

Where Sweets Compacted Lie

Harriet Bell was most astonished when her husband Arthur begged her very sweetly for the sole use of the kitchen for an hour or two. It was not at all like Arthur to ask her politely for anything, and even less like him to make any attempt to cook. But she acceded to his request with a smile, and then, once he was out of both sight and earshot, rang for the maid to let her know that there might be a little extra clearing up to do once the master had finished doing... whatever exactly it was he was doing in there.

In the meantime, she settled down with a pile of mending. After a while, this mundane occupation was interrupted by the baker's boy, who was late today; he habitually did his rounds on a bicycle, and he explained, apologetically, that he had just had a minor accident. Something, possibly a wasp, had caused a cab driver's horse to shy, and it had backed into him, knocking him off the bicycle. "But your bread's all right, honest, Mrs Bell," he assured her earnestly.

"If the bread had got dirty I could cut the crust off," she replied. "It's much more important that *you* are all right."

He gave her a gap-toothed grin. "Just a few bruises, and they'll heal!"

"Good. Well, I had better not keep you; you're already late, and if you don't finish your round in something like good time, you won't be able to get to the football match this afternoon."

"Oh, they're playing away this week, so it don't matter," he replied. "All serene. See you later!"

Harriet returned to the pile of mending. Ah... there was one of Arthur's socks to darn; she had better do that now, while the light was at its best. He was very fussy about darns, even when they were not visible, as was the case here. She was still working on it when he emerged from the kitchen, beaming seraphically and carrying a gift box tied with an elaborate ribbon bow.

"For you, my darling!" he announced.

Harriet was truly astounded. He had not called her by any term of endearment for... well, she was not sure now, but it must be at least a year; and, as for gifts, he had given her a box of pins for Christmas and a fish slice for her last birthday, and he had not previously been inclined to give her anything else in between. She stood up.

"Why, thank you very much," she said, with a smile.

He solemnly handed her the box. "I have had a terrible realisation, my dear," he explained. "I have not been treating you as I should. In short, I have neglected you; and, though your gentle and kindly nature would not permit you to complain, be assured that others have noticed."

Ah, thought Harriet. That, if I'm not mistaken, will have been the vicar. A most perceptive gentleman, and one who has never been afraid to call a sinner to repentance.

"May I open it now?" she asked.

"Of course!" said Arthur, expansively. "Please accept it as the first earnest of my desire to do better in future."

"Well, I am greatly moved," said Harriet, and opened the box.

It contained peppermint creams. Arthur had, very obviously, just made them himself. Harriet truly appreciated the thought and the effort involved.

"Oh, how lovely!" she exclaimed. "Thank you very much. I am not quite in the mood for anything sweet just at the moment, but I shall certainly have one later." And, she reflected, hide it somewhere. She would not for the world discourage Arthur in his new-found penitence; nonetheless, there was the small fact that she hated peppermint.

"Of course, of course. You must tell me what you think of them. They are not too difficult to make even for a bumbling novice such as myself; but I am not quite certain I used enough oil of peppermint."

Harriet kept a small stash of paper bags in the kitchen, retrieved from various purchases and carefully flattened again for future use. They were useful for wrapping food in the larder to keep the flies away from it. They would have been no good against rodents, of course, but the Bells had no problem with those, since they had a cat with a taste for them. So, at the first discreet opportunity, she went and got herself a couple of the paper bags and concealed them about her person; then, a little later, when Arthur was out of the room, she took three of the peppermint creams, put them into one of the bags, and stowed it away temporarily in her sewing box. She could retrieve it once he was out of the house.

"I couldn't resist, my dear," she said merrily, as he re-entered the room. "I've tried the peppermint creams. There is definitely enough peppermint; you need have no concerns about that! Will you not have one or two yourself?"

He smiled. "I think not; you are so willowy that you can eat as many as you wish, but I, alas, am not. I would rather not grow too stout."

“I think you are worrying too much; but as you wish,” replied Harriet. “By the by, do they say it will rain tomorrow morning? I am not sure whether or not to wear my new hat to church.”

“They say it may,” Arthur replied. “The weather must surely break soon. It is quite oppressive.”

“Then I shall take no chances with the hat. But a good thunderstorm would be capital! I am quite tired of watering the rhododendrons.”

