

THE LIQUEUR GLASS

By

Phyllis Bottome



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THE LIQUEUR GLASS

By Phyllis Bottome

MRS. HENRY WATKINS loved going to church. She could not have told you why she loved it. It had perhaps less to do with religious motives than most people's reasons for attending Divine Service; and she took no interest in other people's clothes.

She gazed long and fixedly at the stained glass window in which St. Peter, in a loose magenta blouse, was ladling salmon-colored sardines out of a grass-green sea; but she did not really see St. Peter or notice his sleight-of-hand preoccupation with the fish. She was simply having a nice, quiet time.

She always sat where she could most easily escape seeing the back of Henry Watkins' head. She had never liked the back of his head and twenty years' married life had only deepened her distaste for it.

Hetty and Paul sat between her and their father and once or twice it had occurred to Mrs. Watkins as strange that she should owe the life of these two beloved beings to the man she hated.

It was no use pretending at this time of the day that she didn't hate Henry Watkins. She hated him with all the slow, quiet force of a slow, quiet nature.

She had hated him for some time before she discovered that she no longer loved him.

Mrs. Watkins took a long time before she arrived at the recognition of a new truth; she would go on provisionally for years with a worn-out platitude, but when she once dropped it, she never returned to pick it up again; and she acted upon her discoveries.

The choir began to sing "Oh, God, Our Help in Ages Past." Mrs. Watkins disliked this hymn; and she had never found God much of a help. She thought the verse that compared men's lives to the flight of leaves was nonsense. Nobody could imagine Henry Watkins flying like a leaf.

The first lesson was more attractive. Mrs. Watkins enjoyed Jael's reception of Sisera. "She brought him butter in a lordly dish," boomed the curate. Henry Watkins ate a lot of butter, though he insisted, from motives of economy, upon its being Danish. Sisera, worn out with battle, slumbered. Jael took up the nail and carried out with efficiency and dispatch her

inhospitable deed. Mrs. Watkins thought the nails in those days must have been larger than they are now and probably sharper at the end.

The curate cleared his throat a little over the story; it seemed to him to savor of brutality.

“Why tarry the wheels of his chariot?” cried Sisera’s mother.

Mrs. Watkins leaned back in her seat and smiled. Sisera was done for, his mother would never hear the sound of those returning chariot wheels.

Jael had permanently recouped herself for the butter.

A little later on the Vicar swept out of his stall and up to the pulpit covered by the prolonged “Amen” of the accompanying hymn. Henry looked at his watch and shut it with a click. Then his hard blue eyes closed suddenly—he had no eyelashes. Mrs. Watkins folded her hands in her lap and fixed her attention upon St. Peter.

This was her nice, quiet time, and she spent it in considering how she could most easily kill Henry Watkins.

She was not in the least touched by the sight of her wedding ring. Her marriage had been an accident, one of those accidents that happened frequently twenty years ago, and which happen, though more seldom, now. An unhappy blunder of ignorance, inexperience and family pressure.

She had liked making Henry Watkins jump and her mother had explained to her that the tendency to jump on Henry’s part was ardent, manly love, and that her own amused contemplation of the performance was deep womanly inclination.

It was then that Mrs. Watkins urged that she did not like the back of Henry’s head. She had been told that it was immodest to notice it. His means were excellent and her own parents were poor. Twenty years ago Mrs. Watkins had known very little about life, and what she did know she was tempted to enjoy. She knew a good deal about it now, and she had long ago outgrown the temptation to enjoy it.

Still, that in itself wouldn’t have given her any idea of killing her husband. She was a just woman and she knew that her husband had not invented the universe; if he had she thought it would have been more unpleasant still.

Henry’s idea of marriage was very direct; he knew that he had done his wife an enormous favor. She was penniless and he had the money; she was to come to him for every penny and all she had was his as a matter of

course. She could do him no favors, she had no rights, and her preferences were silly.

It had occurred to Mrs. Watkins in one awful moment of early resentment that she would rather be bought by a great many men than by one. There would be more variety and some of them, at least, wouldn't be like Henry.

Then her children came; she aged very rapidly. Nothing is so bad for the personal appearance as the complete abrogation of self-respect. Henry continually threw her birthdays in her teeth. "A woman of your age," he would say with deep contempt.

He was a man of favorite phrases. Mrs. Watkins was not constitutionally averse to repetition, but the repetition of a phrase that means to hurt can be curiously unpleasant. Still, as her mother had pointed out to her long years ago, you can get used to the unpleasant.

She never complained and her father and mother were gratefully conscious of how soon she had settled down.

But there was a strange fallacy that lingered deep in Mrs. Watkins' heart.

