

## Dumb Feast

Aaron Brubaker considered himself a rational man, a logical man, a modern man of the enlightened nineteenth century. He was a prosperous lawyer in the City, he had a new house in the suburbs, and he cultivated other men like himself, including a few friends in Parliament. He believed in the modern; he had gas laid on in his house, had indoor bathrooms with the best flushing toilets (not that a polite man would discuss such things in polite company), and had a library filled with the writings of the best minds of his time. Superstition and old wives' tales had no place in his cosmos. So what he was about to do was all the more extraordinary.

If his friends could see him, he would have died of shame. And yet—and yet he would have gone right on with his plans.

Nevertheless, he had made certain that there was no chance he might be seen; the servants had been dismissed after dinner, and would not return until tomorrow after church services. They were grateful for the half-day off, to spend Christmas Eve and morning with their own families, and as a consequence had not questioned their employer's generosity. Aaron's daughter, Rebecca, was at a properly chaperoned party for young people which would end in midnight services at the Presbyterian Church, and she would not return home until well after one in the morning. And by then, Aaron's work would be done, whether it bore fruit, or not.

The oak-paneled dining room with its ornately carved table and chairs was strangely silent, without the sounds of servants or conversation. And he had not lit the gaslights of which he was so proud; there must only be two candles tonight to light the proceedings, one for him, one for Elizabeth. Carefully, he laid out the plates, the silver; arranged Elizabeth's favorite winter flowers in the centerpiece. One setting for himself, one for his wife. His dear, and very dead, wife.

His marriage had not precisely been an arranged affair, but it had been made in accordance with Aaron's nature. He had met Elizabeth in church; had approved of what he saw. He had courted her, in proper fashion; gained consent of her parents, and married her. He had seen to it that she made the proper friends for his position; had joined the appropriate societies, supported the correct charities. She had cared for his home, entertained his friends in the expected manner, and produced his child. In that, she had been something of a disappointment, since it should have been "children," including at least one son. There was only Rebecca, a daughter rather than a son, but he had forgiven her for her inability to do better. Romance did not precisely enter into the equation. He had expected to feel a certain amount of modest grief when Elizabeth died—

But not the depth of loss he had uncovered. He had mourned unceasingly, confounding himself as well as his friends. There simply was no way of replacing her, the little things she did. There had been an artistry about the house that was gone now; a life that was no longer there. His house was a home no longer, and his life a barren, empty thing.

In the months since her death, the need to see her again became an obsession. Visits to the cemetery were not satisfactory, and his desultory attempt to interest himself in the young widows of the parish came to nothing. And that was when the old tales from his childhood, and the stories his grandmother told, came back to—literally—haunt him.

He surveyed the table; everything was precisely in place, just as it had been

when he and Elizabeth dined alone together. The two candles flickered in a draft; they were in no way as satisfactory as the gaslights, but his grandmother, and the old lady he had consulted from the Spiritualist Society, had been adamant about that—there must be two candles, and only two. No gaslights, no candelabra.

From a chafing dish on the sideboard he took the first course: Elizabeth's favorite soup. Tomato. A pedestrian dish, almost lower-class, and not the clear consommés or lobster bisques that one would serve to impress—but he was not impressing anyone tonight. These must be Elizabeth's favorites, and not his own choices. A row of chafing dishes held his choices ready: tomato soup, spinach salad, green peas, mashed potatoes, fried chicken, apple cobbler. No wine, only coffee. All depressingly middle-class . . .

That was not the point. The point was that they were the bait that would bring Elizabeth back to him, for an hour, at least.

He tossed the packet of herbs and what-not on the fire, a packet that the old woman from the Spiritualists had given him for just that purpose. He was not certain what was in it; only that she had asked for some of Elizabeth's hair. He'd had to abstract it from the lock Rebecca kept, along with the picture of her mother, in a little shrine-like arrangement on her dresser. When Rebecca had first created it, he had been tempted to order her to put it all away, for the display seemed very pagan. Now, however, he thought he understood her motivations.

