EDITOR'S DRAWER

THE QUARTER LOAF.

BY MARGARET SUTTON BRISCOE.

"I DON'T know why any of us ever expected anything different," said Lydia. "Nothing of a usual nature ever happens to them. Why shouldn't their baby be a freak child?"

"Lydia," I said, gravely, "under all the circumstances that's not a wise way for you to talk of the Popes. If you had said that to any one but me, it might have been thought you had some private animus."

"I wasn't saying it to any one but you, and if you mean any one might think I wanted Martin Pope myself, why I certainly did, and would have had him, too, if Peachey's geese hadn't saved Rome. The way they altered events was a salvation for us all, wasn't it?" and Lydia turned on me one of those glances that are still her own, and hers only.

"Don't look at me like that," I said; "you melt me like butter. You can't call the Pope baby a freak. It isn't one. It's only phenomenally tiny."

"Didn't you tell me Martin had been bothered out of his life by enterprising showmen?"

"Yes; he has had some startling offers for the child, humiliatingly startling."

Lydia began to laugh provokingly.

"And then you tell me it's not a freak baby."

"I tell you it's not a freak," I retorted, warmly. "It's only very undersized, and it's not nice of you to laugh at the poor thing's misfortune. Probably they are thinking a half loaf is better than no bread."

Lydia was silent for a moment, while I began to repent of my harshness, for we ourselves had no offspring of any size. "I might put up with half a loaf," she said at last, as if considering the matter, "but a quarter loaf, and particularly a quarter-loaf baby, I never could stand. Why, I really never remember hearing of a freak baby in one's own class of life; did you, dear?"

"No, dear," I said, meekly, "I never did until Martin's freak baby came." Then we looked at each other and laughed. The train was drawing us into a station of the town where the Popes were then living. It was this circumstance that had turned our thoughts to them and their affairs.

"I suppose you are right," said Lydia, generous when her point was gained. "It's only a preternaturally small child, and not a freak at all. Why, do look. Isn't that Mr. Pope now? The one with the little champagne-basket in his arms. It *is* Mr. Pope."

I looked where she directed. Yes, there was but one Martin Pope, and that was he. As I saw him I burst out laughing shamelessly.

"My dear Lydia, as sure as you live, he's got the baby in that basket." Lydia pressed her nose flat against the glass in her eagerness.

"Why, it can't be! yes, he is carrying it as if he had something alive in it. Oh, nonsense, it's his cat, or a dog."

"Look behind him," said I. "Does that go with a cat or a dog?" Close on Martin's heels, and with eyes fixed on the little basket, walked an evident nursemaid, cap, apron, anxious air, and all. Lydia flung herself back in her seat and choked with laughter.

"Oh, if it were anybody but Martin Pope it would have a chance to be pitiful. But it's so —it's so distractingly appropriate. How can I help laughing?" cried Lydia.

I certainly could not show her how to help it. Indeed there had been something too exquisitely ridiculous, though what we could not exactly state, even to ourselves, in that passing glimpse of Martin paternally hugging a champagne-basket, and followed by a nurse. It was not until the train had steamed out of the station that we recovered nerve.

"Well," said Lydia, "I see now what a far-seeing genius a showman is. I should have said I dreaded nothing more than having Mr. Pope come into this car with his—I don't know what to call it exactly—and now I am consumed with an unholy and unquenchable curiosity to see inside that basket."

Absurd as Martin had looked in that passing glimpse, the old-time friendship had stirred warmly in my heart at sight of him.

"Lydia," I said, irritably, "I do wish you would stop talking in that way. I tell you Martin's child is only undersized. He wrote me that it might take a start and grow any day."

Lydia stared at me. "Well, if you aren't unreasonable. As if you didn't laugh too."

"I knew where to stop. When you insist on laughing at everything and everybody, it makes you extremely difficult to deal—"

"Then why don't you shuffle me?" interrupted Lydia, with imperturbable good-humor.