She had given up her rights as a woman, since presumably her marriage necessitated the sacrifice. But she believed that she would be allowed the rights of a mother. This, of course, was where she made her mistake.

Henry Watkins meant to be master in his own house. The house was his own, so was his wife, so were his children.

There is no division of property where there is one master. This was a great religious truth to Henry, so that when his son displeased him, he thrashed him, and when his daughter got in his way he bullied her.

Mrs. Watkins disputed this right not once but many times, till she found the results were worse for the children. Then she dropped her opposition. Henry Watkins saw that she had learnt her lesson. It taught the children a lesson, too; they saw that it made no difference what mother said to father.

Nothing happened to alter either her attitude or Henry's.

They went to the same church twice every Sunday, except when it rained; and they ate roast beef afterwards.

In spite of Henry, Hetty had grown into a charming, sympathetic, slightly nervous young woman, and in spite of Henry, Paul had become a clever, highly strung, regrettably artistic young man.

But if Henry couldn't help their temperaments he could put his foot down about their future.

Paul should go into the bank and learn to be a man. (By learning to be a man, Henry meant learning to care more for money than for anything else); and Hetty should receive no assistance towards marrying an impecunious young architect to whom she had taken a fancy.

Hetty could do as she chose; she could marry Henry's old friend Baddeley, who had a decent income, or she could stay at home and pretend to be ill; but she certainly shouldn't throw herself away on a young fool who hadn't the means (rather fortunately, as it happened) to support her.

Henry looked at his watch, the sermon had already lasted twenty minutes.

Mrs. Watkins went over once more in her mind how she had better do it. "And now to God the Father," said the vicar. The sermon had lasted twenty-seven minutes and Henry meant to point it out to the vicar in the vestry. "Oh, what the joy and the glory must be!" sang the choir. "And if I am hanged," said Mrs. Watkins to herself, "they'll get the money just the same, I shall try not to be, because it would be so upsetting for them, poor young things; still it's wonderful what you can get over when you're young."

"Keep the beef hot!" whispered Henry, as he set off for the vestry.

At lunch Henry made Hetty cry and leave the room.

Paul flashed out in his sister's defense. "You're unbearable, Sir—why can't you leave us alone?"

His mother strangely interposed.

"Never mind, Paul," she said. "Let father have his own way."

Paul looked at her in astonishment, and Henry was extremely annoyed. He was perfectly capable of taking his own way without his wife's interference, and he told her so.

It was the cook's evening out, and the house parlor-maid—a flighty creature—was upstairs in her room, trimming a new hat. There was no one downstairs in the kitchen after supper.

Paul went out to smoke in the garden, and Hetty had gone to finish her tears in her own room. That was something Mrs. Watkins hadn't got; but she needed no place for finishing her tears, because she had never yet begun them. She did not see the use of tears.

Mrs. Watkins stood and looked at her husband as he sprawled at his ease in the most comfortable of the drawing-room chairs.

“Henry,” she said, “would you like some of that sloe gin your brother sent you? You haven’t tried it yet.”

“I don’t mind trying a glass,” said Henry good-naturedly, yawning in her face.

His wife paused at the door. She came back a step or two. “You’ve not changed your mind,” she asked, “about the children’s futures?”

“No! Why should I change my mind?” said Henry. “Do I ever change my mind? They can make as much fuss as they like, but the man who pays the piper calls the tune!”

“I’ve heard you say that before,” said his wife reflectively.

“I daresay you’ll hear me say it again!” said Henry with a laugh.

Mrs. Watkins’ hand went towards the handle of the door, she did not think she would ever hear Henry say this favorite maxim again; but still she lingered.

“Hurry up with that liqueur!” said her husband.

Mrs. Watkins went into the pantry and took out a liqueur-glass. She poured a little sloe gin into it, then she put down the bottle and left the pantry. She went into the children’s dark-room—they were allowed that for their photography.

She still had the glass in her hand. There was a bottle on the highest shelf. She took it down and measured it carefully with her eye. The children’s manual of photography and the medical dictionary in Henry’s dressing-room had been a great help to her.

She poured out into the deep red of the sloe gin some of the contents of the bottle; it looked very white and harmless and hardly smelt at all. She wondered if it was enough, and she tipped up the bottle a little to make sure. She used a good deal more than the medical dictionary said was necessary, but the medical dictionary might have underestimated Henry’s constitution. She put the bottle back where she found it, and returned to the pantry. There she filled up the liqueur-glass with more sloe gin.

She saw Paul on a garden seat through the window. “I wish you’d come out, Mother,” he said impatiently.

