SQUIFF: Pre-hoof! Pre-hoof! Pre-hoof!

MARY: He knows about it all — he knows — he knows! He, Slyman Squiff, the master detective.

SQUIFF: The man who arrested Edward Kelly.

JACK: Confound Edward Kelly!

MARY: He did. And he may yet arrest you, John Sampson, you and your Laura Brown!

JACK: I haven't exchanged three words with the girl in my life, except good-morning.

MARY: Ah! good-morning! A clever scoundrel can do much with such materials. Why, I fell in love with you myself, poor fool I was, because of the way you used to say, "What a pleasant afternoon, aren't we, Miss Mary?" You Beast!

JACK: For God's sake be reasonable. You can't stall like that. If you're not soaking whiskey like an Irish bog, perhaps you'll explain what you do with all the money you get? Where's the necklace I gave you on your birthday? And your engagement ring? And the sixty-four dollars you took from my wallet this morning?

(Silence. Mary, pale as death, clenches her teeth and fists. A pause.)

SQUIFF (in a hollow voice): Caught out! Prehoof!

(A pause.)

MARY: Jack, it's no business of yours what I do with my money. You never asked me before. You're only asking now to anticipate my asking you. And I do ask you now. What do you do with your money, if you don't spend it on that vile, low creature, Laura Brown?

JACK: She's a perfectly nice girl, and I won't hear you slander her.

MARY: Ah! you defend her, of course. Oh, men are all alike! Mother! Mother!

JACK: You want it both ways. Women are all alike. If I don't defend her, that would be a confession; if I do, it's proof that I'm a more hardened sinner still!

SQUIFF: Prehoof! Prehoof! Prehoof!

MARY: Oh, well; explain how you do spend all your money! I happen to know that you've been branch manager four months, and you never told me! Explain that!

JACK (*stammering*): Mary, dear, it's a — it's a — a — a sort of — er — sort of secret. A — er — kind of a — er — surprise for bye and bye.

MARY (*sneering*): Your manner is convincing, and your explanation most luminous.

JACK: Bah! you're only stalling. Look here, Mary, I believe you loved me once, before this drink got hold of you. I'm going to tell you something. I saw the doctor again today. That weakness of mine was only temporary. I'm fit. They've accepted me for the Aviation Corps, and I'm off to camp next month.

MARY (*between joy and anxiety*): Jack!

JACK: How can I leave you, knowing this about you?

MARY: How can you leave Laura Brown, you mean! Here's your memorandum, with notes of all this money spent on her.

JACK: Laura Brown? L. B. Good God!

SQUIFF: Prehoof! It is enough. Now comes the supreme moment, the triumph of Slyman Squiff, the master detective, the man who arrested Edward Kelly. (*He comes out and presents his cane at them.*) Hands up! Both of you, hands up!

(*Amazed, they obey.*)

Behold the triumph of the strategist! I was employed by both of you, I have convicted both of you. No more shall whiskey and Laura Brown absorb your superfluous funds! I will annex them, or — by the Great Horn Spoon — I expose the pair of you.

JACK: But, you great thundering ass —

MARY: Oh, Jack, be careful! Don't defy him!

JACK: Defy your grandmother! You silly baby, here's L. B. that I spent all my money on. (*He unlocks a cabinet and pulls out papers, which he throws on the table.*) Here's L. B. LIBERTY BONDS!

MARY (*laughing wildly*): Why, that was my secret, too! (*She rushes to the cupboard and throws her bonds with Jack's.*) Wilson — that's all!

(*They embrace.*)

SQUIFF: The Bonds of Marriage! And I thought I had Prehoof!

JACK (*over his shoulder*): Here, you're wanted outside. There's been an escape from Sing Sing.

SQUIFF (*eagerly*): Oh, if it were only Edward Kelly!

(*Jack and Mary renew their embraces. Squiff observes them through the periscope. He fires the gun in the air.*) Break away! (*They take no notice. He fires again.*) Time!

(*They take no notice. Squiff puts a cigar in the cane and begins to smoke. Then he puts up the periscope again at the audience.*)

Hey, Mr. Sampson!

(*He taps him on the shoulder.*)

Nothing can escape for long the eagle eye of Slyman Squiff, the master detective, the man who arrested Edward Kelly!

JACK: Oh, go to blazes!

SQUIFF: But see here, Mr. Sampson, there's all these people here!

(He points to audience. Mary releases her husband with a little scream of surprise.)

MARY: Well, they're all very nice people indeed! Suppose we put them on to the good thing? We can get plenty of new bonds for ourselves before the show opens tomorrow! Come on, Jack! Come on, Mr. Squiff!

(They gather up the bonds and go about the audience selling them, each actor making a little sale speech from time to time, as may be convenient. This should be impromptu, and fitted to the special needs of each district. When the day's quota is disposed of, the actors return to the stage and bow in the conventional manner, with possibly a speech of thanks.)