

# **Lady Betty's Indiscretion**

Anonymous

# Table of Contents

<b><u>Lady Betty's Indiscretion</u></b> .....	<b>1</b>
<u>Anonymous</u> .....	1

# Lady Betty's Indiscretion

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"Horry! I am sick to death of it!"

There was a servant in the room gathering the tea-cups; but Lady Betty Stafford, having been brought up in the purple, was not to be deterred from speaking her mind by a servant. Her cousin was either more prudent or less vivacious; he did not answer on the instant, but stood looking through one of the windows at the leafless trees and slow-dropping rain in the Mall, and only turned when Lady Betty pettishly repeated her statement.

"Had a bad time?" he then vouchsafed, dropping into a chair near her, and looking first at her, in a good-natured way, and then at his boots, which he seemed to approve.

"Horrid!" she replied.

"Many people here?"

"Hordes of them! Whole tribes!" she exclaimed. She was a little lady, plump and pretty, with a pale, clear complexion, and bright eyes. "I am bored beyond belief. And—and I have not seen Stafford since morning," she added.

"Cabinet council?"

"Yes!" she answered viciously. "A cabinet council, and a privy council, and a board of trade, and a board of green cloth, and all the other boards! Horry, I am sick to death of it! What is the use of it all?"

"Country go to the dogs!" he said oracularly, still admiring his boots.

"Let it!" she retorted, not relenting a whit. "I wish it would; I wish the dogs joy of it!"

He made an extraordinary effort at diffuseness. "I thought," he said, "that you were becoming political, Betty. Going to write something, and all that."

"Rubbish! But here is Mr. Atley. Mr. Atley, will you have a cup of tea," she continued, speaking to the newcomer. "There will be some here presently. Where is Mr. Stafford?"

"Mr. Stafford will take a cup of tea in the library, Lady Betty," replied the secretary. "He asked me to bring it to him. He is copying an important paper."

Sir Horace forsook his boots, and in a fit of momentary interest asked, "They have come to terms?"

The secretary nodded. Lady Betty said "Pshaw!" A man brought in the fresh teapot. The next moment Mr. Stafford himself came quickly into the room, an open telegram in his hand.

## Lady Betty's Indiscretion

He nodded pleasantly to his wife and her cousin. But his thin, dark face wore—it generally did—a preoccupied look. Country people to whom he was pointed out in the streets called him, according to their political leanings, either insignificant, or a prig, or a "dry sort;" or sometimes said, "How young he is!" But those whose fate it was to face the Minister in the House knew that there was something in him more to be feared even than his imperturbability, his honesty, or his precision—and that was a certain sudden warmth, which was apt to carry away the House at unexpected times. On one of these occasions, it was rumored, Lady Betty Champion had seen him, and fallen in love with him. Why he had thrown the handkerchief to her—well that was another matter; and whether the apparently incongruous match would answer—that, too, remained to be seen.

"More telegrams?" she cried now. "It rains telegrams! how I hate them!"

"Why?" he said. "Why should you?" He really wondered.

She made a face at him. "Here is your tea," she said abruptly.

"Thank you; you are very good," he replied. He took the cup and set it down absently. "Atley," he continued, speaking to the secretary, "you have not corrected the report of my speech at the Club, have you? No, I know you have had no time. Will you run your eye over it presently, and see if it is all right, and send it to the Times—I do not think I need see it—by eleven o'clock at latest. The editor," he added, tapping the pink paper in his hand, "seemed to doubt us. I have to go to Fitzgerald's now, so you must copy Lord Pilgrimstone's terms, too, please. I had meant to do it myself, but I shall be with you before you have finished."

"What are the terms?" Lady Betty asked. "Lord Pilgrimstone has not agreed to—"

"To permit me to communicate them?" he replied, with a grave smile. "No. So you must pardon me, my dear, I have passed my word for absolute secrecy. And, indeed, it is as important to me as to Pilgrimstone that they should not be divulged."

"They are sure to leak out," she retorted. "They always do."

"Well, it will not be through me, I hope."