“I will in a minute, dear,” she answered quietly. Then she went back to her husband. “Here it is, Henry,” she said. “What a slow woman you are!” he grumbled. “Still I must say you have a steady hand.”

She held the full glass towards him and watched him drink it in a gulp.

“It tastes damned odd,” said Henry thoughtfully. “I don’t think I shall take any more of it.”

Mrs. Watkins did not answer; she took up the liqueur-glass and went back into the pantry.

She took out another glass, filled it with sloe gin, drank it, and put it on the pantry table.

The first glass she slipped up her long sleeve and went out into the garden.

“I thought you were never coming, Mother!” Paul exclaimed. “Oh, I do feel so sick about everything! If this kind of thing goes on, I shall do something desperate! I know I shall. I sometimes think I should like to kill Father.”

Mrs. Watkins drew a long breath of relief. Once or twice lately it had occurred to her while she was thinking things over in church that Paul might get desperate and attack his father. He couldn’t now.

“Don’t talk like that, dear,” she said gently. “I sometimes think your father can’t help himself. Besides, it’s very natural he should want you and Hetty to have money; he values money.”

“He doesn’t want us to have it!” Paul exclaimed savagely. “He only wants to keep us in his power because we haven’t got it, and can’t get away! What money has he ever given you—or ever let us have for our own freedom?”

Mrs. Watkins looked up at the substantial house and around the well-stocked garden. Henry had gone in especially for cabbages. She looked as if she were listening for something.

“I don’t like to hear you talk like that, Paul,” she said at last. “I want you to go up to Hetty’s room and bring her out into the garden. She ought to have some air. The evenings are beginning to draw in. It’ll be church time presently.”

“But if I bring her down, won’t *he* come out and upset her?” Paul demanded.

“I don’t think he is coming out again,” said Mrs. Watkins. She watched her son disappear into the house, and then walked on into the thick shrubbery at the end of the garden. She slipped the liqueur-glass out of her sleeve and broke it into fragments against the garden wall, then she covered the pieces with loose earth.

She had hardly finished before she heard a cry from the house. “Mother! Mother! Oh, Mother!”

“I’ve done the best I can,” she said suddenly, between the kitchen garden and the house.

There was an inquest the following week, and Mrs. Watkins, dressed in decent black, gave her evidence with methodical carefulness.

Her husband had been quite well before dinner, she explained. At dinner he had been a little disturbed with one of the children, but nothing out of the ordinary at all. He had merely said a few sharp words. After dinner he had gone to sit in the drawing-room, and at his request she had brought him a glass of sloe gin sent him by his brother; when he had finished it she had carried the glass back into the pantry. She did not see him again. The maids were not downstairs at the time. The glass was examined, the pantry was examined, the whole household was examined. The parlor maid had hysterics, and the cook gave notice to the coroner for asking her if she kept her pans clean. The verdict was death through misadventure, though a medical officer declared that poison was evidently the cause.

It was considered possible that Henry had privately procured it and taken it himself.

It is true he had no motive for suicide, but there was still less motive for murder. Nobody wished ardently that Henry might live, but on the other hand, nobody benefited by his interesting and mysterious death—that is to say, nobody but Henry’s family; and it is not considered probable that well-dressed, respectable people benefit by a parent’s death.

Mrs. Watkins was never tempted to confession; and she continued to gaze just as fixedly at St. Peter and the sardines every Sunday. She thought about quite different subjects now; but she still had a nice quiet time.

It was the day before Hetty’s wedding to the young architect that Mrs. Watkins made her final approach to the question of her husband’s death. She never referred to it afterwards.

“Do you know, Mummy darling,” Hetty said, “I was sure there were a dozen liqueur-glasses in the cupboard. I always looked after them myself.

Father was so particular about them; and they put back the horrid inquest one, I know, and yet I can only find eleven.”

Mrs. Watkins looked at her daughter with a curious expression, then she asked abruptly, “Are you very happy, child?” Hetty assented radiantly. Her mother nodded. “And Paul,” said Mrs. Watkins thoughtfully, “he seems very contented in his painting. He wants me to go with him to Paris. He always did want to go to Paris.”

“Paul can’t be as happy as I am,” Hetty triumphantly assured her, “because he hasn’t got Dick—but it does seem as if both our wildest dreams had come true in the most extraordinary way, doesn’t it, Mummy?”

Mrs. Watkins did not answer her daughter at once. She turned towards the cupboard. She seemed to be counting the broken set over again.

“Well, I don’t think it matters about that liqueur-glass,” she said finally. “I’m not as particular as your father.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover has been created for this eBook.

[The end of *The Liqueur Glass* by Phyllis Bottome]