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The Stubbornness of Uriah Slater

BY ELLA HIGGINSON

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“WHAT DID I TELL YOU?” CRIED MRS. Snodgrass, with a little crow of triumph following along after her words. “He’s gone an’ hired the second-best kerriage instid of the first-best for his own weddin’. What did I tell you? Let *me* alone! It don’t take me long to size up a man that only hired one kerriage, outside of the mourners an’ pull-bearers, at his father’s funeral.” She turned from the window to cast a withering glance at Mrs. Simonton, who stood behind her with a routed air. “Oh, he’ll get the best for his own weddin’,” says you.” She imitated Mrs. Simonton’s tone. “He’ll get the one that’s closed instid of the canopy-top, even if it is a dollar more,” says you. What you got to say now?”

Mrs. Simonton had not a word to say. The bridal carriage was now passing the gate. The canopy was bobbing and bowing from side to side, as first one wheel and then another went into a rut. The bridegroom sat up with a straight back and a red, conscious face. The bride held her face a little from him with a modest air.

The two women in the window bent instantly over a pot of blooming hydrangeas, but stared still, with their chins held in, in a surreptitious way that made their eyebrows glimmer like little flounces of lace in their own vision. The bride gave them a brief glance—one that unconsciously appealed to them to spare her. But they were as unconscious of its meaning as she.

“She’s feathered her nest with mighty poor feathers,” said Mrs. Snodgrass, lifting her head and staring boldly after the swaying carriage when it had passed.

“He’s got his house all paid for,” said Mrs. Simonton, timidly.

Mrs. Snodgrass threw up her head with a scornful smile.

“An’ some money in the bank besides.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that story time an’ again, an’ every time I’ve heard it I thinks, says I: Well! I wouldn’t have my Isaphene marry a man as stubborn ’s he is for two houses all paid for an’ money in three banks. You’ll see. She won’t get a thing her own way.”

“W’y—is he so turrable stubborn?”

“Is he!”

“I heard she wanted a row of crissyanthums all along the front fence, an’ he

went right off an' got 'em. That don't look so turrable stubborn. Her mother's a-braggin' about it."

"You wait." Mrs. Snodgrass smiled loftily. "It takes a little while for stubborn to out. Mebbe he wanted the crissyanthums hisself. Mebbe he asked her what kind o' flowers she wanted along the front fence. I'd brag about a little thing like that!"

"He ain't got a bad habit to his name," said Mrs. Simonton. Two red spots burned in her hollow cheeks. "Not a one. He don't drink—he don't *tech* drink—he don't gamble, an' he don't set around downtown half the night playin' cards for the cigars. I've hear say that it's even agen his principles to put a nickel in the slot—"

"Oh my!" interrupted Mrs. Snodgrass, with an exasperating laugh. "Where's he keep his wings? I never see 'em. Where's he keep 'em at? I drether a man 'ud have a habit than to be a mule. I drether a man 'ud set downtown an' play cards till daylight than to go an' buy a sorrel horse because I asked for a dapple one, or a white Leghorn rooster because I asked for a *Braymin*." She gave a little start, and bent her head over the hydrangea again. "Here come all the people that's been to the church," she said, digging imaginary worms out of the earth with a hair-pin. "Who's them three women a-walkin' along together ahead? Hunh—*three umberells*! A ghost couldn't get past 'em, let alone flesh an' blood. As if September sun 'ud hurt their complexions!"

"I'll have to go," said Mrs. Simonton, getting up reluctantly when the last wedding-guest had gone by, holding her lavender gown up high on both sides. "The children 'll be gettin' home from school."

"Well, come again," said Mrs. Snodgrass, cordially. She went to the door and waited until her departing guest had reached the corner of the house; then she stepped out on the porch, and slanting one hand up over her eyes, called out, in a tone of repressed triumph: "You just wait till along about—well, let's say April—an' see if there ain't a divorced *mule* in this neighborhood. . . . Look out! you'll tear your dress! It's caught in a quivass of the walk."

