

# My Wife's Wedding Presents

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## Owen Johnson

**I** DON'T believe in wedding functions. I don't believe in honeymoons and particularly I abominate the inhuman custom of giving wedding presents. And this is why:

Clara was the fifth poor daughter of a rich man. I was respectably poor but artistic. We had looked forward to marriage as a time when two persons chose a home and furnished it with furnishings of their own choice, happy in the daily contact with beautiful things. We had often discussed our future home. We knew just the pictures that must hang on the walls, the tone of the rugs that should lie on the floors, the style of the furniture that should stand in the rooms, the pattern of the silver that should adorn our table. Our ideas were clear and positive.

Unfortunately Clara had eight rich relatives who approved of me and I had three maiden aunts, two of whom were in precarious health and must not be financially offended.

I am rather an imperious man, with theories that a woman is happiest when she finds a master; but when the details of the wedding came up for decision I was astounded to find myself not only flouted but actually forced to humiliating surrender. Since then I have learned that my own case was not glaringly exceptional. At the time, however, I was nonplussed and rather disturbed in my dreams of the future. I had decided on a house wedding with but the family and a few intimate friends to be present at my happiness. After Clara had done me the honor to consult me, several thousand cards were sent out for the ceremony at the church and an addition was begun on the front veranda.

Clara herself led me to the library and analyzed the situation to me, in the profoundest manner.

"You dear, old, impracticable goose," she said with the wisdom of just twenty, "what do you know about such things? How much do you suppose it will cost us to furnish a house the way we want?"

I said airily, "Oh, about five hundred dollars."

"Take out your pencil," said Clara scornfully, "and write."

When she finished her dictation, and I had added up the items with a groan, I was dumb-founded. I said:

"Clara, do you think it is wise—do you think we have any right to get married?"

"Of course we have."

"Then we must make up our minds to boarding."

"Nonsense! We shall have everything just as we planned it."

"Wedding presents," said Clara triumphantly, "now do you see why it must be a church wedding?"

I began to see.

"But isn't it a bit mercenary?" I said feebly. "Does everyone do it?"

"Everyone. It is a sort of tax on the unmarried," said Clara with a determined shake of her head. "Quite right that it should be, too."

"Then everyone who receives an invitation is expected to contribute to our future welfare?"

"An invitation to the house."

"Well, to the house—then?"

"Certainly."

"Ah now, my dear, I begin to understand why the presents are always shown."

For all answer Clara extended the sheet of paper on which we had made our calculations. I capitulated.

### II

I pass over the wedding. In theory I have grown more and more opposed to such exhibitions. A wedding is more pathetic than a funeral, and nothing, perhaps, is more out of place than the jubilation of the guests. When a man and a woman, as husband and wife, have lived together five years, then the community should engage a band and serenade them, but at the outset—however, I will not insist—I am doubtless cynically inclined. I come to the moment when, having successfully weathered the pitfalls of the honeymoon (there's another mistaken theory—but let that pass) my wife and I found ourselves at last in our own home, in the midst of our wedding presents. I say in the midst advisedly. Clara sat helplessly in the middle of the parlor rug and I glowered from the fireplace.

"My dear Clara," I said, with just a touch of asperity, "you've had your way about the wedding. Now you've got your wedding presents. What are you going to do with them?"

"If people only wouldn't have things marked!" said Clara irrelevantly.

"But they always do," I replied. "Also I may venture to suggest that your answer doesn't solve the difficulty."

"Wedding presents," I said savagely, "exactly that, my dear. This being forced to live years of married life surrounded by things you don't want, you never will want, and which you've got to live with or lose your friends."

"Oh, George!" said Clara gazing around helplessly, "it is terrible, isn't it?"

"Look at that rug you are sitting on," I said, glaring at a six by ten modern French importation. "Cauliflowers contending with unicorns, surrounded by a border of green roses and orange violets—expensive! And



"If people only wouldn't have things marked!"

solid silver candlesticks by the dozen, solid silver vegetable dishes, and we expect one servant and an intermittent laundress to do the cooking, washing, make the beds and clean the house besides."