"I prefer to cut you at present," I retorted, and then I whirled my chair around with judicious haste before she could possibly reply.

The sharp movement swung me a little too far; so much so that before I could stop myself my foot had struck smartly against the knee-cap of a man who was hurriedly entering the compartment carrying a little glass of white liquid in his hand. The blow felled him instantly. The glass and the liquid landed in Lydia's lap, where the man himself would have followed but that Lydia, with her wont-

ed promptness, caught his arm and held him up. Before I could pick up the débris of my own scattered wits or come to my wife's rescue, I heard her high, cool voice.

"Walk right in, Mr. Pope," she said, pleasantly. "Walk right in. Milk? Yes, I supposed so. It doesn't make the least difference. My dear, aren't you going to apologize to Mr. Pope?"

Apologize! Martin and I were on each other's neck, and not altogether metaphorically either.

"You'd like to see the baby, wouldn't you?" said Martin, beamingly. He was still affectionately holding my hand, and I feared he would surely feel my apprehensive start. I looked quickly at Lydia, and saw an honestly frightened look on her usually composed features. I felt much the same way myself.

"I was getting some water to weaken her milk when I met your foot," said Martin. "She's in the end compartment with her nurse. Don't you want to go back with me now and see her—both of you?"

Lydia gripped the arms of her chair convulsively, looking up to me with imploring eyes, but I braced her with a glance.

"Yes, indeed we do," I said, cheerfully: "of course we do. Come, Lydia," and I dragged my wife to her feet and drove her before me and after Martin, heartily wishing that there was some strong man back of me again to perform for me a like office. Martin led us to the door of the compartment, chatting all the way.

"Just excuse me a moment," he said over his shoulder; "I'll see if she looks nice," and he slipped within the door, closing it after him.

"Now run," said Lydia, turning and pushing me back with both hands. "I can't go in there—I can't, and I won't."

"You must," I said, sternly, but my own heart was beating with an absurd force.

"If you make me look at it, it's ten to one I'll laugh right out. We *can't* risk it."

I set my teeth. "In we go," I said, "and if we laugh we laugh."

Lydia collapsed in my hands.

"Then hold my hand tight," she said. "I'm just as crazy as ever to see it, but I'd give all I possess to be able to run away."

I grasped her hand in mine, and the door opened for us. My own position was not easy. Martin was an old and dear friend, and the next moment might separate us forever.

"Did he tell you anything about baby's size?" asked Martin of Lydia as we entered.

"I told Lydia that the baby was small," I said, weakly.

"Small!" said Martin, scornfully; "do you call that *small?*" He turned and lifted a light veil that lay over the little champagne-basket, and there lay something that brought Lydia with a rush to her knees beside it.

"Oh!" she cried. "Oh!"

"That's what I knew you'd say," said Martin. "Now don't wake it. The last person that saw it I sent into the nursery alone, and she came out and said the baby wasn't there—there was only a French doll in the crib."

"Doll!" said Lydia, scornfully; "there never was a doll in the world like this."

I peered gingerly over her shoulder and saw something that neither small nor doll adequately described. It was a baby so tiny that one hardly dared breathe lest it might be blown away, and yet it was so perfect and plump and rosy, a microscopic vision, that I held my breath for quite another reason.

"Oh!" cried Lydia again, "*do* you think it will have to grow?"

"Not for some time, I hope," said Martin, delightedly, "though she may take a start and grow any day. I don't want to be selfish about it, though personally she fascinates me just as she is. But she wouldn't like it herself, you know, as she grows older. It wouldn't do at all to keep on carrying her in a closed basket, and that's what has to be or she'd draw a mob; and besides there are other dangers." His whisper grew solemn. "Do you know, that little thing is worth thousands as she lies there. We are in constant terror of her being stolen. She's never left a moment alone, day or night, and I have to take a whole compartment for her when we travel. The smaller they come the more they cost—like Blue Points."

