



# Cigarette

## A Short Story by Dorothy F. Perry, Christchurch

**J**OHN'S sister was—well, you know what sisters-in-law are. It was extraordinary that so nice a man as John should have had such an impossible sister.

Jane continually expressed these sentiments to John, and John sniffed and remained silent. Silence is a deadly weapon. If John had only said a word, Jane felt she could have endured Lucy gladly. As it was she could not suffer Lucy, who emphatically returned the compliment.

And now Lucy's husband had died—Lucy's husband had always had a penchant for doing the wrong thing—and his widow was foisted on John and Jane for a fortnight. Think of it! And John at his office from eight to six. If Lucy had been a heart-broken widow, Jane would have taken her to her bosom at once. But there had been no love lost between Lucy and her husband, so the antagonism remained. On the morning of her arrival, Lucy asked in what period John's book-case had been dusted? And she did it so sweetly.

John laughed—But not Jane. As she banged the door on brother and sister, she heard Lucy whisper, "My dear, is she often like that?—How patient you are, dear boy. Well, you can take refuge in my little flat. You have always your sister Loo to come to."

Ridiculous old woman! She would be wearing blue tie ribbons next. Had James done the wrong after all? Not for himself at all events. Still Lucy was a widow, and Jane was her hostess. The morning was weathered without a storm, and after lunch Jane suggested a stroll to clear the air.

"If you don't mind, dear, I would rather lie down. After all I have been through I don't feel like gadding." So Lucy lay down, and Jane, having supplied a novel and a hot bottle, shut herself in the drawing-room. She longed for a cigarette, but Lucy was not aware that she smoked, and smoke is—well, penetrating, and Lucy's nose was—well, nosey. She struggled through a play and opened her cigarette case and the window, when—Lucy entered.

"The radiator made me feel faint, but it was too cold to open the window. Oh, I see you have opened this one. Won't you catch cold, dear?" Jane slammed down the window and slipped her cigarette case under the sofa cushion simultaneously. "I never catch cold, dear. Are you quite rested, dear?" (If it came to endearments she could go one better than Lucy.) "Quite rested, thank you dear. But I'm afraid I've deprived you of your little outing?"

"Not at all. I'd far rather have tea by the fire with you, Lucy—dear." But she was horribly restless, as though she was missing something. Jane wondered with a pang if it could be James.

She introduced his name tentatively, and Lucy froze her by saying it was very hard to lose the breadwinner—just like Lucy to regard a husband as a breadwinner. Jane stared wistfully at the clock. Two hours before John returned! Perhaps she could snatch a cigarette before dinner while he and Lucy revelled in reminiscences of their family and the departed breadwinner.

But her hopes were dashed to the ground, for John rang up to say that he would be detained at the office till nine. Would she make his excuses to Lucy?

"John is kept at his wretched office. He is disconsolate. As you're so fagged, Lucy dear, wouldn't you like to have dinner in bed? We'll put in a fire as you dislike the radiator."

"Oh no, dear," protested Lucy. "That would never do. We'll have a cosy evening together. So glad I am here to keep you company. It's nice to feel one can be of use."

The afternoon dragged. Dinner dragged. If only Jane could have a cigarette! And Lucy was so restless—like a cat on hot bricks. She was certainly missing something. (So, alas, was Jane!)—Just one cigarette and she could carry on. Then she had an inspiration. She jumped up from her chair, nearly upsetting Lucy, who put her hand to her heart; and ran over to a little table, littered with books and papers, and returned with a family album.

"Here is something that will interest you, Lucy; Uncle Murison brought it last week. Portraits and snapshots of your family that he has hoarded for years. There is a sweet one of you with ringlets and striped socks, hugging a bunch of sweet peas—short sleeves and a tartan sash."

She dumped the album on Lucy's willing lap and fled. Lucy's passion for albums was notorious.

After all, Jane could not find her cigarettes. There was the case under the sofa cushions in the drawing-room, but that was too dangerous. She might rouse Lucy. John had apparently taken the box out of the dining-room, but there must be some stray ones somewhere. In despair she rifled his pockets. Oh joy! Only two, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

But where to consume them? Her bedroom was not safe from Lucy, or the dining-room or the kitchen—John's study! The study adjoined the dining-room, but though there were folding doors they were kept shut. It was a risk, but she would take it. Jane lit a cigarette, took a delicious whiff, and tiptoed to her haven. Ugh! It was cold. And smoky.

Suddenly she gave a jump and uttered a suppressed scream. There was a woman, sitting in John's chair, which had its back to the door, smoking a cigarette.

The occupant of the chair screamed simultaneously, and the sisters-in-law confronted each other.

"It's too funny," gurgled Jane. "Why on earth didn't you tell me you smoked, Lucy?"

"I couldn't shake you off, dear," replied Lucy, who was giggling quite humanly. "And the house is so tiny that you would have been bound to detect it. I suppose that's why you gave me the album?"

Jane linked her arm in Lucy's. "Just why, dear," she said, and danced her into the firelit drawing-room to smoke a cigarette of peace.