That winter was a severe one on Puget Sound. Snow dusted itself twice over the green lawns, and once the thermometers registered twenty degrees above zero! Everyone went around shivering, and declaring that the climate was changing since the advent of the railroads. Ladies locked themselves indoors, and looked out the windows at the strange white world with wide, anxious eyes. They fed the birds generously, and hoped to mercy the sea-gulls would not starve. One old pioneer said gloomily that if it kept on, the first thing a body knew the end of the bay would freeze over, and then you might as well live somewhere in the East! His tone meant that he could not imagine any situation more disheartening than that.

There was a slight snowfall the last week in February. But on the first of March a chinook wind came overnight and blew its soft velvety breath over land and sea, and sent its wild sweet laughter in at doors and windows. In the morning there was a green world again sloping from the glimmering white lines of the Olympics, the Cascades, and the Selkirks down to the blue water. The sea-gulls circled through the yellow sunlight, screaming; or drove one another gravely from piling to piling along the shore; or drifted out to the ocean again, rising and falling upon the satiny waves. The pussy-willows trembled like silver clouds against the green background of the hill.

Mrs. Slater, the bride of six months, looked out the kitchen window as she arose from the breakfast table. They ate breakfast in the big cozy kitchen because Mr. Slater preferred it there. She was a pretty young woman with a sweet face. Her figure was round and slender. She wore a neat house dress made with a full skirt and a yoke-waist. Her apron and collar were white and fresh; her brown hair was arranged smoothly, with only a few unmanageable “lovelocks” about her brow and neck. Her apron was tied with long wide strings with deep hems on the ends. The bows were pulled out carefully. In her cheeks were both dimples and roses.

“Oh, Uriah,” she cried out, joyfully! “See how green the hill is! It’s spring at last. I’m so glad. I’m going out to look for a four-leaf clover.”

“I wouldn’t be so foolish,” said Uriah, pushing his chair back against the wall with a great noise.

“What is it, Uriah?”

“I say I wouldn’t be so foolish. Orilla, you do act so foolish!”

She turned and looked at him. A little red came into her face.

“Why, Uriah Slater! I wouldn’t call my wife foolish. Why, you used to look for four-leaf clovers with me. You used to get down on your knees in the yard at mother’s an’ look an’ *look*.”

“Well, what if I did?” said Mr. Slater, reddening. “I wa’n’t married then. It didn’t seem so foolish then. You don’t expect me to go on lookin’ for four-leaf clovers the rest of my natural life, do you?”

He stood up tall and stiff in his working-clothes. He was a good-looking man. He had dark hair and a dark mustache. His eyes were gray. The back of his neck was straight and full. In his wife’s eyes he was so handsome—so perfect physically—that she had always scented a possible rival in every woman she met. He was, in truth, the kind of man that is most admired by women—being at once attractive and indifferent.

The old ladies of the town had asserted with one mind that it was perfectly scandalous the way the girls had all run after him before his marriage. His own mother had laughed about it with poorly repressed triumph.

"Oh no," she would say, humorously, to her confidential friends, "I'm never lonesome. Women with sons never get lonesome, even if they are widows. Melinda Woolard, she brings her embroidery over regular, an' sets an' works buttercups an' wild roses till you can't rest. Mirandy White, she brings fine sewing, an' hems an' tucks an' ruffles all day. Sofia Kildall, she brings E. P. Roe's novels, an' reads out loud till I declare to goodness I want to go outdoors an' *shriek*. An' all Uriah ever says is: 'What on earth makes them fool girls run here so? Don't they suppose I know enough to ask 'em if I wanted 'em?' You just wait till he gets his eye on the right one, though," Uriah's mother would conclude, nodding her head knowingly, "an' then you'll see. He'll run after her fast enough. He'll run errands for her, an' carry flowers to her, an' take her around on two chips. His father acted just like that after me," she said, proudly. "I declare I couldn't express a wish but I got it." Then she sighed, and added, "Until we'd been married quite a spell, anyhow."

Uriah's mother's prophecy had been fulfilled. Uriah had fallen in love with Orilla Baldy, and never did lover sue more humbly and untiringly than he. He bought a new horse and "buggy," and took her driving every Sunday afternoon. Three times a week, no matter how tired he might be, he shaved and dressed up in his best suit, and walked boldly past all the neighbors with his chin up to spend the evening with Orilla in her little parlor furnished with red plush. He always had candy in his pocket; and frequently he carried a big bouquet of honeysuckles or ragged-robins openly where the whole world might see if it desired. Isaphene Snodgrass, who had cultivated his mother more assiduously than any of the others, always did see.