This little drama he was creating was something that his grandmother—who had been born in Devonshire—called a "dumb feast." By creating a setting in which all of the deceased's favorite foods and drink were presented, and a place laid for her—by the burning of certain substances—and by doing all this at a certain time of the year—the spirit of the loved one could be lured back for an hour or two.

The times this might be accomplished were four. May Eve, Midsummer, Halloween, and Christmas Eve.

By the time his need for Elizabeth had become an obsession, the Spring Equinox and Midsummer had already passed. Halloween seemed far too pagan for Aaron's taste—and besides, he had not yet screwed his courage up to the point where he was willing to deal with his own embarrassment that he was resorting to such humbug.

What did all four of these nights have in common? According to the Spiritualist woman, it was that they were nights when the "vibrations of the earth-plane were in harmony with the Higher Planes." According to his grandmother, those were the nights when the boundary between the spirit world and this world thinned, and many kinds of creatures, both good and evil, could manifest. According to her, that was why Jesus had been born on that night—

Well, that was superstitious drivel. But the Spiritualist had an explanation that made sense at the time; something about vibrations and currents, magnetic attractions. Setting up the meal, with himself, and all of Elizabeth's favorite things, was supposed to set up a magnetic attraction between him and her. The packet she had given him to burn was supposed to increase that magnetic attraction, and set up an electrical current that would strengthen the spirit. Then, because of the alignment of the planets on this evening, the two Planes came into close contact, or conjunction, or—something.

It didn't matter. All that mattered was that he see Elizabeth again. It had become a hunger that nothing else could satisfy. No one he knew could ever

understand such a hunger, such an overpowering desire.

The hunger carried him through the otherwise unpalatable meal, a meal he had timed carefully to end at the stroke of midnight, a meal that must be carried out in absolute silence. There must be no conversation, no clinking of silverware. Then, at midnight, it must end. There again, both the Spiritualist and his grandmother had agreed. The "dumb feast" should end at midnight, and then the spirit would appear.

He spooned up the last bite of too-sweet, sticky cobbler just as the bells from every church in town rang out, calling the faithful to Christmas services. Perhaps he would have taken time to feel gratitude for the Nickleson's party, and the fact that Rebecca was well out of the way—

Except that, as the last bell ceased to peal, she appeared. There was no fanfare, no clamoring chorus of ectoplasmic trumpets—one moment there was no one in the room except himself, and the next, Elizabeth sat across from him in her accustomed chair. She looked exactly as she had when they had laid her to rest; every auburn hair in place in a neat and modest French Braid, her body swathed from chin to toe in an exquisite lace gown.

A wild exultation filled his heart. He leapt to his feet, words of welcome on his lips—

Tried to, rather. But he found himself bound to his chair, his voice, his lips paralyzed, unable to move or to speak.

The same paralysis did not hold Elizabeth, however. She smiled, but not the smile he loved, the polite, welcoming smile—no, it was another smile altogether, one he did not recognize, and did not understand.

"So, Aaron," she said, her voice no more than a whisper.

"At last our positions are reversed. You, silent and submissive; and myself the master of the table."

He almost did not understand the words, so bizarre were they. Was this Elizabeth, his dear wife? Had he somehow conjured a vindictive demon in her place?

She seemed to read his thoughts, and laughed. Wildly, he thought. She reached behind her neck and let down her hair; brushed her hand over her gown and it turned to some kind of medievalist costume, such as the artists wore. The ones calling themselves "Pre-Raphaelites," or some such idiocy. He gaped to see her attired so, or would have, if he had been in control of his body.

"I am no demon, Aaron," she replied, narrowing her green eyes. "I am still Elizabeth. But I am no longer 'your' Elizabeth, you see. Death freed me from you, from the narrow constraints you placed on me. If I had known this was what would happen, I would have died years ago!"