"All marked," said Clara dolefully. "Every one, my dear. Then the china and the plates, we can't even eat out of the plates we want or drink from the glasses we wish; everything in this house, from top to bottom has been picked out and inflicted upon us against our wants and in defiance of our own taste and we—we have got to go on

living with them and trying not to quarrel!"

"You have forgotten the worst of all," said Clara.

"No, my darling, I have not forgotten it. I have thought of nothing else, but I wanted you to mention it."

"The flat silver, George."

"The flat silver, my darling. Twelve dozen, solid silver and teaset to match, bought without consulting us, by your two rich bachelor uncles in collusion. We wanted Queen Anne or Louis Seize, simple, dignified, something to live with and grow fond of, and what did we get?"

"Oh dear, they might have asked me!"

"But they don't, they never do, that is the theory of wedding presents, my dear. We got Pond Lily pattern, repoussé until it scratches your fingers. Pond Lily pattern, my dear, which I loathe, detest, and abominate!"

"I too, George."

"And that, my dear, we shall never get rid of; we not only must adopt and assume the responsibility, but must pass it down to our children and our children's children."

"Oh, George, it is terrible—terrible! What are we going to do?"

"My darling Clara, we are going to put a piece of bric-à-brac a day on the newel post, buy a litter of puppies to chew up the rugs, select a butter-fingered, china-breaking waitress, pay storage on the silver and try occasionally to set fire to the furniture."

"But the flat silver, George, what of that?"

"Oh, the flat silver," I said gloomily, "each one has his cross to bear, that shall be ours."

### III

We were, as has been suggested, a relatively rich couple. That's a pun! At the end of five years a relative on either side left us a graceful reminder. The problem of living became merely one of degree. At the end of this period we had made considerable progress in the building up of a home which should be in fact and desire entirely ours. That is, we had been extensively fortunate in the preservation of our wedding presents. Our twenty-second housemaid broke a bottle of ink over the parlor rug, her twenty-one predecessors (whom I had particularly selected) had already made the most gratifying progress among the bric-à-brac, two intelligent Airdale puppies had chewed satisfactory holes in the Art Nouveau furniture, even the Sistine Madonna had wrenched loose from its supports and considerably annihilated the jewel-studded Oriental lamp in the general smash-up.

Our little home began at last to really reflect something of the artistic taste on which I pride myself. There remained at length only the flat silver and a few thousand dollars worth of solid silver receptacles for which we had now paid four hundred dollars storage. But these remained, secure, fixed beyond the assaults of the imagination.

One morning at the breakfast table I laid down my cup with a crash.

Clara gave an exclamation of alarm.

"George dear, what is it?"

For all reply I seized a handful of the Pond Lily pattern silver and gazed at it with a savage joy.

"George, George, what has happened?"

"My dear, I have an idea—a wonderful idea."

"What idea?"

"We will spend the summer in Lone Tree, New Jersey."

Clara screamed.

"Are you in your senses, George?"

"Never more so."

"But it's broiling hot!"

"Hotter than that."

"It is simply deluged with mosquitoes."

"There are several mosquitoes there."

"It's a hole in the ground!"

"It certainly is."

"And the only people we know there are the Jimmy Lakes, whom I detest."

"I can't bear them."

"And, George, there are burglars!"

"Yes, my dear," I said triumphantly, "heaven be praised there are burglars!"

Clara looked at me. She is very quick. "You are thinking of the silver."

"Of all the silver."

"But, George, can we afford it?"

"Afford what?"

"To have the silver stolen."

"Supposing there was a burglar insurance, as a reward."

The next moment Clara was laughing in my arms.

"Oh George, you are a wonderful, brilliant man: how did you ever think of it?"

I just put my mind to it, I said loftily.

