

THE WOMAN'S BEST SHORT FICTION

The Courtship of the Boss—By Anne O'Hagan

It was not surprising that Daniel Hennessey and his fellow townsmen sometimes forgot that the majority was not a hereditary office in Crowley. For so many undignified terms he had been chief magistrate that at last the very town seemed to him his heritage.

The people of the larger city that lay across the state line from Crowley—were given to much abuse of that begrimed center of mills, railroads, gas-works, and oil-tanks. When they spoke of Crowley's mayor and his administrations, it was with the triumphant vindictiveness of those who maintain their own virtuous standing chiefly by the shortcomings of others.

But all the periodic outcries of its great neighbor left Crowley placidly unmoved. Mr. Hennessey and the town agreed admirably with each other. Its population was a poor one; it was the shabby sleeping-place of a horde of petty clerks and workmen, who were ferried over to the big city in the morning twilight and back at evening dusk. It was the abode of its own soiled mill-hands and railroad laborers, of the employees on the trolley lines, of its retired saloon-keepers, and of their graduates in the starting, new, rectangular City Hall that was its boast.

Habituated to makeshifts and blunders, they accepted without resentment the caving-in of badly-laid pavements, the bursting of shell-like sewer pipes, and the spluttering and flickering of illuminating gas that did not illuminate.

Daniel Hennessey suited them. If he did not give them good streets, he made ample amends in the ways of picnics, free to all comers; if he amassed property at a rate unpleasantly suggestive, wealth did not render him proud. Moreover, he spent his income in a way that made Crowley as indifferent to taxation as a loyal Briton on Coronation Day. No mayor within a hundred miles had more diamonds, raced better horses, or kept a more expensive or more easy "open house" at New Year's and other times when he bade his constituents hearty welcome.

Even his political associates were not jealous of Hennessey. He was a "fair man," they said, wearing their chins judicially; by which they meant that if Daniel held stock in each new trolley that won a franchise from the town, they too held stock in their degree; and that if the company which mysteriously, in spite of a high bid, received the contract for opening up a new street, balanced things by restoring a small proportion of its fee to the city officials, they, as well as Daniel, profited.

And they continued to let Daniel rule them and rule Crowley, while the opposition languished into a negligible quantity, prating of assessments, civic honor and the hygienic disposal of refuse, but never organizing a bare party in the summer or distributing coats in the winter.

If Crowley's center was the disgrace to civilization which its neighbors named it, the outskirts were indescribably filthy. The streets were unpaved, the roads ungraded, the infrequent street lamps were erected apparently as targets for stray missiles. Along the river-side toward the north was the road which the big city was constantly urging the little one to turn into a boulevard or a speedway, so great were its natural beauties. On one side lay the winding, leafless stream and on the other sloping, wooded mountains. But Crowley had small use for speedways; so the river-bank north of the town's center went quickly to ruin. Here a flood had encroached upon the road and left a great gap of jagged rock and water; and there a quarrying company, empowered by the city to blast rock, had left holes and pitfalls. The rains came and washed down the earth, uncovering the old corduroy foundations, until even the sure-footed horses from outlying truck farms were forced to seek a new road to town.

In the tangled growth of grass and weeds and trees that sloped up from the river's bank, were five or six old houses. They had been country seats when Crowley was merely a ferry-slip. They had been built with that ancient solidity which defies time and even vandalism. The owners had long since ceased to occupy them, and for the most part they were untenanted. The shingles had fallen from their roofs, the glass was gone from their windows, the doors were fallen from their hinges, the columns of their high piazzas were scarred and chipped by the hands of many pickpockets. In the coarse grass that covered their old carriage-ways the wheel tracks of the past were dim, and ragged weeds choked out the fine grass where lawns had stretched.

It was one morning in September that Mayor Hennessey was tempted to try this ramshackle road. He had intended to take a spin out of the town and try his new horse on the good roads south of his jurisdiction, but when he came down the steps of the City Hall, he found he was too late for the run. Yet there was an unwonted freshness in the air—the wind blowing the many smokes of Crowley away from him—and he wished to try the horse. He bent to lift Lady Hamilton's boots with practiced hand, then rising, flushed with the exertion, he climbed into the light rig and took the reins from the slouching hostler.