"Get me out of this quickly," breathed a smothered voice in my ear. I looked down, and on seeing my wife's face, acted hastily. A chair that was not secured to the floor was near me, and I kicked it over. The wee-est and the most fairylike of screams immediately pierced the air. Martin rushed to the champagne-basket, and Lydia and I fled.

When we were once more installed in our own chairs outside, I looked over at my wife.

"Well," I said, "what were you going to do in there, please—laugh, or cry, or faint? I couldn't tell which."

"Neither could I," said Lydia, from the depths of her handkerchief. "It was the most serio-comic thing I ever went through. Why, he loves it dearly. And yet I know he's going to exhibit it sooner or later. I know it. He couldn't be Martin Pope and not do it."

"Exhibit it!" I repeated, amazed and indignant. "How could Martin do such a thing?"

"He couldn't," whimpered Lydia, "and that's why I am so sure it'll be done. He never yet did anything he could. It makes me feel dreadfully to think of that lovely little baby in a show."

"Don't be silly," I said, severely; and then, resorting to Martin's formula, "Evidently the child is soon to take a start and grow."

"You only have Mr. Pope's word for that," flashed Lydia, emerging from the cambric. "Mark my words, that child will live to be exhibited."

"Have it your own way," I answered; and, as usual, Lydia's way it went, though not quite as even she had expected it to go.

There was something wrong with the Popes. Lydia recognized that there was, and so did I; but neither of us could imagine what it might be. They had moved to the metropolis where we lived shortly after our meeting in the cars, but though they had spent the whole winter not many squares away from our house, the families saw little of each other. Women can make distance as absence and absence as distance in questions of family intimacy. Martin and I met, as it were, by stealth now and then; but there could be little real intercourse. Then one day late in the winter Mrs. Pope herself suddenly appeared in my office. I am not using the word suddenly in any rhetorical sense; it was a fact that I looked up from my writing to find her sitting by my desk.

"Mr. Griffin," she said, abruptly, "did you ever have an obsession? Do you know what they are?"

"Not as well as you must," I answered. "When I want occult or psychic information I know to which sex to go for it in these days. To what cult do you belong, may I ask? My wife belongs to five." But Peachey was not to be dashed.

"I only found out about obsessions the other day," she said, gravely. "I have one. That's what I wanted to consult you about."

I looked anxiously at Peachey's flushed and pretty features, but could not find there or in her innocent eyes anything to justify alarm.

"There are all kinds of obsessions," she went on, "and one is a kind that makes you want all the time, and want dreadfully, to do something that you know you ought not to do at all, and wouldn't do for the world if you could help yourself; but you can't. My obsession is wanting to exhibit the baby."

It was not unnatural that I should have started in my chair and exclaimed aloud before I could control or check myself, but as

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she heard me two great tears rose in Peachey's eyes and rolled down her face.

"My dear Mrs. Pope," I said, taking her hand in mine, "Martin is the dearest friend I have in the world. Now what can I do for his wife?" By which words it will be seen that an ardent appreciation of feminine emotion does make me lose my head in a crisis.

"You are very kind. I knew you would be when I came to you," said Peachey, wiping her eyes. "You see, the temptation is terrible. We do need money so horribly."

I breathed easily again. It was nothing abnormal after all, but a complaint more or less common to all flesh. How they had contrived to attain such a position with Martin's known means of supply was what I could not comprehend, though he spent money like water. Peachey explained it all to me. It seemed that Martin was most peculiarly placed. He had no income. His moneys dropped in to him not yearly, but in large lump sums at irregular intervals, wholly contingent on his good behavior. The bulk of his property was to be handed over to him on his thirtieth year, which was not far off, if before that date Martin had not contrived to disgrace the family name. In the latter case he was to receive nothing. The full power of disbursement and dispossession lay in the hands of an eccentric old uncle of Martin's, and the will was made by Martin's father. After this hearing it did not seem to me difficult to account for Martin's peculiarities. In the past I had always tried to lay them at the door of his artistic genius, but that had not adequately supported them. This explanation did.