Nonetheless, the next morning dawned bright and sunny, and by the time the Bells set out for church it was already very hot. On their way in they met with Miss Fanshawe, who had very nearly married Arthur’s brother Sidney. Fortunately Sidney’s arrest and imprisonment for fraud and extortion had taken place before, rather than after, the wedding; the rest of the family, including Arthur, had washed their hands of Sidney on the spot, but by that time Miss Fanshawe had become very friendly with Harriet, and that friendship had survived the cataclysm. The wedding, needless to say, had not.

Arthur bowed. “Why, Miss Fanshawe, what a charming gown! New, I think? It is most becoming.”

“Thank you, Mr Bell. Yes, indeed, it is new. Mrs Bell, I must introduce you to my new dressmaker; she has a wonderful touch.”

Harriet smiled. “So I see. That is indeed a lovely gown. But I thought you were quite happy with your previous one?”

“Oh, I was, my dear, but she retired, quite unexpectedly,” replied Miss Fanshawe. “She can be no more than perhaps forty-five, but her health is failing her. It is very sad. Her daughter is carrying on the business, but I have never quite seen eye to eye with her. She can be a little... *forceful*... about recommending suitable styles.”

“She is young, and no doubt she will learn,” said Harriet equably. “Nonetheless I am glad you have found someone better. Come, let us go inside and sit down; it will be cooler.”

“Oh, there is Mr Horton,” said Arthur. “Please excuse me one moment. I must have a little word with him.”

The two ladies went and sat down together. “Oh, Miss Fanshawe,” said Harriet, “you will never guess what has happened! I do believe Arthur has been talking to the vicar. Yesterday he came to me and confessed that he had been neglecting me, and so he gave me a huge box of home-made peppermint creams and a solemn promise to do better in future.”

“Why, that is wonderful!” Miss Fanshawe exclaimed. “I will admit I have noticed he has been a little cavalier with you in the past, but of course one does not like to say anything. I am so glad he has come to that realisation himself.”

Harriet smiled. “So am I; but I shall need you to keep a little secret for me, if you can.”

“Of course I can,” said Miss Fanshawe. “You are almost my sister, after all.”

“Well. I strongly dislike peppermint; but, of course, I could not possibly tell Arthur that. I wish to give him all the encouragement I can. So I am hiding them, a few at a time, and I shall have to think of something to do with them, because I cannot bear to waste good food.”

“Well, they are mostly just icing sugar and peppermint,” mused Miss Fanshawe. “So you could make icing of them. If you added chocolate, and perhaps some butter, since buttercream would be less obvious than water icing, you could put it on a cake.”

“Oh, what a splendid idea! Thank you,” said Harriet. “Icing it is. But I think biscuits, for Arthur is more likely to eat those. If you offer him a slice of cake, he may turn it down with the plea that he must watch his figure, but he sees a biscuit as nothing much. He regularly has one with his tea.”

Miss Fanshawe chuckled. “If he is worrying about growing stout, I see no difference between cake and biscuits; but I am sure it is all in his mind. Oh, but he is coming back! I shall make some trivial remark about the weather.”

During the course of the following week, the peppermint creams were gradually transferred from the gift box with the ribbon to the paper bags at the bottom of Harriet’s sewing box. Arthur was as good as his word, treating Harriet with a solicitous care and attention which had, up to that point, been very much lacking; on the Wednesday evening he even came home with a bunch of flowers. Harriet enthused over them greatly, and took much pleasure in arranging them in a vase to their best advantage. During this process, she noticed out of the corner of her eye that Arthur was gazing at her with a very puzzled expression, and she wondered very much what could be behind that. Had she forgotten something obvious? But no, all the flowers were in the vase; none of them had been left behind in the wrapping paper.

She stood back to admire her handiwork. “You should rest now, my love,” said Arthur gently. “You don’t want to tire yourself out.”

Harriet laughed. “Why, I’m only thirty-four! Things would be at a pretty pass if arranging a vase of flowers were to tire me out.”

“Oh, but you’ve been working all day,” he pointed out.

“I have, but most of it has been sitting in my chair,” she replied. “I’ve been sewing. I am starting to wonder if we should get a machine; I hear they are very quick, though the seams are not quite as strong as hand-stitching.”