### IV

We went to Lone Tree, New Jersey. We went there early to meet the migratory spring burglar. We released from storage two chests and three barrels of solid silver wedding presents, took out a burglar insurance for three thousand dollars and proceeded to decorate the dining room and parlor.

"It looks rather—rather nouveau riche," said Clara, surveying the result.

"My dear, say the word—it is vulgar. But what of that? We have come here for a purpose and we will not be balked. Our object is to offer every facility to the gentlemen who will relieve us of our silver. Nothing concealed, nothing screwed to the floor."

"I think," said Clara, "that the champagne coolers are unnecessary."

The solid silver champagne coolers adorned either side of the fireplace.

"As receptacles for potted ferns they are, it is true, not quite in the best of taste," I admitted. "We might leave them in the hall for umbrellas and canes. But then they might be overlooked, and we must take no chances on a careless burglar."

"I'm sure the burglars will never come," said Clara, woman fashion.

"If there's anything will keep them away," I said, a little provoked, "it's just that attitude of mind."

"Well, at any rate, I do hope they'll be quick about it, so we can leave this dreadful place."

"They'll never come if you're going to watch them," I said angrily.

We had quite a little quarrel on that point.

The month of June passed and still we remained in possession of our wedding silver. Clara was openly discouraged and if I still clung to my faith, at the bottom I was anxious and impatient. When July passed unfruitfully even our sense of humor was seriously endangered.

"They will never come," said Clara firmly.

And yet they came.

On the second of August, about two o'clock in the morning I was awakened out of a deep sleep by the voice of my wife crying:

"George, here's a burglar!"

I thought the joke obvious and ill-timed and sleepily said so.

"But George dear, he's here—in the room!"

There was something in my wife's voice, a note of ringing exultation, that brought me bolt upright in bed.

"Put up your hands—quick!" said a staccato voice.

It was true, there at the end of the bed, flashing the conventional bull's-eye lantern, stood at last a real burglar.

"Put 'em up!"

My hands went heavenward in thanksgiving and gratitude.

"Make a move, you candy dude, or about for help," continued the voice, shoving into the light the muzzle of a Colt's revolver, "and this for you's!"

The slighting allusion I took to the credit of the pink and white pajamas I wore—but nothing at that moment could have ruffled my feelings. I was bubbling over with happiness. I wanted to jump up and hug him in my arms. I listened. Downstairs could be heard the sound of feet and an occasional metallic ring.

"Oh, George, isn't it too wonderful—wonderful for words!" said Clara, hysterical with joy.

"I can't believe it," I cried.

"Shut up!" said the voice behind the lantern.

"My dear friend," I said conciliatingly, "there's not the slightest need of your keeping your finger on that wabbling, cold thing. My feelings towards you are only the tenderest and the most grateful."

"Huh!"

"The feelings of a brother! My only fear is that you may overlook one or two articles that I admit are not conveniently exposed."

The bull's-eye turned upon me with a sudden jerk.

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"We have waited for you long and patiently. We thought you would never come. In fact, we had sort of lost faith in you. I'm sorry. I apologize. In a way I don't deserve this—I really don't."

"Bughouse!" came from the foot of the bed, in a suppressed mutter. "Out and out bughouse!"

"Quite wrong," I said cheerily. "I never was in better health. You are surprised, you don't understand. It's not necessary you should. It would rob the situation of its humor if you should. All I ask of you is to take everything, don't make a slip, get it all!"

"Oh, do, please, please do!" said Clara earnestly.

The silence at the foot of the bed had the force of an exclamation.

"Above all," I continued anxiously, "don't forget the pots. They stand on either side of the fireplace, filled with ferns. They are not pewter. They are solid silver champagne coolers. They are worth—they are worth—"

"Two hundred apiece," said Clara instantly.

"And don't overlook the muffineers, the terrapin dishes and the candlesticks. We should be very much obliged—very grateful if you could find room for them!"

Often since I have thought of that burglar and what must have been his sensations. At the time I was too engrossed with my own feelings. Never have I enjoyed a situation more. It is true I noticed as I proceeded our burglar began to edge away towards the door, keeping the lantern steadily on my face.