Orilla was a happy girl in those courtship days—happy in her shy enchanting way. To be courted in so devoted a fashion by the most desirable young man in the whole county was surely bliss enough; but added to this was the satisfaction that every girl of her acquaintance had tried to win him and had been scorned. Her nature was so sweet that the triumph she felt was a very gentle and almost deprecatory one. Still, it was a triumph.

It was long before she would consent, however, to an early marriage. Pleadings and persuasions were of no avail. Perhaps Orilla was a wise young woman when she voluntarily prolonged her much-envied courtship. But one evening in August, after an hour of more urgent pleading than usual, Mr. Uriah Slater suddenly arose from the red plush sofa and went looking around for his hat.

"Well, all is," he said, calmly and distinctly, "I'm all ready to get married. The house is all ready to furnish up, an' I've got money to do it. It suits me to get married in September. If you had any good reason not to, it 'ud be different. But you 'ain't. I don't propose to dangle an' dangle after you if you don't want to marry me. If you don't, just say so right out. If you do, it'll have to be in September."

Terrified at the thought of losing him, Orilla fled like a dove to his breast. She sobbed out that he was unkind, cruel . . . to speak to her so sternly. . . . She had meant all the time to be married in September. . . .

"Then why didn't you say so?" said Mr. Uriah Slater. And how could a maiden reply to such a question?

Mr. Slater put his hat down again upon a chair, and the wedding was all planned and the day named before he went home. Orilla's mother was consulted, and gave her consent without hesitation. There never had been any coyness concerning the matter on her part. When Uriah had first revealed his admiration of Orilla, Mrs. Baldy had confided proudly to her sister that she wouldn't confess it to another living soul, but that she meant to help things along all she could without giving rise to talk, for she did know a good match when she saw it.

The next time Uriah came he brought a ring—a flat circle of gold set with a very pretty amethyst. If ever an innocent heart thrilled with perfect happiness, Orilla's did then. They had been engaged all summer, yet not a word had been said concerning a ring. She had seen her mother glance at her hand every evening after he had gone home. She had seen every girl in town glance at her hand time and again. Once Isaphene Snodgrass had cried out, right in company: "Where's your ring? You don't seem to be getting a ring very fast," and all the other girls had laughed. It had rankled. Orilla hated herself for caring about a ring, but she did care. It had even caused her mother humiliation. Her sister, with the characteristic frankness of blood relations—and relations by marriage—had openly suspected that he must be a little "close." Mrs. Baldy had a qualm whenever she remembered the ring that did not come.

When it did make its shining appearance she could have embraced Uriah Slater. "It must of cost a lot of money," she said next day.

"It's so beautiful," said dear Orilla, holding it to her lips, "that I don't mind having waited so long," and she was always forgetting her gloves.

The second indication that Uriah gave of stubbornness in his disposition was on the wedding-day—of all days on earth!

Two days before, Mrs. Baldy's sister had come hurrying over, breathless, "right out of the middle of a cake!"

"I thought I'd come right over an' tell you," she said. "Mis' Snodgrass was in, a-talking, an' she says she bets he hires the canopy-top. She says he only hired one kerriage, outside o' the mourners an' pall-bearers, at his father's fun'ral. She says his mother besought him an' besought him. She finally told Mis' Snodgrass that the more you besought him the stubbornner he got. I thought I'd come right over an' tell you."

That same evening Mrs. Baldy said, clearing her throat carelessly: "Oh, be

sure they don't send you the canopy-top, Uriah. It might rain, an' Orilla would get her white dress ruined. It don't look nice, either, a-bobbing from side to side like a cork. The closed kerriage is the one for weddings."

Uriah looked at her, and looked away again. "You got your cake all made, Orilla?" he said.

When the canopy-top came to the door on the wedding-day Mrs. Baldy was speechless for a moment. Then she cried out: "Why, Uriah Slater! Look-a-here what they've sent!"