She stamped her foot on the carpet. "I should like to get them, and send them to the Times!" she exclaimed, her eyes flashing—he was so provoking! "And let all the world know them! I should!"

He looked his astonishment, while the other two laughed softly, partly to avoid embarrassment, perhaps. My Lady often said these things, and no one took them seriously.

"You had better play the secretary for once, Lady Betty," said Atley, who was related to his chief. "You will then be able to satisfy your curiosity. Shall I resign pro tem?"

She looked eagerly at her husband for the third part of a second—looked for assent, perhaps. But she read no playfulness in his face, and her own fell. He was thinking about other things. "No," she said, almost sullenly, dropping her eyes to the carpet; "I should not spell well enough."

Soon after that they dispersed, this being Wednesday, Mr. Stafford's day for dining out. Everyone knows that Ministers dine only twice a week in session—on Wednesday and Sunday; and Sunday is often sacred to the children where there are any, lest they should grow up and not know their father by sight. Lady Betty came into the library at a quarter to eight, and found her husband still at his desk, a pile of papers before him waiting for his signature. As a fact, he had only just sat down, displacing his secretary, who had gone upstairs to dress.

## Lady Betty's Indiscretion

"Stafford!" she said.

She did not seem quite at her ease, but his mind was troubled, and he failed to notice this. "Yes, my dear," he answered politely, shuffling the papers before him into a heap. He knew he was late, and he could see that she was dressed. "Yes, I am going upstairs this minute. I have not forgotten."

"It is not that," she said, leaning with one hand on the table; "I only want to ask you—"

"My dear, you really must tell it to me in the carriage." He was on his feet already, making some hasty preparations. "Where are we to dine? At the Duke's? Then we shall have nearly a mile to drive. Will not that do for you?" He was working hard while he spoke. There was a great oak post-box within reach, and another box for letters which were to be delivered by hand, and he was thrusting a handful of notes into each of these. Other packets he swept into different drawers of the table. Still standing, he stooped and signed his name to half a dozen letters, which he left open on the blotting-pad. "Atley will see to these when he is dressed," he murmured. "Would you oblige me by locking the drawers, my dear—it will save me a minute—and giving me the keys when I come down?"

He was off then, two or three papers in his hand, and almost ran upstairs. Lady Betty stood a moment on the spot on which he had left her, looking in an odd way, just as if it were new to her, round the grave, spacious room, with its somber Spanish-leather-covered furniture, its ponderous writing-tables and shelves of books, its three lofty curtained windows. When her eyes at last came back to the lamp, and dwelt on it, they were very bright, and her face was flushed. Her foot could be heard tapping on the carpet. Presently she remembered herself and fell to work, vehemently slamming such drawers as were open, and locking them.

The private secretary found her doing this when he came in. She muttered something—still stooping with her face over the drawers—and almost immediately went out. He looked after her, partly because there was something odd in her manner—she kept her face averted; and partly because she was wearing a new and striking gown, and he admired her; and he noticed, as she passed through the doorway, that she had some papers held down by her side. But, of course, he thought nothing of this.

He was hopelessly late for his own dinner-party, and only stayed a moment to slip the letters just signed into envelopes prepared for them. Then he made hastily for the door, opened it, and came into abrupt collision with Sir Horace, who was strolling in.

"Beg pardon!" said that gentleman, with irritating placidity. "Late for dinner?"

"Rather!" cried the secretary, trying to get round him.

"Well," drawled the other, "which is the hand-box, old fellow?"

"It has just been cleared. Here, give it me. The messengers is in the hall now."

And Atley snatched the letter from his companion, the two going out into the hall together. Marcus, the butler, a couple of tall footmen, and the messenger were sorting letters at the table. "Here, Marcus," said the secretary, pitching his letter on the slab, "let that go with the others. And is my hansom here?"