In the Crowley language he was "a fine figure of a man," broad and well padded by nature across the shoulders and ample of chest. Crowley liked the ruddy, jovial face, the fine, fierce iron-gray mustache at which his honor was twinkled down upon a voter's baby. They started delicately, Lady Hamilton and her owner. His big hands in their orange driving gloves grasped the reins lightly. On the River Way Daniel had purposed to give the horse her head, but the twisting road did not look promising for speed. Although along the winding way he kept a tight

rein, at a sharp turn he came upon calamity.

An adventurous furniture van—what idiot could be carting furniture long the River Way?—blocked travel. Its rear wheel hung over a minor precipice washed out of the road. Some of its content had escaped their rope moorings and lay below, a damaged pile with the ripples washing it. The driver stood scratching his head futilely, and a woman was surveying the scene.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," said his honor, elaborately. "Excuse me for not dismounting to help you, ma'am, but this mare, ma'am, is a bit skittish this morn'." Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes, if you please," said the lady with unfeminine promptness. "I think this driver's drunk. I thought as he came this morning, and that's why I came along with the load. I don't care to have him flash dumping my furniture into the river. If there is such a thing in that town back there"—she nodded contemptuously in the direction of Crowley's center, and the Mayor felt a thrill of wounded pride such as he had not known in thirty years—"as a decent furniture wagon and a man sober enough to unload this on it, please send them to me."

"I will, ma'am, with pleasure, ma'am," answered the Mayor, resentful of Lady Hamilton's determined pull to be gone. "I will be much obliged," announced the lady in a tone that implied no consciousness of overwhelming obligation. "Not at all, ma'am, not at all," the Mayor managed to jerk out, as the horse, safely turned, began to make good her late owner's claims in regard to her speed.

To insure it that the calm woman of the gray eyes was properly served, Daniel set to her aid a city driver driven by a man so sober as to be absolutely taciturn. This being never mentioned to her that the infamously famous Mayor of Crowley had befriended her.

The Mayor was no "lady's man." Fifteen years before he had, as he put it, "buried his wife." Since then he had been too busy to think much about women. Indeed he had been so before poor Mrs. Hennessey had made her final pathetic appeal for thought. But since then he had been the despair of the ladies of Crowley's political circle who were well aware of his eligibility.

Today, however, there was a gentle tumult beneath his striped shirt and his checked waistcoat. The direct gaze from a pair of fine, unseeing gray eyes lent intruding between him and his official business. And at night he went languidly to the brick structure of which he had always thought proudly as the finest house in Crowley, being seized with an inexplicable distaste for its solitary splendors.

He stood at the door of the parlor, hoping by a contemplation of it to restore the brilliancy of his conception of his home. The ornate clock ticked loudly on the black marble mantel. Daniel scowled at it and at the tall Chinese vases at either end, and even at the silver loving-cup inscribed with divers names and with high-sounding sentiments.

The lace curtains hung in spotless evenness clear to the floor, and swept the rose-strewn carpet a few inches. The chairs, upholstered in plush of the softest texture and the most glowing hue, stood evenly against the flowered wall. The marble table supported a gorgeously-bound Bible, an empty card receiver of jade and silver, and a plush photograph album. A long gilt-framed mirror doubled the room, chair for chair and ornament for ornament—even the great, dead, upright piano over against the folding doors, where the red portieres were pulled back by heavy electric cord like the fringe on a general's epaulet.

"An' no one to play it," grumbled the Mayor.

By morning, however, his honor was better. At fifty, the successful politician seldom perishes of love at first sight. He made up his mind to visit the farm-house where some of his horses were pasturing, to buy a library—the Mayor did things on a grand scale—and to start the campaign. Not that there was much arduous campaigning in Crowley. "It's a walk-over for us, all right," said the Mayor, half annoyed at the fact.