"I know," said Uriah, unmoved. "I told 'em to. It's the one I wanted, an' it ain't going to rain." Then he turned and looked her full in the face. "It's a dollar cheaper," he said.

Mrs. Baldy choked, and Orilla felt tears of humiliation coming to her eyes.

But if Mr. Slater had given but few indications of stubbornness before marriage, he made handsome amends by giving what his mother-in-law would have called "a plenty" of them during the six months that followed. Devotedly as she loved him, Orilla trembled at the change which the hey-presto of a marriage ceremony had wrought in him. The adorer had become the adored, the beseecher the besought. His tender attentions ceased as if by magic. He settled down at once to the occupation of his lifetime, which had necessarily been interrupted during his courtship—that of making Mr. Uriah Slater comfortable.

His meals were to be on time. The dishes he specially favored were to be cooked. Expenses were to be kept down. His chair and his slippers were to be in their assigned places when he came home.

Orilla obeyed all his wishes as joyfully as a bird. It was her happiness to make him comfortable, to wait upon him, and humor his whims. But before his plain, calm, seemingly premeditated obstinacy she was helpless.

If she desired Mocha coffee, he bought Java; if uncolored tea, he bought green; if white Castile soap, he bought mottled.

"Oh, Uriah," she cried, one day, "what made you buy mottled? I told you white."

"Mottled's best," he replied, briefly.

"But, Uriah, not for flannels. I wanted it to wash flannels with."

"Mottled's the best," said Uriah, calmly. "It lathers more."

On another occasion she asked him to buy a gingham dress for her. "Get pink, Uriah," she said, clasping her hands over his arms and laying her soft cheek against his shoulder. "Pink looks nice on me."

"You've got one pink one already," he replied, staring straight ahead of him.

"I'd like another, Uriah. I'd rather have that than anything else. It looks better on me than any other color."

"Pink ain't the only color on earth. I don't see any use in havin' 'em all pink. I see a yellow gingham in at Slattery's—"

"Oh, Uriah, I can't wear yellow. I could wear pale blue or green, if you don't like pink—but I'd rather have pink myself. But I *can't* wear yellow—an' I *won't*," she ended, laughing merrily up into his face and kissing him.

That settled it. Uriah brought home a gingham of a fierce orange-color, with a black stripe cleaving its awfulness.

And so, gradually, the tremble came to Orilla's heart. It was the spring coming on, she told herself sternly, when a little faintness seized her after a "difference of opinion," as she came to call it, with Uriah. It was silly of her to care because Uriah did not always think as she did. How could she have expected that? Did he not love her? What if he never did kiss her now unless she put up her lips first, thereby reminding him? Had he not chosen her boldly and ardently, from among all the girls in town? Was not that sufficient bliss for any woman, without moping around hysterically because he forgot to kiss her when he went to work, or preferred orange gingham to pink?

One evening at the supper table, after a brief estrangement, she stretched out a gentle hand and laid it on his in reconciliation. "Do you love me, Uriah?" she whispered, her tender eyes full of repentant tears—repentant because he had abused her and she had timidly resented it! "Oh, of course," he replied, impatiently, with his mouth full, not looking at her. "Pass the butter—can't you?"

Orilla learned so rapidly in those days that she was able to pass from the primer of marriage into the fifth reader, skipping the first, second, third, and fourth.

But on that first day of March a thrill of the old happiness was in her heart. Those pulses are sluggish indeed that cannot be quickened by the velvet-voiced bugle of the chinook wind when it goes singing and calling over hill and sea.

"Well, never mind, Uriah," she said, good-naturedly; "I'll find four-leaf clovers for both of us. I don't mind being foolish in such a nice way. And, besides"—she leaned her cheek against his shoulder and looked roguishly up into his face—"you like foolish people, Uriah, don't you?"

"Unh—hunh!" said Uriah, smiling in spite of himself.

"Then it's all settled. Oh, Uriah, the ground is soft now, and we must have the well dug. It's just the time."