In another minute he was speeding one way, and the Staffords in their brougham another, while Sir Horace walked at his leisure down to his club. The Minister and his wife drove along in silence, for he forgot to ask her what she wanted; and, strange to say, Lady Betty forgot to tell him. At the party she made quite a sensation; never had she seemed more recklessly gay, more piquant, more audaciously witty, than she showed herself this evening. There were illustrious personages present, but they paled beside her. The Duke, with whom she was a great

## Lady Betty's Indiscretion

favorite, laughed at her sallies until he could laugh no more; and even her husband, her very husband, forgot for a time the country and the crisis, and listened, half-proud and half-afraid. But she was not aware of this; she could not see his face where she was sitting. To all seeming, she never looked that way. She was quite a model society wife.

Mr. Stafford himself was an early riser. It was his habit to be up by six; to make his own coffee over a spirit lamp, and then not only to get through much work in his dressing-room, but to take his daily ride also before breakfast. On the morning after the Duke's party, however, he lay later than usual; and as there was more business to be done—owing to the crisis—the canter in the Park had to be omitted. He was still among his papers—though momentarily awaiting the breakfast-gong, when a hansom cab driven at full speed stopped at the door. He glanced up wearily as he heard the doors of the cab flung open with a crash. There had been a time when the stir and bustle of such arrivals had been sweet to him—not so sweet as to some, for he had never been deeply in love with the parade of office—but sweeter than to-day, when they were no more to him than the creaking of the mill to the camel that turns it blindfold and in darkness.

Naturally he was thinking of Lord Pilgrimstone this morning, and guessed, before he opened the note which the servant brought in to him, who was its writer. But its contents had, nevertheless, an electrical effect upon him. His brow reddened. With a quite unusual display of emotion he sprang to his feet, crushing the fragment of paper in his fingers. "Who brought this?" he asked sharply. "Who brought it?" he repeated, before the servant could explain.

The man had never seen him so moved. "Mr. Scratchley, sir," he answered.

"Ha! Then, show him into the library," was the quick reply. And while the servant went to do his bidding, the Minister hastily changed his dressing-gown for a coat, and ran down a private staircase, reaching the room he had mentioned by one door as Mr. Scratchley, Lord Pilgrimstone's secretary, entered in through another.

By that time he had regained his composure, and looked much as usual. Still, when he held up the crumpled note, there was a brusqueness in the gesture which would have surprised his ordinary acquaintances, and did remind Mr. Scratchley of certain "warm nights" in the House. "You know the contents of this, Mr. Scratchley?" he said without prelude, and in a tone which matched his gesture.

The visitor bowed. He was a grave middle-aged man, who seemed oppressed and burdened by the load of cares and responsibilities which his smiling chief carried so jauntily. People said that he was the proper complement of Lord Pilgrimstone, as the more volatile Atley was of his leader.

"And you are aware," continued Mr. Stafford, still more harshly, "that Lord Pilgrimstone gives yesterday's agreement to the winds?"

"I have never seen his lordship so deeply moved," replied the discreet one.

"He says: 'Our former negotiation was ruined by premature talk, but this last disclosure can only be referred to treachery or gross carelessness.' What does this mean? I know of no disclosure, Mr. Scratchley. I must have an explanation, and you, I presume, are here to give me one."

For a moment the other seemed taken aback. "You have not seen the Times?" he murmured.

"This morning's? No. But it is here."

He snatched it, as he spoke, from a table at his elbow, and unfolded it. The secretary approached and pointed to the head of a column—the most conspicuous, the column most readily to be found in the paper. "They are crying

## Lady Betty's Indiscretion

it at every street corner I passed," he added apologetically. "There is nothing to be heard in St. James's Street and Pall Mall but 'Detailed Programme of the Coalition.' The other dailies are striking off second editions to contain it!"

Mr. Stafford's eyes were riveted to the paper, and there was a long pause, a pause on his part of dismay and consternation. He could scarcely—to repeat a common phrase—believe his eyes. "It seems," he muttered at length, "it seems fairly accurate—a tolerably precise account, indeed."

"It is a verbatim copy," said the secretary drily. "The question is, who furnished it. Lord Pilgrimstone, I am authorized to say, has not permitted his note of the agreement to pass out of his possession—even up to the present moment."

"And so he concludes," the Minister said thoughtfully—"it is a fair inference enough, perhaps—that the Times must have procured its information from my note?"