He stared, his mind reeled. What did she mean? How could she say those things?

"Easily, Aaron," Elizabeth replied, reclining a little in the chair, one elbow on the armrest, hand supporting her chin. "I can say them very, very easily. Or don't you remember all those broken promises?"

Broken—

"Broken promises, Aaron," she continued, her tone even, but filled with bitterness. "They began when you courted me. You promised me that you did not want me to change—yet the moment the ring was on my finger, you broke that promise, and began forcing me into the mold you chose. You promised me that I could continue my art—but you gave me no place to work, no money for materials, and no time to paint or draw."

But that was simply a childish fancy—

"It was my life, Aaron!" she cried passionately. "It was my life, and you took it from me! And I believed all those promises, that in a year you would give me time and space—after the child was born—after she began school. I believed it right up until the moment when the promise was 'after she finishes school.' Then I knew that it would become 'after she is married,' and then there would be some other, distant time—" Again she laughed, a wild peal of laughter than held no humor at all. "Cakes yesterday, cakes tomorrow, but never cakes today! Did you think I would never see through that?"

But why did she have to paint? Why could she not have turned her artistic sensibilities to proper lady's—

"What? Embroidery? Knitting? Lace-making? I was a painter, Aaron, and I was a good one! Burne-Jones himself said so! Do you know how rare that is, that someone would tell a girl that she must paint, must be an artist?" She tossed her head, and her wild mane of red hair—now as bright as it had been when he had first met her—flew over her shoulder in a tumbled tangle. And now he remembered where he had seen that dress before. She had been wearing it as she painted, for she had been—

"Painting a self-portrait of myself as the Lady of Shallot," she said, with an expression that he could not read. "Both you and my father conspired together to break me of my nasty artistic habits. 'Take me out of my dream-world,' I believe he said. Oh, I can hear you both—" her voice took on a pompous tone, and it took him a moment to realize that she was imitating him, " 'don't worry, sir, once she has a child she'll have no time for that nonsense—' And you saw to it that I had no time for it, didn't you? Scheduling ladies' teas and endless dinner parties, with women who bored me to death and men who wouldn't know a Rembrandt from an El Greco! Enrolling me without my knowledge or consent in group after group of other useless women, doing utterly useless things! And when I wanted to do something—anything!—that might serve a useful purpose, you forbade it! Forbade me to work with the Salvation Army, forbade me to help with the Wayward Girls—oh no, your wife couldn't do that, it wasn't suitable! Do you know how much I came to hate that word, 'suitable'? Almost as much as the words 'my good wife.' "

But I gave you everything—

"You gave me nothing!" she cried, rising now to her feet. "You gave me jewelry, gowns ordered by you to your specifications, furniture, useless trinkets! You gave me nothing that mattered! No freedom, no authority, no responsibility!"

Authority? He flushed with guilt when he recalled how he had forbidden the servants to obey her orders without first asking him—how he had ordered her maid to report any out-of-the-ordinary thing she might do. How he had given the cook the monthly budget money, so that she could not buy a cheaper cut of roast and use the savings to buy paint and brushes.

"Did you think I didn't know?" she snarled, her eyes ablaze with anger as she leaned over the table. "Did you think I wasn't aware that I was a prisoner in

my own home? And the law supported you, Aaron! I was well aware of that, thanks to the little amount of work I did before you forbade it on the grounds of `suitability.' One woman told me I should be grateful that you didn't beat me, for the law permits that as well!"

He was only doing it for her own good. . . .

"You were only doing it to be the master, Aaron," she spat. "What I wanted did not matter. You proved that by your lovemaking, such as it was."

Now he flushed so fiercely that he felt as if he had just stuck his head in a fire. How could she be so-

"Indelicate? Oh I was more than indelicate, Aaron, I was passionate! And you killed that passion, just as you broke my spirit, with your cruelty, your indifference to me. What should have been joyful was shameful, and you made it that way. You hurt me, constantly, and never once apologized. Sometimes I wondered if you made me wear those damned gowns just to hide the bruises from the world!"