Uriah's face clouded over again. "Orilla, you do beat all! I ain't hear anything but well—*well*—all winter. Don't you s'pose I know enough to get the well dug when I'm ready? You keep at me the whole during time. It gets to be awful monotonous."

Tears stung their way up into Orilla's eyes.

"You don't know how unhandy it is to get water from the spring, Uriah.

You're real good to carry it twice a day, but I have to carry it a dozen times, or do without. Sometimes when I go out all het up so, I'm afraid I'll get pneumonia of the lungs."

"My soul! you do take duck-fits about nothing," said Uriah. "I've had a man engaged for a week to dig that well. He's coming to-morrow. Just as if I didn't know when's the time to dig a well! Keep at me the whole during time!"

"Don't be cross, Uriah. You don't know how unhandy it is to get along without a well. Come out in the yard," she added, timidly, "and I'll show you right where I want it."

Uriah bristled up and reddened. "It's going to be right alongside of the front gate," he said.

Orilla burst out laughing merrily. It wasn't a very funny joke, she thought, but if Uriah wished to be humorous, even in a poor way, she would try to appreciate his humor.

Uriah looked at her. His face grew redder. The back of his neck flamed suddenly up to his hair. "I don't see anything funny."

"How, Uriah?"

"I say I don't see anything funny. What makes you laugh so?"

"Why, just at the idea of a well alongside the front gate!"

"What is there so terrible funny in that?" hissed out Uriah. "That's the place for it, and that's where it's going to be."

Orilla looked up at him in a quick, startled way. Her face paled. "You're not in earnest? Uriah Slater, you say you're not in earnest!"

"I never was more in earnest in my life. That well is going to be dug right alongside of the front gate, or it ain't going to be dug at all."

There was a silence. The kettle steamed vigorously on the stove, its lid lifting and falling musically. Orilla stood looking out the window with wide eyes. Her face was like marble, save where two round crimson spots burned in her cheeks. Presently she turned and fronted her husband.

"Uriah," she said, "I don't want a well by the front gate." Her voice was calm and gentle. Her eyes looked steadily and dauntlessly into his. "I thought you were only in fun. I never thought you could be in earnest. I do the house-work and the washing, and I want the well where it'll be handiest for me." She put her hand pleadingly on his arm. "Come out in the yard with me, Uriah, an' I'll show you right where I want it. You can't help seeing it's just the place for it."

He shook her off fiercely.

"I'm going to work," he growled, looking at the clock. "I ain't got time for any more foolishness."

"It ain't foolishness Uriah. I want it settled where the well is to be—"

"It's all settled. Didn't I tell you it was? Didn't I—"

"That don't settle it, Uriah. I'm your wife, and I've got a right to say—"

He strode to the door and went out, slamming it behind him. She ran after him, and stood on the porch as he went down the steps. The red spots burned deeper in her cheeks. The wind blew her dress in light folds about her, and lifted the lovelocks from her brow and neck. There was a kind of terror in her eyes.

"Uriah," she called out, "I don't want a well alongside of my front gate, and I won't have it there! Look-a-here, Uriah—"

He went right on without turning, as fast as he could go. He walked stiffly, holding his head high and the back of his neck straight and full.

"Uriah Slater!" she called once more. "You look-a-here!"

But he went on, and did not look or turn.

When Uriah came home that evening Orilla received him as if no unpleasantness had occurred. "Oh!" she said, kindly, when he came in; "you, is it?" And she went to him and kissed his unresponsive mouth.

The supper was better than usual, and it was always good. There was a deliciously broiled steak, covered with mushrooms, which Orilla had gathered in the fields. They were stewed and thickened and browned, then poured over the steak in its simple blue platter. The potatoes had been steamed, and shredded through a colander, and were drifted round and round in large snowy flakes in an oval plate. There was a dish of tomatoes, and there were light golden biscuits that would fall apart when touched into crisp delicate halves. A bread pudding was browning slowly on the oven grate, and would presently make its appearance with little cones of velvety hard sauce upon it, the whole lightly dusted with nutmeg. But most tempting of all, perhaps, was the glass dish of perfectly brandied peaches, which this small scheming lady had taken from her hoarded store and set close to Uriah's plate. But her gentle designs were fruitless. Uriah ate heartily, but he did not talk. Orilla chatted pleasantly, not resenting his silence. Occasionally, however, she gave him a brief frightened look. Once or twice, remembering a resolution she had made that day after deep and careful thought, she shivered suddenly and helplessly.