"No!" the secretary objected sharply and forcibly. "It is not a matter of inference, Mr. Stafford. I am directed to say that. I have inquired, early as it is, at the Times office, and learned that the copy printed came directly from the hands of your messenger."

"Of my messenger!" Mr. Stafford cried, thunderstruck. "You are sure of that?"

"I am sure that the sub-editor says so."

And again there was silence. "This must be looked into," said Mr. Stafford at length, controlling himself by an effort. "For the present, I agree with Lord Pilgrimstone, that it alters the position—and perhaps finally."

"Lord Pilgrimstone will be damaged in the eyes of a large section of his supporters—seriously damaged," said Mr. Scratchley, shaking his head, and frowning.

"Possibly. From every point of view the thing is to be deplored. But I will call on Lord Pilgrimstone," continued the Minister, "after lunch. Will you tell him so?"

A curious embarrassment showed itself in the secretary's manner. He twisted his hat in his hands, and looked suddenly sick and sad—as if he were about to join in the groan at a prayer-meeting. "Lord Pilgrimstone," he said, in a voice he vainly strove to render commonplace, "is going to Sandown Spring Meeting to-day."

The tone was really so lugubrious—to say nothing of a shake of the head with which he could not help accompanying the statement—that a faint smile played on Mr. Stafford's lip. "Then I must take the next possible opportunity. I will see him to-morrow."

Mr. Scratchley assented to that, and bowed himself out, after another word or two, looking more gloomy and careworn than usual. The interview had not been altogether to his mind. He wished now that he had spoken more roundly to Mr. Stafford; perhaps even asked for a categorical denial of the charge. But the Minister's manner had overawed him. He had found it impossible to put the question. And then the pitiful degrading confession he had had to make for Lord Pilgrimstone! That had put the coping-stone to his dissatisfaction.

"Oh!" sighed Mr. Scratchley, as he stepped into his cab. "Oh, that men so great should stoop to things so little!"

It did not occur to him that there is a condition of things even more sad: when little men meddle with great things.

## Lady Betty's Indiscretion

Meanwhile Mr. Stafford, left alone, stood at the window deep in unpleasant thoughts, from which the entrance of the butler sent to summon him to breakfast first aroused him. "Stay a moment, Marcus!" he said, turning with a sigh, as the man was leaving the room after doing his errand. "I want to ask you a question. Did you make up the messenger's bag last evening?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you notice a letter addressed to the Times office?"

The servant had prepared himself to cogitate. But he found it unnecessary. "Yes, sir," he replied smartly, "Two."

"Two?" repeated Mr. Stafford, dismay in his tone, though this was just what he had reason to expect.

"Yes, sir. There was one I took from the band-box, and one Mr. Atley gave me in the hall at the last moment," explained the butler.

"Ha! Thank you, Marcus. Then ask Mr. Atley if he will kindly come to me. No doubt he will be able to tell me what I want to know."

The words were commonplace, but the speaker's anxiety was so evident that Marcus when he delivered the message—which he did with all haste—added a word or two of warning. "It is about a letter to the Times, sir, I think. Mr. Stafford seemed a good deal put out," he said, confidentially.

"Indeed?" Atley replied. "I will go down." And he started at once. But before he reached the library he met someone. Lady Betty looked out of the breakfast-room, and saw him descending the stairs with the butler behind him.

"Where is Mr. Stafford, Marcus?" she asked impatiently, as she stood with her hand on the door. "Good morning, Mr. Atley," she added, her eyes descending to him. "Where is my husband? The coffee is getting quite cold."

"He has just sent to ask me to come to him," Atley answered. "Marcus tells me there is something in the Times which has annoyed him, Lady Betty; I will send him up as quickly as I can."

But Lady Betty had not stayed to receive this last assurance. She had drawn back and shut the door smartly; yet not so quickly but that the private secretary had seen her change color. "Umph!" he ejaculated to himself—the lady was not much given to blushing as a rule—"I wonder what is wrong with HER this morning. She is not generally rude to me."

It was not long before he got some light on the matter. "Come here, Atley," said his employer, the moment he entered the library. "Look at this!"