"And one favor more," I added, "there are several flocks of individual silver almond dishes roosting downstairs—"

"Forty-two," said Clara. "Twenty-four in the dining room and eighteen in the parlor."

"Forty-two is the number; as a last favor please find room for them; if you don't want them drop them in a river or bury them somewhere. We really would appreciate it. It's our last chance."

"All right," said the burglar in an altered tone. "Don't you worry now, we'll attend to that."

"Remember there are forty-two—if you would count them."

"That's all right—just you rest easy," said the burglar soothingly. "I'll see they all get in."

"Really, if I could be of any assistance downstairs," I said anxiously, "I might really help."

"Oh, don't you worry, Bub, my pals are real careful nuts," said the burglar nervously. "Now just keep calm. We'll get 'em all."

It suddenly burst upon me that he took me for a lunatic. I buried my head in the covers and rocked back and forth between tears and laughter.

"Hil what the—'s going on up there?" cried a voice from downstairs.

"It's all right—all right, Bill," said our burglar hoarsely, "very affable party up here. Say, hurry it up a bit down there, will you?"

All at once it struck me that if I really frightened him too much they might decamp without making a clean sweep. I sobered at once.

"I'm not crazy," I said.

"You bet you're not," said the burglar, edging towards the door and changing the key.

"Hold up!" I cried in alarm, "don't be a fool. What I want is for you to get everything—everything, do you hear?"

"All right, I'll just go down and speak to him."

"Hold up—"

"I'll tell him."

"Wait," I cried, jumping out of bed in my desire to retain him.

At that moment a whistle came from below and with an exclamation of relief our burglar slammed the door and locked it. We heard him go down three steps at a time and rush out of the house.

"Now you've scared them away," said Clara, "with your idiotic humor."

I felt contrite and alarmed.

"How could I help it?" I said angrily, preparing to climb out on the roof of the porch. "I tried to tell him."

With which I scrambled out on the roof, made my way to the next room and entering, released Clara. At the top of the steps we stood clinging together.

"Suppose they left it all behind," said Clara.

"Or even some!"

"Oh, George, I know it—I know it!"

"Don't be unreasonable—let's go down."

Holding a candle aloft we descended. The lower floor was stripped of silver—not even an individual almond dish or a muffineer remained. We fell wildly, hilariously into each other's arms and began to dance. I don't know exactly what it was, but it wasn't a minuet.

### V

Of course we raised an alarm—after sufficient time to carefully dress, and fill the lantern with oil. Our exploit was quite the sensation. With great difficulty we assumed the proper public attitude of shock and despair. The following day I wrote full particulars to the Insurance Company, with a demand for the indemnity.

"You'll never get the full amount," said Clara.

"Why not?"

"You never do. They'll send a man to ask disagreeable questions and to beat us down."

"Let him come."

"You'll see."

Just one week after the event, I opened an official envelope, extracted a check, gazed at it with a superior smile and tendered it to Clara by the tips of my fingers.

"Three thousand dollars!" cried Clara, without contrition, "three thousand dollars—oh, George!"

There it was—three thousand dollars, without a shred of doubt. Womanlike, all Clara had to say was:

"Well, was I right about the wedding presents?"

Which remark I had not known.

We shut up house and went to town next day and began the rounds of the jewelers. In four days we had expended four-fifths of our money—far with what results. Every thing we had hoped for, but for dreamed of was ours and everything harmonized.

Two weeks later as, engaged in our city house, we moved enraptured about our new-found home, gazing at the reincarnation of our silver, a telegram was put in my hand.

"What is it?" said Clara from the dining room, where she was fondling our chaste Queen Anne teaset.

"It's a telegram," I said, puzzled.

"Open it, then!"

I tore the envelope, it was from the Insurance Company.

"Our detectives have arrested the burglars. You will be overjoyed to hear that we have recovered your silver in toto!"



"Bughouse! out and not bughouse!"