"You see now," said Peachey, "how important it is for us that Martin should be able to meet a note for $5000 that will fall due to-morrow. If we don't meet it, Uncle Pope may call that a disgrace. One of the hard things about father Pope's will has been that Martin never knows what Uncle Pope may call a disgrace. He wasn't sure he wouldn't be angry at his marrying me; and then, when the baby came and was so little, we were afraid he might call that disgraceful. Martin says he knows he'll call it perfectly disgraceful and extravagant for us to have a note falling due for $5000 to-morrow and nothing ready to meet it. Do you think he will?"

"Well," I said, "I'm afraid he might view it so."

"We can scrape about one thousand dollars together," sighed Peachey, "and that's all."

"Of course, under the circumstances," I said, "you can't call on your uncle for an advance, as you don't want him to know your need, but I should think it would be easy enough to arrange for an advance of four thousand dollars from any one on such expectations as Martin has. It's pretty late in the day, but I think I can negotiate a loan for him by noon to-morrow."

"Why, no, you can't," said Peachey, practically, "because we haven't any security to offer."

"Well, I can only try," I said at last. "I wish I had the money myself, Mrs. Pope."

"Oh, I knew you hadn't a cent, or I wouldn't have come to you," said Peachey, with delightful frankness. "I'm afraid you think we have been awfully extravagant; but, you see, Martin miscalculated. He thought we had plenty to last until he was thirty, but it all seemed to go suddenly. You know how it is with money. And then the baby's an awful expense. We have to guard her so carefully. She is watched all day, and we keep a night nurse sitting up with her with the door locked on the inside. I suppose it's foolish, but we still keep getting such offers for the poor little thing it makes us awfully nervous."

"I don't call it foolish at all," I replied. "I should go still further and keep the nursery door bolted on the *outside*, and the key in my own pocket. A nurse might be unfaithful. But you haven't told me about your own exhibiting obsession, Mrs. Pope." Peachey looked a little embarrassed.

"Well, I really haven't one, you know. I just said that to open the conversation. I didn't know how to open a business talk, and so I tried to think how my husband would probably begin, and that's about the way I thought he would. You won't tell *any one* I came to you, will you? I got desperate after Martin left me to-day, so I came to you myself."

"Of course I'll do all I can, but don't feel too hopeful," I answered. "Expect me at your house rather late. I shall be kept very late at the office to-night."

But I did not keep my promise of going to the Popes that night, because, just as I was preparing to seek them with the distressing news that I had nothing and could get nothing for them, my office door burst open and Peachey hurried in, crying like a hurt child.

"Here it is," she sobbed, trembling, and drawing forth from under her wide cloak a tiny basket. In its depths I recognized the infinitesimal hope of the Pope family, sound asleep as usual. And then I saw a strange sight. I had in my varied experience seen maternal emotion lavished on a fair-sized child, but in this case I was to see what was more like going through with the motions than anything else. The baby was far too small to receive Peachey's wild caresses, and the basket got the most of them.

"Oh," sobbed Mrs. Pope, "she's been *exhibited* every night for weeks and weeks — ever since we've been in this city! My baby, my little, little baby. Oh, that wicked woman! If you hadn't suggested it I'd never have thought of it. You saved my baby." And down she went on her knees and kissed my hand.

"My dear Mrs. Pope," I said, "do get up and tell me what has happened." But Peachey

was sitting on the floor by the basket examining that sleeping little Quarter Loaf all over, to its very finger-nails, and would not answer until she had assured herself that in every particular it was exactly as it should be—except for size.

"It's all right," she sighed at last. "I've let the woman go, but I hope you won't think it weak of me. She was dreadfully frightened, and she was only that wretched man's tool. He confessed that himself. He was dreadfully frightened too. I'm afraid I made a terrible scene."