The secretary took the Times, folded back at the important column, and read the letter. Meanwhile the Minister read the secretary. He saw surprise and consternation on his face, but no trace of guilt. Then he told him what Marcus said about the two letters which had gone the previous evening from the house addressed to the Times office. "One," he said, "contained the notes of my speech. The other—"

"The other—" replied the secretary, thinking while he spoke, "was given to me at the last moment by Sir Horace. I threw it to Marcus in the hall."

"Ah!" said his chief, trying very hard to express nothing by the exclamation, but not quite succeeding. "Did you see that that letter was addressed to the editor of the Times?"



## Lady Betty's Indiscretion

The secretary reddened, and betrayed sudden confusion. "I did," he said hurriedly. "I saw so much of the address as I threw the letter on the slab—though I thought nothing of it at the time."

Mr. Stafford looked at him fixedly. "Come," he said, "this is a grave matter, Atley. You noticed, I can see, the handwriting. Was it Sir Horace's?"

"No," replied the secretary.

"Whose was it?"

"I think—I think, Mr. Stafford—that it was Lady Betty's. But I should be sorry, having seen it only for a moment—so say for certain."

"Lady Betty's?"

Mr. Stafford repeated the exclamation three times, in pure surprise, in anger, a third time in trembling. In this last stage he walked away to the window, and turning his back on his companion looked out. He recalled at once his wife's petulant exclamation of yesterday, the foolish desire expressed, as he had supposed in jest. Had she really been in earnest? And had she carried out her threat? Had she—his wife—done this thing so compromising to his honor, so mischievous to the country, so mad, reckless, wicked? Impossible. It was impossible. And yet—and yet Atley was a man to be trusted, a gentleman, his own relation! And Atley's eye was not likely to be deceived in a matter of handwriting. That Atley had made up his mind he could see.

The statesman turned from the window, and walked to and fro, his agitation betrayed by his step. The third time he passed in front of his secretary—who had riveted his eyes to the Times and appeared to be reading the money article—he stopped. "If this be true—mind I say if, Atley—" he cried, jerkily, "what was my wife's motive? I am in the dark, blindfolded! Help me! Tell me what has been passing round me that I have not seen. You would not have my wife—a spy?"

"No! no! no!" cried the other, as he dropped the paper, his vehemence and his working features showing that he felt the pathos of the appeal. "It is not that. Lady Betty is jealous, if I may venture to judge, of your devotion to politics. She sees little of you. You are wrapped up in public affairs and matters of state. She feels herself neglected and set aside. And she has been married no more than a year."

"But she has her society," objected the Minister, compelling himself to speak calmly, "and her cousin, and—and many other things."

"For which she does not care," returned the secretary.

It was a simple answer, but something in it touched a tender place. Mr. Stafford winced and cast a queer startled look at the speaker. Before he could reply, however—if he intended to reply—a knock came at the door and Marcus put in his head. "My lady is waiting breakfast, sir," he suggested timidly. What could a poor butler do between an impatient mistress and an obdurate master?

"I will come," said Mr. Stafford hastily. "I will come at once. For this matter, Atley," he continued when the door was closed again, "let it rest for the present where it is. I am aware I can depend upon your—" he paused, seeking a word—"your discretion. One thing is certain, however. There is an end of the arrangement made yesterday. Probably the Queen will send for Templeton. I shall see Lord Pilgrimstone tomorrow, but probably that will be the end of it."

## Lady Betty's Indiscretion

Atley went away marveling at his coolness, trying to retrace the short steps of their conversation, and so to discern how far the Minister had gone with him, and where he had turned off upon a resolution of his own. He failed to see the clue, however, and marveled still more as the day went on and others succeeded it, days of political crisis. Out of doors the world, or that little jot of it which has its center at Westminster, was in confusion. The newspapers, morning or evening, found ready sale, and had no need of recourse to murder-panics, or prurient discussions. The Coalition scandal, the resignation of Ministers, the sending for Lord This and Mr. That, the certainty of a dissolution, provided matter enough. In all this Atley found nothing to wonder at. He had seen it all before. That which did cause him surprise was the calm—the unnatural calm as it seemed to him—which prevailed in the house in Carlton Terrace. For a day or two, indeed, there was much going to and fro, much closeting and button-holing; for rather longer the secretary read anxiety and apprehension in one countenance—Lady Betty's. But things settled down. The knocker presently found peace, such comparative peace as falls to knockers in Carlton Terrace. Lady Betty's brow grew clear as her eye found no reflection of its anxiety in Mr. Stafford's face. In a word the secretary failed to discern the faintest sign of domestic trouble.

