

A Lesson From The Play

By HOWARD FIELDING

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THERE were long racks for hats just outside the door of the hotel dining room, and as I was endeavoring to find my own headgear in the midst of the great and varied assortment a man spoke my name in a tone of surprise.

"Upon my word," he exclaimed, with unusual earnestness, "I'm glad to see you! I'm mighty glad to see you here!" I was glad to see him, too, though I might not have stated it in a manner so emphatic as his own. To me he was merely a friend unexpectedly met in a strange city; to him I certainly seemed to be something more. He was John M. Crawford, whom I have known intimately since our school days twenty-five years ago. We are both in business in New Haven, and one of us has been very prosperous, as anybody might guess from Crawford's aggressive and confident demeanor.

"I heard you were in Denver," said he. "I'm half way home," was my reply. "I had a bit of business in this city and stopped off for a day and a night."

"Well, I've a bit of business here, too," he said, "and you can help me out with it. It's not exactly in my line nor to my liking, but it's got to be done."

Naturally I asked him what it was. He led me to a retired spot in a corner of the hotel office, and when we were seated he pulled a folded piece of pink paper from his pocket. I perceived immediately that it was a theatrical programme, a single sheet such as one will see in "one night" towns. I looked at Crawford in surprise, for he is not a man who takes an interest in the drama.

He held the programme up before my eyes and put his finger upon a name in the list of the performers. It was Wallace Ford.

"Yes," said I, "he's an actor. His mother told me last winter that he had gone into the profession."

"She told me so, too," replied Crawford, "and I was sorry, though I have no prejudice against the stage, none whatever."

He spoke almost as if he were repelling an accusation.

"Well," said I, "this boy has got himself into trouble," said Crawford. "That's why I'm here. His mother asked me to see what I could do. She would have come herself, but she is not well enough to make the journey."

My sympathy as well as my curiosity was aroused. Nellie Ford was a school friend of mine many years ago, and she was the sort of girl that one always remembers. Her childish beauty and unfailing buoyancy of spirit seem to be a part of my own youth. Her name wasn't Ford, of course, in those old days when Jack Crawford and I used to sharpen lead pencils for her and be darkly jealous of each other. We were never jealous of Ford, who was a much older boy and quite out of the field of rivalry as we viewed it then. But he was the candidate of fate, and to such there can be no opposition. He had "prospects" when he married Nellie, and they were no more than prospects when he died ten years later. He bequeathed them to his wife

written to his mother, and she is fairly prostrated. So here I am."

"Have you seen him?" I asked. "Yes; I had a talk with him this afternoon, and he is the most obstinate young blunderhead that ever I encountered. Before I had fairly approached the subject he said he would throw me out of the window for venturing to hint that the young woman's past might be considered an obstacle. Well, you know me. I'll make an affidavit that no man lives who is more careful in the matter of a woman's good name."

"You may have been too careful," I suggested. "The boy should know the facts. He'll know them some day. Let's go and see him now together."

"It's too late," said Crawford. "He's gone to the theater. I'm to meet him afterward. Suppose we have a look at the play."

I assented, and after we had smoked together for a little while we strolled over to the theater.

The play was a sort of sentimental comedy by an English dramatist, a very good piece of work, it seemed to me. I had heard of it, but had never seen it performed and was ignorant of the story which it presented. Its leading idea was that a very good fellow upon his deathbed had put his motherless boy into the care of his best friend, who had accepted the trust with the highest resolve to execute it faithfully. Three other men who had known and loved the father were colleagues in this great and difficult task of bringing the orphan through all perils which might beset him up to a noble and honorable manhood.

At the rise of the curtain the youth is supposed to have attained his twenty-first birthday, and the story of his guardianship is disclosed to the audience in the first act, together with the facts that the four protectors have led a gay life in their time and that the boy shows signs of a tendency to do likewise.

Wally Ford played the part of the youngster, and I thought that his work was really excellent. Indeed, the whole company was surprisingly good, especially the young woman who (in real life, not in the play) had endeared Wally's affection. Upon the stage she had the role of an innocent girl to whom the four guardians have betrothed the boy.

"She's rather pretty. Don't you think so?" said I to Ford.

"Yes," confessed I, "she is— with her makeup on."

"There's no makeup that is equal to the self-delusion of a young fellow in love," said I. "This girl never painted her own face as Wally's fancy paints it."

