

The Umbrella

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Madame Oreille knew the value of money. Monsieur was always telling his wife, 'You shouldn't be so close. We never spend what we've got coming in.' He perpetually complained of the privations which she made him endure, some of which wounded his vanity.

He was a head clerk in the Ministry of War where, for the last two years, he had been arriving with the same much mended umbrella which made all his colleagues laugh. IN the end, weary of their jibes, he insisted Madame Oreille buy him a new one. She found one for eight and a half francs in a department-store sale. Within three months it was quite useless and the hilarity in the Ministry turned into an epidemic.

Irritated beyond measure, Monsieur Oreille ordered his wife to 'select a new broolly for him, with a silk covering, for twenty francs, and told her he would want to see the bill.

She chose one costing eighteen francs and told her husband. That should last you five years at least.

Monsieur Oreille made a triumphant appearance at the office.

When he got home that evening, his wife looked anxiously at the umbrella and said: 'You're not going to leave it rolled up tight with that elastic strap round it, are you? It'll wear the silk'.

She took it and shook out the folds. A round hole, the size of a penny, had appeared in the middle of the umbrella. It was a cigar burn!

She stammered: 'What's the matter with it?'

'Matter with what?'

'You .. you've....you've burnt a hole.....Have you.....have you taken leave of your senses? Do you want to ruin us?' She thrust the small round burn right under his nose.

Confronted with the mutilation, he was aghast. 'I'm not responsible, I swear. How should I know how it got in that state?'

She was shouting now, 'You've been at the office, opening it, to show off.'

'I did open it once to let them see how smart it was.'

But she staged one of those scenes of married life which make hearth and home a more fearsome place for a man of peace than a battlefield bristling with bullets.

She mended the hole with a piece of the silk from the old umbrella, which was a different colour. And, next morning, Monsieur Oreille, in chastened mood, stowed it away in his office cupboard and gave it no further thought.

But he had hardly set foot through the door that evening when his wife snatched the umbrella out of his hands. It was riddled with small holes which were clearly burns, as though someone had tipped burning ash onto it. It was ravaged beyond return.

When the storm blew itself out an hour later, he managed to put his side of the case. He swore that the thing could only have been done out of spite or because someone wanted to get his own back.

Madame Oreille laid the facts of the case before a friend who was dining with them that evening.

He said, 'Why not get it recovered? It won't cost much.'

Madame Oreille spluttered: 'Recovering it will cost at least eight francs. Eight and eighteen makes twenty-six! Twenty-six francs for an umbrella! It's sheer madness!'

The friend then had an inspiration 'Get your insurance, to pay. Insurance companies pay up for fire-damage providing that fire occurred on the property of the insured.'

Monsieur Oreille started: 'I'd never have the nerve! It's only eighteen francs down the drain. We won't die of it.'

Next morning he went off to work carrying a cane. Fortunately it was a fine day.

Alone in the house, Madame Orielle had put the umbrella on the dining room table and walked round and round it. The thought of the insurance kept coming into her head. She tried to put it out of her mind but the memory of her loss was like vinegar on a cut finger. What was she to do? Then, like cowards who become foolhardy, she formed her resolve, 'I'll go, and we'll see what happens!'

But first she had to attend to the umbrella so as to put her cause beyond doubt. She took a box of matches from the mantelpiece and made a large burn as big as her hand between the spokes; then she fastened it with the elastic band and hurried off to the rue de Rivoli, where the company's offices were situated.

But when she was almost there, she slowed her pace. What was she going to say? How would they answer?

Suddenly she gave a start. Here was the door and on it, written in letters of gold: La Maternelle Fire-Insurance Co. So soon! Feeling rather shamefaced, she walked on, then turned and came back. Finally she said, 'There's no going back now.' Even so, as she went through the doors, she was aware that her heart was racing.

An employee appeared carrying a sheaf of papers. She asked in a small, shy voice: 'Excuse me, where should I go about putting in a claim for fire-damage?'

He replied in a booming voice: 'First floor, turn left. You want Disasters.'

She had an urge to run away, to say nothing, to wave goodbye to her eighteen francs. But at the thought of the money her courage revived slightly.

On the first floor she saw a door. She knocked. A confident voice shouted: 'Come in!'

She found herself in a large room and stammered: 'I've.....I've come....about....a Disaster.'

A man politely motioned to a chair. 'In what way can I be of service?'

'I've come about.....about this.'

The manager looked down in amazement at the object with which he had been presented.

With trembling hands, she opened the tattered skeleton of the umbrella.

'It looks in a bad way.' said the man sympathetically.

'I paid twenty francs for it.'

'Really?' He looked shocked, 'As much as that?'

'Yes, it was a very good one. I want to report the state it's in.'

'I see. But I don't quite understand what I'm supposed to do about it'

'It's been burnt.'

The man did not deny it.

Then she remembered what she had forgotten to say, 'I am Madame Oreille, and I've come to make a claim for the damage to this umbrella. I want you to have it recovered. That's all.'

The manager, quite nonplussed, replied: 'But.....dear lady.....this is not an umbrella shop. We cannot undertake that type or repair work.'

She was going to have to fight. So fight she would! 'I simply wish to claim for the cost of repairs. I am quite able to do the work myself.'

The man seemed to be out of his depth: 'I must say that the sum involved is very small. You will appreciate that we cannot possibly pay out for the host of small items which are daily exposed to damage by fire and smoke.'

She felt anger flood over her: 'Let me tell you that only last December our chimney caught fire and did at least five hundred francs worth of damage. Monsieur Oreille didn't make a claim against the company then, so it's only right that you should pay out on my umbrella now!'

The manager said with a smile: 'But you will admit, dear lady, that it is very odd that Monsieur Oreille should not submit a claim for five hundred francs but is now asking for five or six francs for repairing an umbrella.'

She did not hesitate and replied: 'I'm sorry but the five hundred francs was a matter for Monsieur Oreille's budget not mine!'

Seeing that he could easily spend the whole day arguing, he resigned himself and asked: 'Then perhaps you would explain how the accident happened.'

Scenting victory, she began : 'In my hall at home I have this brass thing where you put umbrellas and walking-sticks. Well, the other day, as I was coming in, I put this umbrella in it. I should explain that just above it there's a little shelf for putting matches and candles on. I reached out and I took out four matches. I struck one but nothing happened, I tried another the same result. Anyway, the fourth one was alright and I lit the candle; then I went into the bedroom to lie down. But a

quarter of a hour later, I thought I could smell burning. Since the time I told you about when the chimney caught fire, I've gone about in fear and trembling. I got up and searched everywhere, and in the end I found my umbrella on fire. One of the matches had fallen into it. You can imagine the state I was in....'

The manager had decided the line he would follow and asked: 'And what is your assessment of the damage?'

She remained speechless, not daring to name a figure. 'I put myself in your hands.'

'Out of the question, dear lady. Just tell me how much you are asking.'

'But....I should think....er...I shall take my umbrella to the maker's for him to recover it and I'll present you with the bill. Would that be acceptable?'

'By all means, dear lady. I will give you an authorization for the cashier who will reimburse you.'

He proffered a card to Madame Oseille who took it, and left, anxious to get outside in case he should change his mind.

Now, with a light step, she went along the street in search of a suitably high-class umbrella-maker's. When she found one which looked expensive, she entered and said confidently:

'I have an umbrella which I want you to recover in silk, good-quality silk. Use the best you have. Price is no object.'