He had smoked a cigar and had a chat with the District Attorney as part of the day's business, when a clerk from the outer office stood at his desk.

"A lady to see you," said the clerk. "The District Attorney looked his surprise. So did the Mayor.

"You mean me?" he asked.

"Yes," nodded the clerk.

"Did ye tell her I was busy?"

"Says she'll wait."

"What'll she want?" pondered the Mayor aloud, for the female lobbyist was the one political evil unknown in Crowley.

"Have her in and see, Dan," counseled the District Attorney. "I'll stay and help you out."

"All right." Send her in, Bill," concluded his honor. And in two more minutes a plump, neat, forceful-looking woman was ushered into the mayor's presence.

Daniel withdrew in his chair to see his visitor, then he bounded to his feet. "How'd ye do, ma'am, how'd ye do?" he cried joyously. And as he advanced he muttered to the District Attorney: "It's all right, Carr. Get out." Which Carr did with a smile made up of equal parts of amazement and comprehension.

The lady of the gray eyes looked her astonishment.

"Oh!" she said. "It's you?"

"It is, ma'am," said Daniel, beaming as he pushed forward a chair with one hand, and with the other sent his cigar stand flying through the open window. "An' delighted if I can be of any service to you. The man I sent—the driver—were all right."

"Oh, yes," she replied absently, as she sat down. "They were all right. You were very kind. I didn't understand."

"I suppose you mean in them black-guardly papers across the river?" he returned, stirred to an unwonted heat.

Again the widow's soothing, radiant smile appeared.

"I suppose they were opposition papers," she conceded. "But that River Way is a disgrace and a danger. And it is in the city, you know."

Charmed by her amiability, the Mayor hastened to concede also.

"It has been somewhat neglected in the press of other matters, but now that we seem likely to have a population out that way—something will have to be done."

"The street lamps do not seem to be lighted out there at night. It's rather gloomy if one's a stranger," she said.

"Never a whimper about bel'n' a woman!" thought Mayor Hennessey proudly, while he proclaimed aloud: "If the lighters ain't doin' their duty, ma'am, we'll soon look the reason."

The lady rose to go. Her face was divided between its grim resolution and its sunny confidence.

"You will do something, then?" she said. "You see I'm ignorant. Maybe I ought to have gone to some one else."

He gripped the Mayor's hand. He

neatly written, but it seemed to him unnecessarily brief, note from Maria Downs acknowledging the receipt of twenty-eight dollars, and thanking him for the trouble he had taken in her behalf.

The campaign went on; and the result was the usual one. The Mayor was triumphantly re-elected. The returns reached him at the party headquarters, conveniently adjacent to Casey's saloon. He and his aides sat about a long table in an upper room, dimly perceiving one another's good-natured faces and titter hats through a haze of smoke. There was plenty of laughter during the evening, and when the last district had been heard from, the Mayor, according to his time-honored custom, invited his friends to remain until Casey sent up a little something to drink success to the government. They all waited except young Donahue, the new alderman.

"You'll excuse me, Mr. Hennessey," he apologized, slipping into his overcoat, "but there's a little woman at home that'll be sittin' up to hear the good news."

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her brown hair and the lines about her eyes, was calculating. "Thirty-eight or maybe forty." But he closed his arithmetical exercises to say, with pained attention:

"To find fault? With me, ma'am?"

"With you—since you're the government of Crowley," she answered, again with the smile that took all harshness from her face, "anyway, with the government of Crowley."

She paused. Mayor Hennessey, satisfied with red, had no apt reply. So he fixed his blue eyes, from which the twinkle had departed, dejectedly upon her and waited.

"I have been left an old house," she announced, "out on the road you call the River Way. It used to be known as the Blair Place."

"Yes," said the Mayor.

"I am a poor woman," she went on, "a self-supporting one."

"A widow—or did her husband desert her?" inwardly questioned the Mayor in a peroration of fear.

"My husband died thirteen years ago, and I have got along pretty hard until now, when I come into possession of this property."

