
Jonathan Stannard's Secret Vice

by Rex Stout

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When Mrs. Stannard saw her husband with a woman in a yellow hat one night at Courin's Restaurant, she thought she had solved the mystery which was making her life miserable. Then, watching from her secluded corner, she had seen a tall, middle-aged man with a brown mustache walk over to their table and join them.

Him she recognized. So her husband had not lied to her, after all, when he had said that he was going to dine that evening with John Dupont, of the Academy.

And she was further assured when he observed casually, in their own home three hours later:

"By the way, Dupont brought his wife along. Did you ever see her?"

"No," replied Mrs. Stannard.

"Nice-looking woman, but a bit flashy. Had on a lot of yellow stuff. Dupont's getting to be tiresome. I wished myself at home with you. What did you do with yourself all evening?"

She murmured something about reading, thereby achieving her second falsehood within sixty seconds.

But though her husband thus stood acquitted of this particular malfeasance, the mystery remained. It was not of long standing. She had married Jonathan Stannard twelve years before, when he was still an underprofessor at the university.

Three years later he had become suddenly famous by his lengthy essay, "The New Homer." Others had followed; his reputation grew and solidified; and since he was financially independent he had been able to give up his professorship and devote himself entirely to writing.

He was a conservative.

Classicism was his sacred word. His books and lectures were divided into two equal parts: appreciations of the classic and attacks on the modern; the latter were the most interesting, for he was a hard hitter.

He could belabor the Futurists or Motion Pictures or Eugene Brieux for

three hundred pages, with what effect! Assuredly not in vain, for he was taken seriously.

As a husband he was as near perfection as any reasonable woman could expect. He had never neglected his wife; for over eleven years he had even appeared to continue to love her, which is admittedly something unusual in the case of a literary man who hangs around the house all the time. Indeed, for any positive act of his to the contrary, she had every reason to believe that he loved her still.

But there was the mystery.

Though she had previously noticed a rather unusual amount of absence on his part, it had really begun one January evening some six months before. After dinner he had appeared restless, a rare thing with him; and finally, after an hour of books picked up and thrown down again, he had announced abruptly that he had an appointment at the Century Club.

A hasty kiss and he was gone.

Two hours later, about eleven in the evening, an important message had come for him and she had telephoned the club, only to be told that he had not been there. That was all very well; men do change their minds. But when he returned shortly before midnight he replied to her question:

"Why, I've been at the club. I said I was going there, didn't I?"

"That's odd," said Mrs. Stannard. "I called up to give you Selwyn's message and they said you hadn't been there all evening."

"Absurd!" he exclaimed. "Of course I was there! Why, of course I was there! If they had only searched properly--"

But his wife, noting his ill-concealed embarrassment, felt the shadow of doubt enter her mind. She entertained it most unwillingly, for she was not of a suspicious nature, and there had been eleven years of mutual trust to justify her confidence in him; so she had almost succeeded in obliterating the incident from her mind when, a week later, something happened to remind her of it.

He had taken tickets for them for a Hofmann recital, and at the last moment a headache had put her on her back, so he had gone off alone. The next morning she had asked him:

"And how was the new Debussy tone poem?"

"Awful," he replied emphatically, after a second's hesitation. "The man has no ears or he couldn't write such stuff."

And ten minutes later, going through the morning paper, her eye had fallen on the following paragraph:

...Salamambo, the new tone poem by Debussy, which was to have been rendered for the first time in

America, was dropped from the program on account of the late arrival of the manuscript, leaving Mr. Hofmann insufficient time to study the composition. A group of Chopin was substituted...

Obviously, her husband had not attended the recital at all! Mrs. Stannard drew her lips together and hid her face behind the paper to think unseen. Should she confront him with the evidence of his falsehood and demand an explanation? Yes. No. If he had lied once he would lie again. Useless. Better to hide her knowledge of his guilt. But she found it extremely difficult to hold her tongue, and it was with a sigh of relief that she saw the door close behind him as he went out for his morning stroll.

Her feeling was chiefly one of discomfort, for she could not as yet bring herself to believe that her husband, Jonathan Stannard, the man who above all others stood for rectitude in morals as well as in art, could be guilty of any misdeed.

But he had lied--she pronounced the word aloud in order to get a better hold on it--he had lied to her twice within the week. And now that she thought of it, he had been absent from the house considerably more than usual for the past month or so.