"It's a queer thing," said Crawford a moment later, "that there's a splendid girl in this company. Mrs. Ford told me about her—good family, irreproachable character and all that. If Wally had fallen in love with her, he'd have had the maternal blessing. Mrs. Ford has no prejudice against actresses. She's a broad minded woman. She knows that there are lots of nice girls on the stage, and she believes in the work if a person really feels called to it. She put no obstacle in Wally's way when he expressed a wish to be an actor, and I think she's right. It is an honorable work. Now, this play, for instance, is full of the feeling and teaches a good lesson. You'll see."

"Which is the nice girl—the one whom Mrs. Ford likes?" I asked.

"You won't see her till the third act," he said. "She plays the adventuress."

"The adventuress does?" said I.

"It is the plot of the piece that this adventuress is led to believe that the youth has a lot of money, and she therefore agrees to marry him—if he will settle it all upon her. In reality he hasn't anything except what his guardians give him. The adventuress is connected with the dramatic profession in a very lurid capacity, and she is spoken of as having seen 'a great deal of the world.'"

"The youth in the play is totally blind and deaf so far as the adventuress is concerned. He won't hear a word said against her. He asserts his own judgment with the explosive confidence appropriate to his years and will listen to no warning from the older and wiser men who have reared him for his father's sake and who make any sacrifice to shield him from disaster."

I beheld this plot unfolding before me with a slowly growing wonder at the amazing coincidence which was involved.

"How long," I whispered to Crawford, "has Wally been playing this part?"

"All the season," he replied.

"A hundred times, at least," said I. "A hundred times he has held up this mirror of folly to the eyes of the multitude, and, by the living Jingo, he has never seen it himself."

"It does fit his own case to the life, doesn't it?" said Crawford.

The curtain had fallen upon the second act, at the close of which the chief trustee of the boy decides to buy the adventuress outright for the small sum of \$1,000 as the only way of rescuing the youthful prey from her clutches. We could speak more at our ease between the acts.

"How is it possible," said I, "that he can play this part over and over again and in his private life enact the very folly which he holds up to the public for a lesson?"

"I don't know," said Crawford. "Doesn't look reasonable that a man could do that; upon my word it doesn't. Love's a queer thing."

"Do you think that the fellow on the stage is supposed to be in love with the adventuress?"

"No," said he; "not really."

"Well, neither is Wally in love with this girl. He is suffering from a species of self-hypnosis. He is under the influence of a delusion. We must wake him up."

"We'll have another try at the play," said Crawford. "The company doesn't leave town till tomorrow. He is coming to my room at the hotel. We'll both do our best. It's a serious matter, my friend. Wally may marry the girl any day."

We saw the remainder of the play and then walked back to the hotel. Half an hour later there was an unnecessarily loud rap at the door, and Wally Ford strode in, tall, handsome and strong. I observed an excess of dignity, an effort to seem older than his years—in fact, very much the same demeanor that he uses on the stage when he says, 'There comes a time in every man's life when his own judgment is of far more use to him than any other person's.'

The reply in the play is, 'Perhaps this is not one of those times.'

But the internal difficulty is to beat such a conviction into the head of an obstinate boy.

Wally started at the sight of me, and there was an added defiance in his manner when he returned my greeting. I hastened to assure him that my presence in the city was entirely accidental, and he said, with a withering glance at Crawford, that he was glad to hear it.

There is really no use in setting down here what we said to him that night. It would have been just the same if we had read to him out of the city directory. My statement that the very part he played should teach him prudence and respect for the judgment of his elders nearly procured some broken bones. Did I venture to compare Miss Hartington with the woman of the drama? Oh, dear, no; not for the world. Still there was a faint basis for comparison in the fact that she was five years older than himself.

"Miss Hartington is but twenty-six," said he. "She is two years older than I am."

I shook my head in blank despair. The boy even believed her in regard to her age.

"And," he added, "you would hardly urge the difference in our ages as a reason for my delay. It is a reason for haste. Life slips away. We should not waste our youth. It does not come again."

"We may differ, Wallace," said I, "upon a definition. What constitutes a waste of one's youth?"

"A long engagement, for one thing," he replied, "when two people are sure of each other."

Crawford argued with his customary gentleness, and I lost my temper, but we produced no effect upon Wally. When he had gone we held a council of war and decided to follow the play to the next town. We did so, and to the next after that. The business manager of the company began to recognize us and to nod pleasantly when we met upon a train. No one but Wally knew our errand. We were suspected of being fascinated by some of the young ladies. Altogether, for two respectable middle aged married men, our position began to be embarrassing. Moreover, we were doing no good. Yet we were more and more strongly convinced that our young friend was on the brink of a great folly, that he was infatuated with a wholly mercenary woman and that because of our old time regard for his mother we could not desert him while there remained the most shadowy ghost of a chance of saving him.