"It couldn't come to better hands," declared the Mayor, bowing his head. But his visitor seemed not to hear, and he felt himself all at once absurd and small.

"I can't come to a place now," she said. "Of course I didn't know or I wouldn't have moved here clear from Illinois. However, I'm here. And I mean to stay. And I mean to open a boarding-house there, for the house is as big as a barn, and I'm used to the business. But the road to it has to be repaired. Mr.—"

"Hennessey," supplied the Mayor.

"Mr. Hennessey. No one would travel over such a road to get anywhere. There ought to be a breakwater all along the river-edge there," she finished severely.

The Mayor began to recover himself. "Oh, my dear madam," he said in the florid political manner, "we're not a rich community like the city over there. Ours is a working population. A breakwater is an expensive luxury for which our taxpayers would be unable to pay."

The widow gazed at him steadily.

"I've read all about Crowley," she announced.

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Next summer—"Next summer, ma'am," declared the Mayor, with sudden decision, "there'll be two miles of as fine breakwater as you'd want to see along this road. And the city'll build it."

"I'm sure I hope so," said Mrs. Downs with skeptical dryness of intonation.

"You have me word for it, ma'am," said the Mayor at a summer temperature of embarrassment. Then, awkwardly enough he persuaded the lady to permit him to drive her along the road for a way, and he felt a thrill of pride when, looking doubtfully from her shabbiness to his seal-lined elegance, she averred that "she wasn't fit."

Back in the City Hall by-and-by, he sent for young Donahue and for young Wilson. Young Donahue learned that he was to introduce a bill providing for a breakwater along the River Way, for a two-mile stretch of macadam road, for the planting of new shrubbery and for the cutting through of a street behind the few dwellings that fronted on the river. Nothing but the boundlessness of his belief in his boss saved him from panic.

"Do—do you—think it'll go through?" he asked.

"It'll go through," answered the Mayor shortly.

Young Wilson, tall, slim, blond and indolent had, for his uncle's sake, to draw a salary. But he was a foolish youth, scarcely fit even for the ornamental secretaryship created for him in the office of the Commissioner of Docks. To-day Mayor Hennessey decided that he should "earn his keep."

"Where are you livin', Wilson?" he demanded abruptly.

"Up at Mrs. Snyder's," replied the astonished Wilson.

The Mayor considered how to make it up to Snyder.

"Like it there?"

"First-rate place," replied Wilson, examining his nails carefully. He was reported in City Hall circles to be addicted to the manicure habit.

"Could you move—to oblige me?" said the Mayor. Mr. Wilson bestowed a sharper glance than usual on his chief.

"Shouldn't care to," he drawled. Then he explained. "You see, I've been there two years and it's homelike and—er—" he finished with a smile.

"Making up my mind to go, eh? Well, what I've in mind would do you no harm there. You'll get her all the quicker for not bein' under her feet the whole time, and I'll square it with the missus. Now I want—and he scheduled what he wanted.

Of course he had his own way. Wilson might sigh and grumble and declare that it was too far out for a person who liked to see a little life of an evening, but Wilson knew that he must be persuaded or lose the easy secretaryship, and he was persuaded.

All that week the Mayor's obscure agents were busy searching the titles of the River Way estates and bargaining with the long-disgusted holders of them. Had Daniel Hennessey appeared as a purchaser the owners would have suspected expensive schemes and would have held their land dear. But only a few poor fellows, not even real estate speculators, wanted to buy. They had to buy on small mortgages. The estates went very cheaply, and the mortgages were cleared with astonishing speed after the transfers had been made to Mr. Daniel Hennessey.

Then Mr. Hennessey worked with his aldermen, his Common Council and his Board of Public Works. They did not see, at first, just what was in it, but under the guidance of their astute chief their vision gradually cleared.