Tuesday afternoon he had gone out at two o'clock and stayed till dinnertime without saying a word of where he had been. Wednesday evening he had gone out for a walk after dinner and returned at a quarter to eleven.

Clearly, he was up to something.

That was her first conclusion. After an hour's reflection she reached her second, and her eyes flashed as she said it aloud:

"There's a woman in it somewhere."

Thenceforth she took good care not to ask where he was going or where he had been. And he, abandoning a habit closely followed for more than eleven years, did not take the trouble to tell her. His absences grew more frequent.

Two or three afternoons and as many evenings each week he would go out and remain several hours without a word to her. She suffered considerably, but she told herself that the only possible course was to sit and wait in dignified sorrow for whatever might come.

Then, on a sudden impulse, she had gone alone to Courin's Restaurant one night when he had told her he was to dine there with John Dupont, the painter; and she thought she had discovered her enemy in the woman with the yellow hat, only to find later that she was Dupont's wife.

But she resolved to sit and wait no longer.

Dignity or no dignity, she would find out who or what it was that was taking her husband away from her. She had lost six pounds in a month,

and her eyes were acquiring a permanent and unattractive redness from frequent tears.

When her husband left the house at eight o'clock the next evening she followed him. But not very far. At the corner of Broadway and Eighty-seventh Street he boarded a downtown car, and she stood helplessly in the middle of the pavement watching the thing whiz out of sight.

The next time, two days later, she had a taxi ready.

She saw him, a block ahead, as he darted into the subway station; but by the time she had reached the spot and leaped out and paid the chauffeur and rushed breathlessly down the steps, a train had gone through and the platform was empty.

Then she awoke to the absurdity of her course. If she did keep close enough to follow him, he would certainly see and recognize her, even through her heavy veil.

By now she was too enraged to cry. She went home, consulted the Red Book, and in a firm and resolute voice asked central for a certain number found therein.

Within thirty minutes her maid ushered in a short, fat man in a brown suit and straw hat, with enormous hands and feet and twinkling eyes. Mrs. Stannard received him in the library.

"You are--" she began in a timid voice, as the man stood in the doorway with the straw hat in his hand.

"Mr. Pearson, of Doane, Doane & Doane," he replied amiably. "You telephoned for a man, I believe. This is Mrs. Stannard?"

"Yes. You are"--her voice faltered--"you are a detective?"

"I am."

Mrs. Stannard looked at him much as she might have looked at a strange and ferocious animal from the zoo. Then, partially recovering herself, she asked him to be seated. He did so, jerking up his trousers and balancing the straw hat on his knee.

"You follow people?" she declared abruptly.

Mr. Pearson smiled.

"I sure do," he admitted proudly.

"Well"--she hesitated--"of course, I know that there's nothing really wrong, but I am a little worried about it, and I thought if you could--"

"Pardon me," the detective interrupted, "but are you speaking of your husband?"

"Certainly!" said Mrs. Stannard indignantly.

"Just so. You want to know where he goes. Natural curiosity. Day or night?"

"Why--both."

"Ah!" Mr. Pearson elevated his brows. "That's bad. Now, if you will permit me to ask a few questions. What is his full name?"

"Jonathan Stannard."

Mr. Pearson wrote it down in a little leatherbound book.

"Business?"

"Why--the writer."

"Writer?"

"Yes. He writes."

"U-m. Does he drink?"

"No."

"Gamble?"

"No!"

"Er--fond of--er--women?"

"Well! Well--"

But seeing the foolishness of it, she swallowed her indignation and replied calmly:

"No."

"I see." Mr. Pearson was frowning as he wrote. "Evidently he's a bad un. Always been a good husband?"

"Yes."

"U-m. The worst kind. Like Wooley. I handled that case. I suppose now you've got some particular woman in mind?"

"I have told you my husband does not run after women," said Mrs. Stannard with dignity.

"No?" Mr. Pearson winked at a chair. "Now, madam, please give me the particulars of his absence."

She did so; the hours, the dates, the duration. He filled two pages of the book with them.

"You say he's a writer. Stories?"

"No. Mr. Stannard writes essays and criticisms. He is a man of high morals and serious purpose. I can't imagine why he is deceiving me--"

"No doubt. You aren't expected to. We find out and let you know. We always find out. I'd like to go through his desk."