The late Minister, indeed, was taking things with wonderful coolness. Lord Pilgrimstone had failed to taunt him, and the triumph of old foes had failed to goad him into a last effort. Apparently it had occurred to him that the country might for a time exist without him. He was standing aside with a shade on his face, and there were rumors that he would take a long holiday.

A week saw all these things happen. And then, one day as Atley sat writing in the library—Mr. Stafford being out—Lady Betty came into the room for something. Rising to find her what she wanted, he was holding the door open for her to pass out, when she paused.

"Shut the door, Mr. Atley," she said, pointing to it. "I want to ask you a question."

"Pray do, Lady Betty," he answered.

"It is this," she said, meeting his eyes boldly—and a brighter, a more dainty little creature than she looked then had seldom tempted man. "Mr. Stafford's resignation—had it anything, Mr. Atley, to do with—" her face colored a very little—"something that was in the Times this day week?"

His own cheek colored violently enough. "If ever," he was saying to himself, "I meddle or mar between husband and wife again, may I—" But aloud he answered quietly, "Something perhaps." The question was sudden. Her eyes were on his face. He found it impossible to prevaricate.

"My husband has never spoken to me about it," she replied, breathing quickly.

He bowed, having no words adapted to the situation. But he repeated his resolution (as above) more furiously.

"He has never appeared even aware of it," she persisted. "Are you sure that he saw it?"

He wondered at her innocence or her audacity. That such a baby should do so much mischief. The thought irritated him. "It was impossible that he should not see it, Lady Betty," he said, with a touch of asperity. "Quite impossible!"

"Ah," she replied with a faint sigh. "Well, he has never spoken to me about it. And you think it had really something to do with his resignation, Mr. Atley?"

"Most certainly," he said. He was not inclined to spare her this time.

She nodded thoughtfully, and then with a quiet "Thank you," went out.

## Lady Betty's Indiscretion

"Well," muttered the secretary to himself when the door was fairly shut behind her, "she is—upon my word she is a fool! And he"—appealing to the inkstand—"he has never said a word to her about it. He is a new Don Quixote! a second Job, new Sir Isaac Newton! I do not know what to call him."

It was Sir Horace, however, who precipitated the catastrophe. He happened to come in about tea-time that afternoon, before, in fact, my lady had had an opportunity of seeing her husband. He found her alone and in a brown study, a thing most unusual with her and portending something. He watched her for a time in silence, seemed to draw courage from a still longer inspection of his boots, and then said, "So the cart is clean over, Betty?"

She nodded.

"Driver much hurt?"

"Do you mean, does Stafford mind it?" she replied impatiently.

He nodded.

"Well, I do not know. It is hard to say."

"Think so?" he persisted.

"Good gracious, Horry!" my lady retorted, losing patience. "I say I do not know, and you say 'Think so!' If you want to learn so particularly, ask him yourself. Here he is!"

Mr. Stafford had just entered the room. Perhaps she really wished to satisfy herself as to the state of his feelings. Perhaps she only desired in her irritation to put her cousin in a corner. At any rate she coolly turned to her husband and said, "Here is Horace wishing to know if you mind being turned out much?"

Mr. Stafford's face flushed a little at the home-thrust which no one else would have dared to deal him. But he showed no displeasure. "Well, not so much as I should have thought," he answered frankly, pausing to weigh a lump of sugar, and, as it seemed, his feelings. "There are compensations, you know."

"Pity all the same those terms came out," grunted Sir Horace.

"It was."

"Stafford!" Lady Betty struck in on a sudden, speaking fast and eagerly, "is it true, I want to ask you, it is true that that led you to resign?"