“I shall look into it for you,” Arthur promised.

“Thank you, darling. Of course it may not turn out to be worth the money, but we don’t know one way or the other until we investigate, do we?”

“No, indeed,” he replied, earnestly.

“I shall just go and serve dinner,” said Harriet cheerfully. “No great effort there; it’s a stew, so it has just been sitting on the hob on the lowest possible heat for a few hours. It’s very sweet of you to be so concerned about my energy, but you need not worry. I do have plenty.”

“Then that is all to the good,” replied Arthur.

By Friday lunchtime, the last of the peppermint creams had been squirrelled away into the sewing box, and Harriet was ready for action. First she made a large batch of chocolate biscuits, and then, while they were cooling, she went and retrieved the sweets and transferred them to a large mixing bowl with a little water and some cocoa powder. If Arthur, with his sudden new and inexplicable concern about how easily she might over-tire herself, had seen her, he would no doubt have been horrified to see how energetically she pounded everything together with the end of the rolling pin; and she did not stop there, for once it was fully workable she added some butter (which, at least, was very soft, since it was still hot) and continued to pound until the butter had worked in enough for the use of a wooden spoon to be practicable. This done, she iced the biscuits and put them in the larder in the hope that they might set in there. That thunderstorm was by now very much overdue.

Sadly for Arthur, it arrived just as he set foot outside the office, and by the time he came in through the front door he was soaking wet. “Oh, my poor darling!” exclaimed Harriet. “Let me get you some towels, and I’ll send the maid to find you a change of clothes. And once you’re dry, I’ve made something that I think may cheer you up.”

He sighed. “At least it will do the garden good,” he observed.

“It could have done the garden good with you safely inside. I’ll be back as fast as I can.” She hurried upstairs, returning with an armful of towels. “Oh! I feel a little dizzy. I think I ran too fast. You dry yourself off. I’m just going to sit down for a moment.”

“Perhaps you should go to bed?” Arthur suggested.

“Oh, nonsense, darling! I’m just not used to running. I’ll be fine in a minute.” She went and sat down in the parlour while he applied the towels; a few moments later, feeling better again, she rang for the maid and asked her to go and find some clean clothes for the master.

“And when he’s changed, please take away the wet clothes and either hang them up somewhere to dry or wash them straight away, if they need it, but don’t leave them lying around wet,” she instructed. “Otherwise they’ll shrink, and I’m afraid my poor husband is already worried he is growing stout.”

“Yes’m,” said the maid, with a little smile.

A little later, Arthur, suitably dried off and re-clad, walked into the parlour and asked Harriet if she was feeling all right now.

“Oh! I’d almost forgotten about that already,” she said. “Yes, thank you, darling, I’m fine. And I have a little surprise for you. I was going to save it till after dinner, but I think after the soaking you’ve had I should let you have at least one now.” She indicated the tin of biscuits, which she had brought through and put on the table. “Chocolate biscuits, my love. And I put some peppermint in the icing, just as a change.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Arthur. “Why, how very thoughtful of you! I love peppermint.” He took the lid off the tin, helped himself to a biscuit, and ate it with gusto. “Oh, my love, you are truly inspired! I have never eaten such a delicious biscuit.”

Harriet beamed. “I’m so glad you enjoy them! But not too many now, or you’ll have no room for your dinner.”

“Wise advice, but I shall certainly have another one afterwards,” replied Arthur, with a smile. “Or two.”

In fact he had three, since dinner was quite a light meal that evening. It was not very long after this that the doorbell rang, and Arthur pushed the tin of biscuits into Harriet’s hands.

“Please go and put this in the kitchen, darling,” he said. “I know it’s very selfish of me, but these are so good I really don’t want to share them with any visitors.”

“Oh, but I can always make more,” Harriet protested.

“No, bring out the gingerbread; it’s still very nice, and we shall still be being quite hospitable,” he insisted.

“Very well,” replied Harriet, and did so.

The maid showed the vicar into the parlour; he greeted both Arthur and Harriet cordially, but then said that, if Harriet was agreeable, he had come to have a private word with Arthur. Harriet was quite agreeable and said so. “In any case,” she said, “I have some letters to write, and that is best done at the dining-room table.”