She demurred, but he insisted. She sat trembling, with an eye on the hall door, while Mr. Pearson opened drawer after drawer of her husband's desk and examined the contents. But he found nothing but typewritten sheets with headings like, "Chiaroscuro; the Lost Art," or "The Deleterious Effect of the Motion Picture on the Literary Sense."

"I take it," said Mr. Pearson, closing the bottom drawer and standing up-- "I take it that Mr. Stannard is one of them serious guys. Moody and a kicker. I see here where he says he has about as much respect for the modern school of illustrators as he has for a paper hanger. Also, he seems to have a grudge against the movies."

"He stands for the noble in art," said Mrs. Stannard. "He has conducted a campaign against the cinema because it appeals only to the lowest function of our mentality."

"Just so," Mr. Pearson agreed. "I remember him now. I've heard my daughter speak of him. He hates things that other people like. Take this, for instance."

He picked up a sheet from the desk and read:

The real danger of the poison--for the motion picture is a poison-- lies in the ease and frequency with which it is administered. One dose would be harmless, but repeated day after day it is slowly corroding the intellect of the nation.

"We hear much criticism nowadays of the modern craze for wealth, of materialism in art, of the undermining of Christianity by science; but more pernicious than any of these, or of all of them put together, is the subtle and insidious virus of the cinema.

"I see," muttered Mr. Pearson, replacing the paper on the desk.

"Probably a shifty customer. Secret vice. Will you please sign this order, madam, for our protection. On the bottom line."

Mrs. Stannard did so.

"I take it," said the detective, pocketing the slip, "that you want a complete report of your husband's movements outside this house. Including everything?"

"Including everything," she agreed, her lips tight.

"All right." He picked up the straw hat. "You may depend on us, madam. You will hear developments. Good day."

A bow from the door and he was gone.

Mrs. Stannard lived a year in the week that followed.

For the first day or two she reproached herself bitterly for what she had done. To have one's husband followed by a detective! So vulgar! So mean, somehow! However he was wronging her, was it not better to remain in ignorance than to stoop to the role of spy, even by proxy?

If it transpired that some creature had ensnared him with unlawful charms--and she no longer had doubt of this--what could she do, anyhow? And if it were something else?

What, then? She remembered the detective's words, "secret vice." There was something sinister, something horrible about them. Yes, there were worse things even than a woman.

Each day she gazed at her husband's back with alarm and dread as he left the house. To what dreadful place was he going? What revolting deed was he about to commit?

"Secret vice!" Yes, it would be something truly, grandly horrible. There was nothing petty about Jonathan Stannard. Even in his vices he would not be as other men.

On the third morning after the detective's visit, seized with insatiable curiosity, she telephoned the office of Doane, Doane & Doane. No, they had nothing to communicate as yet.

Mr. Pearson, one of their best men, was working on the case day and night. They would probably not report before the end of the week, when all possible evidence would have been gathered.

Really, Mrs. Stannard must have a little patience.

So she waited, brooding, scarcely sleeping at all, tormented by her fears. When her husband told her at the breakfast table that she was not looking well, and advised a trip to the mountains or seashore, she could hardly refrain from replying: "Yes, you want me out of the way." She was, in fact, working herself into a pretty state.

Her husband was absent nearly every afternoon and evening, and she would sit in her room, at the window, gazing dully into the street for hours. Several times she saw a man start from somewhere in the block to follow her husband as he descended the stoop. It was Mr. Pearson.

And then at five o'clock, Friday afternoon, the detective called to make his report.

She received him, as before, in the library. He wore the same brown suit and straw hat--the former, indeed, looked as if he had never taken it off--and he wiped his brow with his handkerchief as he took a seat at her invitation.

She saw something ominous in the deliberate manner with which he turned to face her, drawing the leatherbound book from his pocket with one hand and placing his hat on the floor with the other.

She trembled.

"You--you--"

She could not go on.

"Madam," said Mr. Pearson impressively, "I am able to give you a full and complete account of your husband's actions. I may say the thing has been done thoroughly. I did it myself. Are you prepared to listen?"

She nodded, unable to speak.

"In my judgment," continued the detective, opening the leatherbound book, "your husband is the finest example of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde I have met in my professional career. Also, he is a clever man. I would have lost him the first day but for my ability to hang onto the tail of a subway express. Evidently he has gone in fear of being followed. But he could not elude me."

"Tell me! Tell me!" Mrs. Stannard implored.