By slow degrees I came to understand what had happened. My words of the morning had roused Peachey's fears, and on that night, after the baby and night nurse were seemingly locked in together, she had gone to the nursery door and demanded entrance, obtained it with difficulty, and—the baby was gone from the cradle. I could imagine that Mrs. Pope might be quite formidable, when roused, in the way that a brooding bird is formidable if its young are attacked. Apparently she had flown at the nurse with such fury that the woman had confessed all on the spot. She had been hiring the baby to a showman for an hour or so each night, smuggling it out of the house to one of his myrmidons and back again unnoticed.

"I made her get in a carriage with me," said Mrs. Pope, "and drive right to the show, and I rushed in and grabbed up my baby and ran in here with it. It's right around the corner from here, a miserable poor little show! Oh, my little abused baby!" And she fell to kissing the basket again.

Now I have not lived as a legal adviser in my native town some forty odd years and read three newspapers daily for nothing, so what Mrs. Pope said opened a window in my mind and let in light upon some old newspaper information stored there.

"Round the corner did you say, Mrs. Pope?" I asked. "Was the show called the 'Eureka,' and did it have life-size portraits of all kinds of freaks outside the door?"

Peachey shuddered her assent, drawing her baby closer, but I had no time to mince words just then.

"My dear lady," I said, "the man that owns that show owns dozens like it in as many towns. That's his horrid business, and it yields him enormous profits, on which he lives in this city. His offence against you is a serious one, and it's not his first offence of the kind either. It would go hard with him if he were hauled up. Did you promise his showman anything?"

"I? Good gracious, no. They were promising me everything, and I just ran away from them all as I told you."

"Where's Martin?"

"Out trying to collect that wretched four thousand; he'll never get it."

"No," I said, "he won't, but he may have it gotten for him." I disengaged Mrs. Pope from the baby and led her to my desk. "Now sign this," I said, and a moment later I had her name tremulously written beneath these words: 'Mr. Griffin is fully empowered to act for me in this matter.'"

Now what I did with this slip of paper I shall never tell. It's not a transaction that I am proud of, and as a struggling lawyer it is not an episode that I care to publish. It was a fair case both of love and war—love for Martin and war for the showman. Suffice it to say that I drove away furiously in Mrs. Pope's carriage, bidding her wait for me in my office; and when I at last came back to her I had in my hand another bit of paper, oblong in shape, which I did not show to Mrs. Pope. I locked it away carefully in my desk, and for it substituted a check torn from my own checkbook, and made out for the sum of four thousand dollars. With this I turned to Martin's wife.

"I have been more successful in raising that sum we were talking of to-day than I thought I could be," I said, "and here it is, Mrs. Pope; you can tell Martin that those who sent it to him didn't want their names to appear. They feel themselves under obligations to him, and are glad of the chance to settle them. He can pay the money back when he is thirty years old if he then wants to, but there's no need whatever to do so." I held out the check, which Mrs. Pope took from me in an absent-minded way. She was hanging over the baby with an eager interest on her face.

"Have you an inch measure here?" she asked, with such suppressed excitement in her tone that I knew something important was about to happen.

I produced the measure, and with evidently practised fingers Peachey lifted that mite of a baby and laid it flat on my desk, face down. Then she measured its back from end to end. I bent over the measure as eagerly as she.

"Has it taken that start?" I asked; and as she saw the figure reached by the back of the baby's little heel, Peachey dropped the measure and looked up at me, with her big eyes swimming in tears.

"Oh, Mr. Griffin!" she cried.

What had come to pass may be gathered from a little scene that took place one day not many years later, when my wife and I met Peachey and her first-born walking together on the street.

"Lydia, my dear," I said, "look; you's the Quarter Loaf;" and Lydia walked right up to the pair and held out her hand to the daughter with her most radiant smile.

"Why, my dear," she said, *looking up*, and Lydia is not short, "allow me to congratulate you. Mrs. Pope, the next time I see your daughter I only hope she won't have grown as much again as she has since the first time I saw her." And this wish was a kindly one, so meant and so accepted.