The vicar stayed for nearly two hours, during which Harriet was able to catch up on all of her correspondence. After he finally left, she returned to the parlour to find Arthur in a foul mood, and not at all forthcoming about the reason, except that he was complaining of a stomach ache. Clearly that was not all it was, but Harriet knew better than to press him on the subject.

“You had better take some bismuth and go to bed,” she said. “In fact, I think I shall have an early night myself.”

Arthur frowned. “I don’t feel like going to bed just yet.”

“Then come whenever you’re ready,” she replied. “If the stomach ache isn’t too bad, then walking around may help; but in any case, the sooner you go and take something for it, the better you will be.”

He sighed. “Yes, I’ll go and find the bismuth. Most odd. It’s not at all like me to get a stomach ache. I’m probably wound up.”

“Well, goodnight, darling, and I hope you feel better very soon,” said Harriet.

She tried to keep herself awake for a while in the hope that he would be upstairs soon; but sleep got the better of her before too long, and she eventually awoke just before seven. She woke, in fact, so abruptly that she realised something must have woken her, though she was not sure exactly what.

Arthur was not in the bed. That was strange. Had he stayed up all night, or just felt so ill that he had curled up on the sofa and fallen asleep where he was? She got out of bed and put on her dressing gown, determined to go and check on him before she did anything else.

There was a noise. Someone was running up the stairs very fast, and the tread was far too light to be Arthur’s. It must be the maid. Within seconds there was a hammering on the door. Harriet opened it to see the maid looking as white as a sheet and almost in tears.

“Oh, please come quick!” she wailed. “It’s the master.”

“Why, what’s the matter with him?” asked Harriet, immediately all concern. “Do we need to send for the doctor?”

“Oh, no’m, not the doctor. The undertaker!”

Harriet instantly went as white as the poor maid. “What?!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry! I shouldn’t have just been and blurted it out like that without thinking, but I’ve just found him and I’m in such a taking I can’t think.”

Harriet drew several deep breaths in an effort to calm herself; if she did not, she had no hope of calming the maid. What did you do when someone died unexpectedly? Oh... you called the police. That was it.

“Do you have to walk past him to leave the house?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Yes’m, he’s in the kitchen,” replied the maid, and sniffed.

“Then you don’t if you use the front door,” said Harriet gently. “And I am giving you permission to do that. Leave the house by the front door, go and fetch a police officer, and come back. Don’t go in the kitchen again unless the police officer insists that you do.”

“Yes’m,” said the maid.

“Very well. I am going to get dressed and then investigate for myself. Oh, and if you could send for the vicar as well, that would be helpful.”

“Yes’m.”

“I know you’re very shocked, but please don’t just stand there saying ‘yes’m’. Please go and get the police and the vicar. Now.”

The maid hurried off downstairs without further ado, and Harriet, still reeling, dressed mechanically and then walked slowly down to the kitchen. She was going to have to face it sooner or later, she told herself, and it had probably better be sooner.

She should, she realised, have also asked the maid to get the undertaker. Maybe the police would do that if she asked them nicely.

For some reason, she had expected to find Arthur sitting slumped over the kitchen table; but he was not. He was prone on the floor, and he had vomited quite copiously. The bottle of bismuth was standing on the work surface next to the sink,

and the biscuit tin was on the table where she had put it the previous night, with the lid off.

It was empty.

Horrified, she retreated into the parlour and sat down with her head in her hands. Unable to process the full enormity of the situation, she took refuge in smaller, more digestible thoughts, such as the impossibility (in all charity) of asking the poor maid to clean up in the kitchen. She would either have to get someone else in after the body had been removed, or do it herself. And... how on earth could Arthur have eaten *all* the biscuits? Especially if he was worried about his figure and he already had a stomach ache? And...

It seemed an age before the maid came back with a policeman, who questioned both of them in some detail and kept referring to the unfortunate Arthur as “the deceased”, which was strictly accurate but not helpful. The maid, of course, knew very little, other than that she had let herself in and almost fallen over the body; she said she had screamed, and Harriet realised it must have been this that woke her up. Harriet herself, however, recounted the whole story of the vicar’s mysterious visit the night before, Arthur’s bad mood which seemed to be connected with that in some way, the fact that he had complained of a stomach ache which was unusual for him, and that she had recommended him to take bismuth and go to bed.

