
Gossip

Fred Battersby had a fine collection of married women, and he tried to treat them equally. No favourites. He usually called round on them once a week, staying perhaps for an hour, trying to pay exactly the same amount of attention to each one.

He still remembered the day one of them, Audrey Ball, had stopped him in the street and said: 'I hear you've been to see Ann *twice* this week, and you haven't been to see me once!' Of course she tried to make it sound like a joke, but Fred's sensitive antennae picked up the undertones of jealousy. After that, he was always careful to share himself out, as it were.

So it was that Fred had his regular round, calling in turn on Audrey and Ann and Judy and Carol and – but it is unnecessary to list them all: the point is that they were all very fond of Fred, and always very pleased to see him.

'Hello, Fred! Come in! I've just put the kettle on. Would you like a cup of tea?' said one.

'Ah, Fred, I'm so glad to see you. I wonder if you'd give me a hand to move this settee?' said another.

'Good morning, Fred. Sorry if I'm not very cheerful, but I'm worried about my youngest: she's got a terrible cough,' said a third.

'Hello, Fred. How are you? I'm a bit fed up myself. To tell you the truth, Richard and I have had another row,' confided a fourth.

And so it went. Fred was like a counsellor to them. He was

a friend, an adviser, a doctor, a priest and a handyman all rolled into one. And Fred loved it. Firstly, he loved it because he was good at it. Fred lived alone, his wife having died a year or two before. He was still no more than middle-aged, a tallish man, not handsome but with a pleasant open face that seemed to encourage people to confide in him. He was good at it because he was one of those rare men who actually *like* women. Of course, most men will tell you, and themselves, that they like women, but the fact is that most men feel more relaxed and comfortable in the company of other men. They *need* women, certainly, as lovers and mothers and housekeepers and admirers, but on the whole they do not actually like them – probably because they do not really understand them.

This is where Fred was different. He enjoyed the company of women, and he understood them. He knew what it was like for married women to look after houses and husbands and children, serving up perhaps twenty meals a week, nursing the family through its problems and illnesses, listening patiently while husbands complained about the boss or the terrible time they had had at work that day. And all the time, these same women were trying to stay attractive and lively. Fred understood all this, and did his best to be a good friend to his married ladies.

‘Here you are, Ann. I’ve brought you some tomatoes from my greenhouse. They’ll put the colour back in your cheeks!’

‘Audrey, you’ve had your hair done. It really suits you!’

‘Hello, Judy. You’re looking a bit tired. Are you sure you’re not overdoing things a bit?’

‘That’s a pretty dress, Carol. What? You made it yourself? I wish I had talent like that.’

He listened to their problems, took an interest in their children, complimented them on their appearance, tried to make them feel important. He even flirted with them sometimes in a light-hearted way that amused them but never offended them. In short, he did all those things that husbands should do, but

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often forget to do because they are too busy and too wrapped up in themselves.

So, Ann and Audrey and Carol and the rest appreciated Fred when he came round each week to collect the insurance premiums. They looked forward to a friendly chat, a helping hand when they needed one, or simply a break from the boring routine of housework. But Hadley is a small village, and tongues began to wag. The sight of Fred's old bike propped up against Ann Fletcher's front wall or against the side of Carol Turner's house for an hour or more, when everyone knew he only needed to be there two minutes, started the gossip among the older village women. 65 70

'I always said he was no good.'

'I think it's a disgrace. She's a married woman with two small children!' 75

'Her poor husband: he doesn't even suspect what's going on!'

'That Ann Fletcher. Personally, I think she leads him on, you know, actually *encourages* him!'

The worst of these gossips was undoubtedly old Mrs Somersham. Her husband was not only the manager of the local bank, but also chairman of the Parish Council. She told him about her suspicions, but in that indirect way which makes gossip seem more like concern for the welfare of others. Mr Somersham took no notice at first, but then began to wonder. He heard one or two comments from other sources and eventually began to believe the stories about Fred. He thought for a while, and decided to have a quiet word with one of the husbands. As is always the way with these things, it was not long before the other husbands were made aware of the gossip about their wives and the unspeakable Fred Battersby. Well, these men had their pride, so naturally they were sure that their wives were as innocent as angels. But it was clear that these innocent angels were in danger from a widower with a roving eye and the morals of a stray dog. So the husbands of Carol Turner and Ann Fletcher and the rest began to get jealous or angry or sulky, and 80 85 90 95

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they began to say unkind things or to drop hints about Fred Battersby in the offhand way that people have when they don't want to look foolish but still want to have their way.

100 Eventually, the smell of scandal reached too many noses, and something had to happen. Tired of Mrs Somersham's references to the subject, Mr Somersham decided to have another quiet word, this time with his old friend, Porter, who happened to be the managing director of the insurance company that Fred worked for. Just a quiet word was enough. Fred lost his job
105 shortly afterwards. He could feel the cold atmosphere around him and, before long, packed his things and moved to another village several miles away. Mrs Somersham clucked with satisfaction, old Somersham breathed a sigh of relief, the offended husbands relaxed, and peace settled once more over Hadley.

110 For a time, that is. But then, the strangest things began to happen to Fred's married ladies. Not long after Fred's departure, Ann Fletcher had an affair (a real, serious love affair) with an estate agent from Stamford. Then, a month or two later, Audrey Ball just got up one day and walked out on her husband.
115 At about the same time, a rumour started going round that Carol Turner was getting a divorce. And by now, even the local postman was aware that Judy Smith was no longer sleeping in the same bed as her husband. At least, these were the kinds of rumours that reached even Fred Battersby, living in his little
120 caravan in another village some miles away. Not that he took any notice of such stories: Fred's the sort of man who has always refused to listen to gossip.

Crash

It is hard for me now to remember why they brought me here. They have given me a very nice room. It is small: it has a narrow bed, a built-in wardrobe, a table and chair, a wash-basin and a bookcase. The room is small, but it is big enough for me. There is a high window opposite the door. If I stand on tiptoe, I can look out on to green fields. Sometimes, for reasons I do not understand, I don't see fields when I look out, but huge saucer-shaped lights, blinding lights that hurt my eyes. Most of the time I am alone, but sometimes they come and talk to me. I think they come about twice a day, but I am not sure, because I find it difficult to know what time it is, or what day it is, or why I am here. 5 10

They always ask me the same questions. Their voices are high-pitched, squeaky. They sound like mice to me. I am used to them now, and I try to be polite. I try very hard to answer their questions. They watch me closely as they interrogate me, their bright, red eyes searching mine to see if I am telling them the truth. But what is the truth? I can remember the awful moments before the crash, the terrible moments when I lost control of the machine. I can remember trying desperately to escape before impact, but I couldn't open the door. I can remember the sensation of spinning and falling and the moment when I hit the ground. I was trapped, crushed by an enormous weight on my chest. I can still hear the sound of my own screams at that moment . . . The rest is blackness. 15 20 25