In the morning, as they arose from the breakfast table, some one came to the door. Uriah opened it. "Oh!" he said; "you come to dig the well, did you? I'll come right out an' show you where."

He went into another room to get his hat. Orilla pushed the door shut, and stood against it. As he came back she faced him, gray and stony as death.

"Uriah," she said, gently. She put her arms up—they were shaking—around his neck. "You'll put the well where I want it, won't you? If you love me, Uriah, say yes."

Uriah's face grew purple. "Lemme by!" he hissed. "I'll put it right where I said I would!"

"Uriah"—her lips were shaking too now, and her voice was nothing like her own—"I beg you, I beseech you, to give up to me in this. I've been giving up to you ever since we got married. You give up to me this time—"

"Lemme by!" said Uriah.

"You give up to me this time, Uriah. If you don't—"

"Lemme by!"

"If you don't—" She shuddered hard. Her lips went on moving, but no sound came from them. Her arms fell down at her sides. Uriah pushed her aside and went out. She stood where he had left her. Her white lips still moved, and still no sound came from them.

When Uriah came home that evening the well was partly dug beside the front gate. He grinned, and went into the house. It was cool and dark. On the table was a letter, which read:

"DEAR URIAH,—I've gone home. I can't ever live with you again. It'll break my heart. I'll love you just the same till the last day of my life. But I can't ever live with you again. ORILLA."

"Talk's cheap," grinned Uriah. "I'll give her three days. The well 'll be giving water by that time."

But days passed, and Orilla did not return. At first Uriah was amused; then he became angry; then furious; finally his anger gave place to terror. The well was finished, but not a drop of water had he drawn from it. He could not pass it without a shudder.

It was a full month before he could make up his mind to go after Orilla and bring her home. When he did go, it was without a misgiving.

Orilla was alone. It was a soft April evening. The doors and the windows were open, but there was a fire in the big fireplace. Before it Orilla sat in a low chair. Her hands lay listlessly in her lap. She did not see Uriah until he was in the room.

"Oh, Uriah," she said, "is it you?" She arose politely and drew a chair to the fire. "Mother's at prayer-meeting. You sit down."

"I didn't come to see your mother." He stood awkwardly before her. "I come to see you, Orilla. Oh, Orilla"—his voice shook, as in the old days when he had been the humble wooer—"I've come to ask you to forgive me, an'—an'—take you home!"

"Oh, I forgive you," said Orilla. She had a white, tired look. "But I can't ever go back."

It had never occurred to him that she would refuse. "She just wants to make

me knuckle down,” he had thought, judging her by his own small soul. “She wants to scare me into it.”

But now a sudden terror clutched his heart. He pleaded earnestly and desperately. “Orilla, I own up I was wrong. I’m stubborn. I was born stubborn. But you’re the only woman I ever loved, an’ I want you. *Dang* the well! You can have your own way. I’ll fill it up with gravel! I’ll dig one wherever you want it! I’ll—I’ll”—he hesitated, wondering, even in that critical moment, if any further concession was necessary; something in her face made him feel that it was, and he went on—“*I’ll put a pump in, too!*”

“No, Uriah,” said Orilla, slowly. “I’ll never go back. You needn’t to say any more. I love you. I’ve suffered, and I’ll keep on suffering. But I can stand this kind of suffering better’n I could stand a lifetime of being nagged at and hissed at and contraried every time you happened to feel stubborn. Six months of it’s a plenty for me. You needn’t to worry about me. I’ll get along. It ain’t the well. It’s—it’s—what it means when you look ahead to a whole lifetime of it. . . . You needn’t to say any more. You might as well talk to a stone wall. I ain’t a woman to change, and I’ll always love you. But I’ll never live with you again. We can be just as good friends, though. . . . You sit down, Uriah. The evening’s coolish, ain’t it?”

She took up the tongs with a firm hand and stirred the fire. The sparks went up the chimney in a scarlet stream.