“Well, he did take the bismuth,” she sighed. “But he never went to bed. I tried to wait up for him, but he didn’t come up, so... I went to sleep in the end, in spite of all I could do.”

The policeman duly made notes. “Now, madam,” he said, “you mentioned earlier that the deceased had eaten a whole tin of biscuits what you had made.”

“Yes, and that was the strangest thing,” said Harriet. “He did say he liked them very much, but I still wouldn’t have expected him to do a thing like that. He usually had more self-control. The odd thing about those biscuits... you see, he gave me a box of peppermint creams, not knowing I strongly dislike peppermint, and I couldn’t bear to tell him because it was such a nice thing for him to do. So I hid them away, a few at a time, in my sewing box, and then I made them into the icing for these biscuits. Now Arthur really loves... really loved peppermint, so I knew he would enjoy them; but to eat the whole tin? And with a stomach ache, at that?”

“My mum says peppermint’s good for the digestion, if I may make so bold,” said the maid. “I bet that’s what poor master was thinking.”

“Oh!” said Harriet. “Thank you. Of course. That’s really helpful. It must have been that.”

The maid nodded. “Yes, if I’d ha’ been there when he said he had a stomach ache, I’d have suggested peppermint tea. My mum swears by it.”

“It is indeed a very fine remedy for the indigestion and the bloating,” agreed the policeman, sagely. The doorbell rang, and the maid jumped up to answer it.

“That will be the vicar, or at least I hope so,” said Harriet.

“I would appreciate a few words with the reverend gentleman myself,” said the policeman.

“Perhaps we could all have the words together,” Harriet suggested, “because I should very much like to know what he said that so upset poor Arthur last night.”

It was indeed the vicar, who was clearly astonished to see the policeman and his notebook. Harriet ushered him to a chair and briefly filled him in on the situation.

“And, now that it is no longer in confidence,” she added, “could I ask what it was that you said to him last night? I’m afraid he didn’t react at all well.”

The vicar sighed. “I don’t suppose he did. I should tell you, but be warned first of all that it will be another shock to you.”

“Mr Gibson, I cannot possibly be any more shocked than I already am,” Harriet assured him. “Please tell me whatever you have to say.”

“Then I am very sorry to tell you that I had to come and point out to your husband the error of his ways regarding another woman,” said Mr Gibson heavily. “Don’t be too alarmed; the lady concerned has, I think, no idea, and even if she has an inkling she is quite innocent in this regard. She has certainly done nothing whatsoever to encourage him. But I have caught him looking at her a number of times in a manner that could not possibly be mistaken, and so I had to explain to him that I had just advised her to attend Evensong in future rather than Matins, and that if I caught him attempting to do the same I should not easily be convinced that it was for spiritual reasons.”

Harriet stared at him. “Oh, Mr Gibson, there must be some mistake! Why, only last Saturday poor Arthur confessed that he had been sadly neglecting me, and gave me a box of peppermint creams as an earnest of his future good intentions. And he has behaved like the model husband ever since then. Do you see those flowers? He bought me those on Wednesday.”

The vicar frowned. "I'm afraid there is no mistake. He admitted it himself, once I confronted him with the evidence."

"That is quite bizarre!" exclaimed Harriet. "And may I ask who this lady is?"

"It is your friend Miss Fanshawe," replied the vicar.

"Miss Fanshawe! Poor Miss Fanshawe – I am quite certain she had no idea, or else she would have been very skittish around him. She is a lady of the highest probity."

"Indeed she is," the vicar agreed. "She was most unsettled when I had to explain to her that she had a married admirer. I did not give her his name, feeling that it would cause unnecessary strain. She was more than willing to alter her churchgoing habits in the interest of not, however unintentionally, causing a brother to stumble."

"Well, she may change them back again now if she wishes," said Harriet sadly. "But I am most puzzled by the whole affair. If you want to know, I thought you had been speaking to him earlier about his attitude towards me, and he had taken it to heart and resolved to do better in future."

"No; but I did that as well last night," replied Mr Gibson. "And I quoted freely from the Book of Proverbs about the deadly dangers of adultery and the exhortation to delight in the wife of his youth."