All at once, her fury ran out, and she sagged back down into her chair. She pulled the hair back from her temples with both hands, and gathered it in a thick bunch behind her head for a moment. Aaron was still flushing from the last onslaught. He hadn't known-

"You didn't care," she said, bluntly. "You knew; you knew it every time you saw my face fall when you broke another promise, every time you forbade me to dispose my leisure time where it would do some good. You knew. But all of that, I could have forgiven, if you had simply let Rebecca alone."

This time, indignation overcame every other feeling. How could she say something like that? When he had given the child everything a girl could want?

"Because you gave her nothing that she wanted, Aaron. You never forgave her for not being a boy. Every time she brought something to you—a good grade, a school prize, a picture she had done—you belittled her instead of giving her the praise her soul thirsted for!" Elizabeth's eyes darkened, and the expression on her face was positively demonic.

"Nothing she did was good enough—or was as good as a boy would have done."

But children needed correction-

"Children need direction. But that wasn't all, oh no. You played the same trick on her that you did on me. She wanted a pony, and riding lessons. But that wasn't suitable; she got a piano and piano lessons. Then, when her teacher told you she had real talent, and could become a concert artist, you took both away, and substituted French lessons!" Again, she stood up, her magnificent hair flowing free, looking like some kind of ancient Celtic goddess from one of her old paintings, paintings that had been filled with such pagan images that he had been proud to have weaned her away from art and back to the path of a true Christian woman. She stood over him with the firelight gleaming on her face, and her lips twisted with disgust. "You still don't see, do you? Or rather, you are so sure, so certain that you could know better than any foolish woman what is best for her, that you still think you were right in crushing my soul, and trying to do the same to my daughter!"

He expected her to launch into another diatribe, but instead, she smiled. And for some reason, that smile sent cold chills down his back.

"You didn't even guess that all this was my idea, did you?" she asked, silkily. "You had no idea that I had been touching your mind, prodding you toward this moment. You forgot what your grandmother told you, because I made you forget—that the dumb feast puts the living in the power of the dead."

She moved around the end of the table, and stood beside him. He would have shrunk away from her if he could have—but he still could not move a single muscle. "There is a gas leak in this room, Aaron," she said, in the sweet, conversational tone he remembered so well. "You never could smell it, because you have no sense of smell. What those awful cigars of yours didn't ruin, the port you drank after dinner killed. I must have told you about the leak a hundred times, but you never listened. I was only a woman, how could I know about such things?"

But why hadn't someone else noticed it?

"It was right at the lamp, so it never mattered as long as you kept the gaslights lit; since you wouldn't believe me and I didn't want the house to explode, I kept them lit day and night, all winter long. Remember? I told you I was afraid of the dark, and you laughed, and permitted me my little indulgence. And of course, in the summer, the windows were open. But you turned the lights off for this dumb feast, didn't you, Aaron. You sealed the room, just as the old woman told you. And the room has been filling with gas, slowly, all night."

Was she joking? No, one look into her eyes convinced him that she was not. Frantic now, he tried to break the hold she had over his body, and found that he still could not move.

"In a few minutes, there will be enough gas in this room for the candles to set it off—or perhaps the chafing dish—or even the fire. There will be a terrible explosion. And Rebecca will be free—free to follow her dream and become a concert pianist. Oh, Aaron, I managed to thwart you in that much. The French teacher and the piano teacher are very dear friends. The lessons continued, even though you tried to stop them. And you never guessed." She looked up, as if at an unseen signal, and smiled. And now he smelled the gas.

"It will be a terrible tragedy—but I expect Rebecca will get over her grief in a remarkably short time. The young are so resilient." The smell of gas was stronger now.

She wiggled her fingers at him, like a child. "Goodbye, Aaron," she said, cheerfully. "Merry Christmas. See you soon—"