Wally was entirely unshaken in his allegiance to Miss Hartington. He treated

Crawford and me with frozen dignity. It was utterly futile to reason with him, and when at last he informed us that his wedding would take place within a fortnight we decided that the battle was lost. Nevertheless we did not quit the field, and as the company played an engagement of three consecutive nights in one city we were spared the miseries of travel.

We took a double suit in a rascally little hotel in order to be near Wally, who was economizing for the wedding and on the last of the three nights we were sitting in the parlor waiting for the boy, who had promised to see us after the performance. He came promptly, and with the magnanimity of a victor, he greeted us less jolly than usual. Indeed we were fairly launched upon a really amicable conversation when a hasty rap at the door interrupted us.

Crawford answered, and I saw him retreat from the door after he had opened it, as if there had been a ghost outside.

"I beg your pardon," said a voice which I instantly recognized as Miss Hartington's. "Is Mr. Ford here?"

Crawford did not reply in words, but he made a series of grotesquely wooden gestures which the lady rightly interpreted as an invitation to come in. So she came, and her looks amazed me. I had seen her several times on the stage, and always the sight of her had touched my heart. The world had not used her well, and she showed it. She had seemed to me a beaten woman, weary, disappointed and oppressed by a deep sense of injustice, yet withal sustained by some interior strength which I had taken to be sheer pugnacity.

Now she was transformed. She held her head high; her eyes shone; there was the magic of renewed youth in her face.

"Wally," she cried, "read that!"

And she gave him a telegram, so long that it filled two sheets. The boy got about half way through it, and then he seized her hand, exclaiming:

"Splendid! Splendid! This is the chance of a lifetime. I'm so mighty, mighty glad for you."

She looked at him intently, lovingly—yes, by all that's odd, the woman loved him.

"Is the chance of a lifetime for both of you?" she said, paying no more attention to the telegram than if it had been two dumplings. "Wally, this offer—miraculous as it is—may also rain roses."

"No dollars," said he.

"This part that is offered me," she continued, "is all that I ask. If I cannot make my way with this, I am content to fail. But I was no content to do so. My life of mine and have nothing, absolutely nothing; no smallest desire granted, no single gleam of good fortune between my cradle and my grave. Wally, I was not strong enough to do it. I was not strong enough to live a life all loss and still do right. But now, now! Now I can do it. I can say to you what I should have said long ago, that—that you must not think of me any more."

She had been at a high pitch of courage up to that last sentence, but she could not quite carry it on to the end. I thought that she didn't mean what she said, but the boy knew her better, and suddenly his face grew startlingly white.

"Do you mean," he cried, "that you will break with me?"

"Yes," she answered, and she waved her hand toward Crawford and me. "Ask them. They know. They'll tell you—they've been telling you. Love some one who has not lived so much, who has illusions and the hopes of girlhood. I lost them long ago, but I have ambition. I love my work. You shall see."

And in the midst of this outburst she vanished from the room.

Wally's face, which had been so pale, now flamed with rage.

"You," he shouted, striking up to us. "You have done this. You have bought her. You have wrecked my life."

I think he was upon the point of striking Crawford, but instead he turned upon his heel and left us.

Crawford sank into a chair and said lower and lower in it till I thought he would slide off upon the floor.

"The boy is crazy," said I. "This is undoubtedly genuine. The girl has got a fine engagement, and her good luck has given her the strength to do right, just as she said. But to accuse us of getting this engagement for her?"

Crawford interrupted us by tapping up his own breast.

"I did it," said he. "She doesn't know it, but I did. I telegraphed to a fellow in New York to send money and all that. By George, she has got a chance. I know for I paid for it. And somehow I'm ashamed. It's like some blasted conspiracy, and yet it's for the good of both of them."

"But how did you know she'd give him up?"

"You don't understand women," said he. "You never did. She loved him."

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"HE'S FALLEN IN LOVE WITH A GIRL IN THIS COMPANY."

and his son. Some day they would get a share of a considerable estate, but it was a long time coming.

"So Wally Ford has got himself into trouble," said I. "Well, we'll get him out. That's all settled. Now I'll hear the story."

"He's fallen in love with a girl in this company," said my friend. "She's older than he is and—quite out of the question. She's been married and divorced—two or three times, I believe. Really, you know, it's mighty hard to say anything against a woman even when the worst that one is tempted to say isn't half as bad as the truth. But in this case I think there's no doubt that the woman's motives are entirely mercenary. You know Wally must get his money soon in the more course of nature. Old Timothy Ford can't live forever. And this girl has found it out and has made up her mind to marry Wally. The boy has