"Certainly. I am coming to it. I take it, madam, that you do not care to hear the details of the chase. What you want to know is what your husband has done and where he has gone. I have here a list of the dates and places, if you will be so good as to give me your attention."

He pulled out his handkerchief to mop his brow, cleared his throat, and read as follows in a loud, rhetorical voice:

**REPORT ON JONATHAN STANNARD,
WRITER, 318 RIVERSIDE DRIVE**

Friday, July 9, 2.24 P.M., entered Empire Moving Picture Theater, Third Avenue and Thirty-ninth Street. Remained three hours and eleven minutes.

Friday, July 9, 8.15 P.M., entered Royal Moving Picture Theater, Third Avenue and Grand Street. Remained two hours and thirty-four minutes.

Saturday, July 10, only appearance in company with client, Mrs. Stannard.

Sunday, July 11, A.M., attended church with client.

Sunday, July 11, 7.09 P.M., entered Circle Moving Picture Theater, Ninth Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street. Remained three hours and fifteen minutes.

Monday, July 12, 3.03 P.M., entered Louvre Moving Picture Theater, Third Avenue and 14th Street. Remained two hours and one minute.

Tuesday, July 13, only appearance in company with client.

Wednesday, July 14, 1.48 P.M., entered Columbia Moving Picture Theater, Eighth Avenue and 117th Street. Remained four hours and twenty-one minutes.

Thursday, July 15, 9.10 A.M., went to Long Beach

with client.

Friday, July 16, 1.55 P.M., entered Mecca Moving Picture Theater, Broadway and Ninety-eighth Street. (Evidently getting bolder.)

Left him there to report to client.

Mr. Pearson closed the book and looked at his client with an air of triumph.

She sat motionless, gazing at him stupidly as though she had not comprehended. Then suddenly she was aware of a shadow on the threshold, and she looked up to see her husband standing in the doorway, a puzzled expression on his grave, handsome face at the sight of his wife seated talking to a man he had never seen.

He came toward them and saw the look on his wife's face.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

She struggled for a moment to find her voice, and finally succeeded.

"Jonathan," she said, "I know all. This is Mr. Pearson, a detective. He will tell you--"

Stannard's face paled a little as he looked from one to the other.

"A detective!" he repeated. "What for? What is it?"

Then Mr. Pearson spoke.

"Mr. Stannard," he announced, rising to his feet, "I have just informed your wife that during the past seven days you have spent twenty hours and two minutes in moving picture theaters, with the dates and places."

There was a silence. Stannard's face grew white as chalk, and it could be seen that he trembled from head to foot.

The detective gazed at him sternly. His wife had cast her eyes on the floor, as though she could not bear to look at him in that moment.

"I am ruined!" groaned the stricken man, sinking into a chair.

"And I thought it was some kind of a woman," whispered his wife. Profound regret was in her voice.

The detective stooped to pick up his hat.

"Well," he said as he started for the door, "I guess you're through with me."

Mrs. Stannard nodded her head in silence, then said suddenly:

"But I must pay you; how much is it?"

"That's all right," replied the other genially from the threshold; "we'll mail our bill and you can send a check. I trust the job has been

satisfactory?"

Again Mrs. Stannard nodded. "Quite satisfactory."

"Good. Good day, madam." He started to go, then turned again to add, "You'll have to excuse me for hurrying off like this, but I got a date to go to the movies."

Alone with her husband, Mrs. Stannard turned to look at him with an expression of mingled incredulity and sorrow. The unhappy man sat with his face buried in his hands, moaning piteously; great beads of perspiration stood out on his brow. Thus do strong men, overtaken by their sins, bend under the awful burden of remorse.

Suddenly he looked up and showed her his haggard countenance.

"It is the end," he whispered miserably. "The end of everything--I cannot--it is too much to expect--Vera, tell me--tell me--can you ever forgive me?"

And then it was that Vera Stannard shone forth in all the glory of her womanliness. She gazed at her husband and saw the dumb pleading of his eyes fastened on her; she heard the agonized despair in his voice, and she felt something come up in her throat, while the hot tears came to her eyes. It is ever woman's part to forgive. She smiled at him.

"We are one, Jonathan," she said in a sweet voice that trembled. "Who am I to judge you. I will even"--she hesitated and faltered, then went bravely on--"I will even share your sin. Yes, I will share it and glory in it."

She stepped forward and laid a hand on his arm.

"Come, dear; let us dress for dinner. Afterward we shall attend the cinema--together."

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