

## PLAYFUL CONNUBIALITY

THIS PAST WINTER something most peculiar occurred in my domicile. Wire clothes hangers began disappearing from my bedroom closet at an alarming rate. No sooner did I bring one home from the cleaner, when it would vanish, until finally I was forced to put two or three garments on one hanger and this distressed me no end for I am a very tidy sort of person who dislikes slovenliness of any sort, which is to say I like my shirts crunchy-crisp as cornflakes.

Now I disliked bothering my wife Elsa about this matter because she has become melancholic since the death of Poopsy, her poodle, and has for the most part kept to her room, but when the situation went from bad to worse I spoke to her one night at dinner of the strange goings-on surrounding the clothes hangers and asked if she could throw any light on the subject.

'Clothes hangers?' she asked slowly in tones of skepticism while toying with her tuna. 'Surely I have not heard you correctly, Heinrich. Would you please be so kind as to repeat that which you have just spoken?'

'Clothes hangers,' I repeated, enunciating each syllable as clearly as possible so that she would realize the gravity of the situation and not turn it aside in her usual fashion. 'I have now only seventeen of them in my closet whereas formerly I had exactly thirty-nine. And what is even more curious,' I continued, pushing aside my emptied plate of brain cutlets that my wife refuses to touch, 'the hanger supply in all other closets in the house—including yours—remains unchanged. Now surely you must have some sort of explanation for this monkey-business of which I complain.'

'Well,' Elsa said slowly after a longish pause while studying the tines of her fork. 'This afternoon at four o'clock, after she had prepared your cutlets, I let Ludmilla go and she became vindictive . . . perhaps it was she? . . .' The end of my wife's sentence refused to leave her tongue as if fixed with Elmer's glue.

'You dismissed Ludmilla?' I cried in absolute dismay because Ludmilla makes the best liver dumplings this side of Heaven and irons my socks meticulously. 'Then whom do you intend to replace her with since the agency is running out of patience. And why on earth did you see fit to discontinue her services.'

'She shall not be replaced, Heinrich,' Elsa replied calmly as she handed

me my bowl of tapioca with cream. 'For Dr. Burgerschmitt insists that I have absolute peace and quiet during my climacteric and Ludmilla was disruptive. She played her accordion as I napped.' (Now Dr. Burgerschmitt, like all psychiatrists, simply makes money off people's gullibility but if it makes Elsa happy to place herself in his hairy hands I shall not stand in her way so I dropped the subject for the time being and simply kept my eyes open for further developments.)

Well, for one week after Elsa and I had our little conference there was no further evidence of clothes hangers disappearing so I was forced, albeit reluctantly, to believe that Elsa was correct. That Ludmilla was the culprit. But then a week or so later the thing started up again, slowly and insidiously. A hanger missing here. One gone there. Until I was down to three.

So now I knew that I had misjudged Ludmilla cruelly. That my own spouse was the culprit for now there were only the two of us in the house and we kept the doors locked and bolted. But having reached this ugly conclusion did not end the matter. No indeed. I now had to catch Elsa in the nefarious act and mete out punishment. So first things first. And first I must find her cache. I therefore kept watch over my wife's every move until one evening when she made a fatal mistake as I pretended to nap after dinner.

'Heinrich,' she whispered softly as only she can. 'Are you awake, liebchen?'

I answered with a slight snore to fool her.

She then repeated her innocuous query.

I replied with a vigorous snore that left no doubt in her mind that the coast was clear and off she went a-thieving. Well, no sooner was she out of sight when I stalked her stocking-footed to my bedroom where I caught her red-handed secreting a clothes hanger under her peasant skirt while standing before my open closet door. But I did not then inform her the jig was up. Nosirree. Instead, I hastened back downstairs and resumed my snoring.

The next afternoon while Elsa kept her regular appointment with Dr. Burgerschmitt I made a thorough search of the premises. Upstairs, downstairs, in every nook and cranny I searched but to no avail. That night, however, luck was with me. At about midnight I heard her leave her bedroom with shuffling steps and ascend the steps to our unused attic.

After she had again returned to her quarters—it was, perhaps, a half hour later—I got out of bed and retraced her footsteps and there, under the eaves, I found that which I sought. Piles and piles of clothes hangers, their hooks clipped off at the neck, lay beside a wire cutter.

Well, now, my first impulse was to confront her immediately with proof of her perfidy. But then I got to thinking. Hanger-stealing was a harmless enough pastime. For what if she were to go marching about braless shouting foolish slogans. So the very next day, in the interest of harmony at home, I began outwitting my wife by snatching clothes hangers from rods in various establishments I patronized and it is surprising how adept I became at stuffing them down the front of my trousers without getting caught.

But then suddenly this evening I found myself without a single clothes hanger in the closet. So, my patience finally strained to the breaking point, I now approached my wife in the living room where she was knitting and told her straight out that I had witnessed her theft of hangers from my closet and I demanded that she stop the practice immediately or I should have her locked up.

‘If you do not cease and desist, I shall send you down to that place again that you dislike so much,’ I threatened, convinced that this would put an end to the matter. So you can well imagine my dismay when she responded by getting down on all fours, arching her back, hissing, and spitting out at me like an enraged alley cat. Well now, I decided. I shall fight fire with fire. So I, too, got down on all fours. Assumed the stance and behavior of a pit bull. Backed her into a corner. Pummeled her around a bit. And did not stop until she lay inert.

However, she is now commencing to rouse herself. Reaches for a knitting needle. Is no doubt reconnoitering for the next round before conceding defeat. Well, I should not mind a single bit if she wishes to engage in this sort of playful connubiality from time to time for, to tell the truth, I find it downright stimulating.