"Oh, he would never have actually committed adultery," said Harriet warmly. "Even had he wanted to do so, Miss Fanshawe would never have allowed him to do such a thing."

"Perhaps not, but he was still very much on the wrong track," replied the vicar. "And he knew it, which was why I left him in a foul mood, I fear. The thing I fail to understand is the sudden positive change in his behaviour. I would certainly not have guessed that from talking to him last night."

"Did he not plead it in extenuation?" asked Harriet, surprised.

"He did not. Perhaps he felt it wouldn't wash."

Harriet winced. "And... oh dear... on that subject..."

"You're going to want me to clean up in that kitchen, ain't you, 'm?" said the maid plaintively.

"No, I'm not. I wouldn't do such a thing to you," replied Harriet. "But I *would* like some help with that. Mr Gibson, could we... perhaps... exchange maids for today?"

“Certainly,” said the vicar. “That, in the circumstances, would be ideal.”

“I will ’ave the deceased taken away in a respectable fashion once I have measured everything,” said the policeman helpfully.

Harriet frowned. “Why do you need to measure everything?”

“Because of Evidence,” replied the policeman, importantly.

“Oh. Well, then, feel free. You... you don’t think he died of some unnatural cause, do you?”

“Most probably he just had something nasty wrong with his stomach,” replied the policeman. “I had an aunt like that. She had a stomach ache and just collapsed and died, and when they did the autopsy they found part of her gut had died first and the rest of her had just followed it, like. But when someone goes off all unexpected like that, we’ve got to be thorough.”

“Of course. Well... please go and do your measuring, because I can’t bring myself to go back in there till you’ve taken him away.”

“Understood, madam,” said the policeman, and lumbered off into the kitchen.

“If my wife and I can be of any help at all at this sad time, please don’t hesitate to let us know,” said the vicar.

“Thank you,” said Harriet. “I very much appreciate that.”

“In fact,” the vicar continued, “why don’t you come and have breakfast at the vicarage? Then you won’t have to think about going back into the kitchen at all until it’s properly cleaned up.”

“Oh, thank you so much,” said Harriet. “That would be perfect. Oh, and the grocer’s is on the way, and I know they always open early, so if you don’t mind I’ll pop in and ask them to take the arrowroot off the order. I was going to do arrowroot pudding tonight, but it’s too much of a bother just for myself. Arthur used to love it.” She sighed.

“Of course,” said the vicar.

Harriet left a key for the policeman, with instructions for him to bring it round to the vicarage after he had locked up; then she and the maid set off with the vicar, and about ten minutes later they reached the grocer’s shop. Harriet went in.

“Oh, good morning, Mrs Bell,” said the grocer affably. His name was Marshall, and he was a stout middle-aged man with a gentle air about him.

“Good morning, Mr Marshall,” said Harriet. “I’m afraid I can’t stop to talk for long, but might I take the arrowroot off my order, please?”

“Of course,” said Mr Marshall. “Found some hiding at the back of the cupboard?”

She shook her head. “No, it’s not that. I’m afraid my husband died very suddenly last night, so I’m not doing arrowroot pudding after all.”

“Oh! Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that,” said Mr Marshall. “What a terrible shame! And he always seemed to be in such good health.”

“He did, but last night he said he had a stomach ache, and this morning the maid found him dead in the kitchen,” Harriet replied. “The vicar has very kindly invited me round for breakfast, which is why I can’t stop. He’s waiting outside.”

“Oh, God bless him,” said the grocer. “Will you be needing any more arsenic?”

Harriet stared at him. “Arsenic?”

“For the rats?” Mr Marshall prompted.

“What rats?”

“Your poor husband said you had a terrible problem with rats.”

“We don’t have rats,” said Harriet, slowly. “We have a cat. A first-class rat-catcher.”

“You have?”

They stared at each other. Finally, Harriet said, “Thank you... no arsenic. Not at all. Ever. I’ve got to go. I’ll see you later.” And she hurried, rather unceremoniously, out of the shop.

“What happened in there?” asked Mr Gibson, concerned. “You look upset.”

“Arsenic,” replied Harriet, bleakly.

“Arsenic?”

“Arsenic. I’ll explain later, once I’ve calmed down.”

“What...?”

“Mr Gibson,” said Harriet, “*I know what happened.*”