Nearly two miles of river-front land in his possession, a breakwater and a macadam roadway in front, a street opened through in the rear; a branch of the main trolley line running along that new street; what more natural than the formation of the River Way Real Estate Company, the erection of villas—all chocolate-colored gables and crushed strawberry porticos and shallow cream-colored bay windows? A great light began to break in upon the municipal brains. Then there was the Point, three miles farther on, where the river made its deep dip and the land was a wooded promontory. There was a beach there—a fine sand beach. Picture the macadam road and the butters against the water continued to this point on one side and the trolley busing through to it on the other! Was there anything the matter, the Mayor would like to know, with organizing the Laurel Point Pleasure Resort Association? The Mayor's friends enthusiastically agreed that there was not, only one irrelevant man venturing to point out that there were no laurels within two hundred miles of the little cape.

So the Mayor worked and manipulated and waited. To his allies he seemed, as usual, a great and genial organizer who never "forgot his friends." But he knew himself for the humbler worker of energetic Maria Downs.

Maria Downs did not know him so. Had he informed her that a sea-wall

was building because she had stood one windy morning directing two rude masons before her house, or that "restricted villas" were rearing themselves in pink and yellow-gabled angularity that she might have neighbors of the safe sort, or that a trolley line ran to her back door that her boarders might travel to and fro with ease and in safety, she would have been amazed. She would only have thought him a more elaborate liar than she had been already taught to believe him. And perhaps her skepticism would have proved more nearly true than his fancy, for certain it is that his active mind had more pleasure in this indirect pursuit of her than the chase of an innamorata often affords a man.

The Mayor was a frequent visitor at the big boarding-house, where he marveled to find his open fire more attractive than his gilded radiators. He wondered, too, why her homely work-basket seemed so much more of an ornament on her red-covered table than the jade card-receiver on his marble-top at home. But, slow to unfamiliar sentiment and awkward in her actual presence, he never put the questions to her. The years when women had not mattered to him had done their work.

As the third Christmas of Maria's reign and the Crowley approached, "I'll tell her we'll go over to Paree the week after," she can get what she wants."

The old Blair place beamed rosy and yellow out into the white radiance of the night. The Mayor's heart thumped painfully and his fingers bungled as he fastened the weight to the bit. His voice was a little thick as he asked for "Mrs. Downs" and the smiling maid admitted him.

Mrs. Downs came in after a brief delay. There was a flush on her cheek like a young girl's, and her eyes were starry. Her plain frock was exchanged for something that fluted and fluttered about the throat. The Mayor surveyed her with an agitated pride.

They wished each other a Merry Christmas and drew their chairs before the fire. The Mayor tugged at his big mustache, and cleared his throat many times. Then he played with the cat. Mrs. Downs gazed silently at the blaze. Suddenly she turned toward him.

"I want to tell you something," she said with her old directness. "You're my oldest friend here; you gave me my start with the dray and the driver and—and my first boarder. You remember. Well—I'm going to be married."

Daniel stared at her, his big red face expressionless, his eyes like two bits of dull blue china. She hurried on nervously.

"It's Ed—Mr. Wilson. You're responsible, you see, for it all."

A slow amazement dawned over Daniel's face. He was galvanized into speech, and with one sentence showed how vast a gulf lies between tact with men and tact with women.

"Why, he's nothing but a boy!" he blurted out.

Brickish red traveled slowly up Maria's sensible face.

"He is older than you think," she said stiffly, "and maybe I'm not so old."

Daniel looked at her with drooping jaw for a minute.

"Maybe," he acquiesced finally, but it was the acquiescence of an unbeliever.

"And you don't know," she hurried on, ashamed of her brief animosity, "how a woman who's had a hard time and—none too much pleasure—liking—in her life, wants it when it comes. You see," she wound up with a final attempt at bravado, "you're a hard-headed business man and a politician, and I don't believe you know about romance."

The Mayor stared at her from glazed eyes for a minute. "I guess you're right," he agreed at last. He rose and, going to the red-curtained window, looked out across the sloping lawn, flecked with lights from the house. The smooth road above the river shone white in the night. He could hear the water softly beating the stone defense he had made against it. There was a dull weight in his chest.

"I guess you're right," he said as he turned back to the room and stretched out his big hand in congratulation. "I guess you're right. Romance ain't in my line."