

A Romance of The Year's End

By Howard Fielding.

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If you had been able to look into Henry Clifford's rooms upon a certain evening as if they were a scene set on a stage and he an actor, you would have said to yourself, "What is the matter with this fellow?"

He was engaged in packing his belongings in spasmodic bursts of hurry, and often he would stand stock still and set his teeth very hard and pull himself together in the manner of a man who fights against a prostrating illness or a racking pain. You would have felt sure that he was forcing himself through this task, which must be done within a very brief time, for he kept looking at his watch, and the sight of it always seemed to increase his distress and his hurry.

Now, the facts are that there was not a healthier young man in ten miles' radius, that he suffered no physical pain whatever and that he had a superfluity of time for what he was doing. It was the evening of Friday, Dec. 31, and Clifford was to leave his rooms on the following Wednesday and sail on Thursday. Meanwhile he had scarcely anything to do except the remainder of his packing, a few hours' work in all.

Take another look at the man, and then I will let you into the secret. You will observe that he is a strong, rugged, masculine creature, with a handsome but somewhat stern countenance, keen gray eyes, plenty of nose and a firm jaw—an attractive fellow, not unamiable, but very hard to move. He is an expert in steel work, especially bridge building, and his appearance fits his calling.

This is what had happened to him: In the early part of the preceding summer he made the acquaintance of Miss Dorothy Leland at her father's country house on the north shore, and he had fallen in love with her.

He addressed himself to Dorothy's father, who admired the young man extremely and willingly gave him leave to try his fortune. Then, with a sense of hazard that might have paralyzed a weaker man, with cold fear in the marrow of his bones and a consuming fire in his blood, but outwardly as steady as iron, he offered his hand and heart to Dorothy.

The girl had seen this coming, and yet she was surprised. It was too soon. She was almost angry with Clifford, as if he had been guilty of a roteness. He had spoiled the fun.

The sense of justice in man is replaced in woman by the punishing instinct. A true woman will punish even an inanimate object if it hurts her. If you have seen a little girl stumble on the stairs and then stand and make



HE WAS FORCING HIMSELF THROUGH THIS TASK.

faces at the stair carpet you have the material for a considerable knowledge of the sex.

Only one circumstance saved Clifford from a direct refusal—that he showed in his avowed incapacity for doing precisely what he had thus far conspicuously neglected. He really did introduce the subject, and for half an hour he was a wooer, speaking of nothing in particular, but with a thrill images of beauty rose unthought to his lips, surprising and exciting his own heart; he sang a sort of wordless song to her, and all the meaning was in his eyes. What he said was mere fancy, mere picture, a direct emotional appeal, and if he had gone on like that for half an hour more he might have won an acceptance. But suddenly his intellect awoke and felt itself neglected. It intruded awkwardly where it had no business, and it wrecked the scene. He began to speak straight out, rationally about marriage and his status in the world and all the cold conventionalities. Thirty minutes at least these matters should have been postponed, but Clifford did not know it.

Dorothy was furious—as she herself would have expressed it. Her wrath when he began to speak ordinary, colorless words out of the dictionary was directly proportionate to the pleasure she had had in the bird song pretense; but, of course, she couldn't tell him to go back and do it over again. He should have known it; he must be punished.

"No," she said, rising. "No, I cannot listen."

"That is your answer?" said he. "I have not answered you at all," said Dorothy. "I am not prepared for either question or answer. Let us not speak of it."

"I have spoken," said he sadly. "If you have not answered, I can only wait."

"Yes," she said, "wait. We have been friends. Let us go on as before. But you must not speak to me of this."

"The question must remain," he said, with a touch of firmness. "It would not be right, it would not be honest, to ignore it."

"Let it be so," said she, "and I will answer"—

"When?"

"Within the year," said she, and looked for him to plead for a much briefer time, but he said gravely: "Within this year?" And she answered, "Yes."

The absurd fellow accepted these terms as if his honor were in pledge for their fulfillment. They met as friends thereafter, and Clifford was often very charming and lovable, but his lips were sealed. There were times when Dorothy could have beaten him. He was aware in his foolish way of her displeasure, and he read his doom in it. The days passed, and she gave him no answer, and of course he didn't ask her for it. He didn't know enough. He relied upon her promise (the idiot) to answer him within the year, and now it was half past 10 on the evening of the 31st of December, and she had not answered!

He could not believe that she would be false to her promise, but he had long since ceased to have the smallest hope of any favorable word. Within the last month he had seen her rarely; within the last week he had decided that he would go away. He had resigned his position with the bridge company and was considering several offers of work in the far parts of the earth. An agent of the British government had offered him special inducements to go to Pretoria for a year, and he viewed the proposition favorably because the place was so remote. He had, in fact, accepted, with the single proviso that he should be permitted to change his mind at any moment within the year.

Several times during that last evening he had resolved to telephone to Sir James Knowlton, the English representative in this negotiation, that he might consider the matter settled, and then he had clung to the dwindling possibility that Dorothy might yet communicate with him.

At half past 10 he had a foolish idea. Perhaps Dorothy had sent some word and he had not received it. Would it be a breach of his word to ask her? He sat with his head in his hands and debated this question, and at last, like a dull, dishonest schoolboy who knows the answer of the problem and shapes his figuring to fit it, Clifford shaped his reasoning to suit his desire and dragged himself to the telephone.

Dorothy did not give him any time to ask her anything; she had her own way with the conversation.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "Nothing? You're all alone? Well, that won't do at all on New Year's eve. Come right over here. Father is entertaining a few sedate graybeards, and no one is entertaining me. If I had dreamed that you were disengaged I should have summoned you."

That was very friendly—far, far too much so. A young lady who felt herself bound to answer a young man's offer of marriage within an hour and a half would hardly address him in a style so unconstrained. The inevitable inference was that Dorothy considered the matter settled already, the "no" tacitly given and understood, the love episode at an end.

It is said that a poet has died young in every one of us. He was not quite dead in Clifford, and he was a really able bard. Dorothy had heard him sing once; she was now to hear him sing again, and in a most moving strain.

Clifford's mood was ideal for the performance, and his theme, the exile's farewell, has always been a favorite. Moreover, he had the advantage of unveiling a complete surprise, and Dorothy listened with a feeling of great grief and loss that did not lack an element of pleasure.

Clifford said not a word about her part in this upheaval of his life. The cause of his expatriation seemed to lie with the gods, like the issues of Greek tragedy, though the king of England and some other earthly potentates dignified the tale with their presence and could not escape the feminine eye. There was no suggestion of reproach or bitterness, but there was an undertone of simple, unaffected broken heartedness deeply touching.

"I think it was unkind to go so far in this," said she, "without a word to me. I would have tried to dissuade you. Is it even now too late?"

Clifford glanced at the clock.

"I have still ten minutes," said he. "If Sir James does not hear from me before midnight I am pledged, honor and bond, to do so."

"And why midnight? It is a strange hour."

"Can you not guess?"

"What? The clock, as if surprised. You were waiting for my answer, and you did not tell me?"

"Tell you, Dorothy?" he echoed. "How could I tell you? I had promised you not to speak!"

"Oh, man, will you never learn women? I have waited for you in pale wrath—waited for you weeks and months."

"Dorothy!" he gasped. "It is not possible. In this—is this your answer?"

"Where is that man?" she asked.

"Sir James?"

"Yes."

"At the Army and Navy club. He will wait there till midnight. On the stroke of 12 our bargain is closed."



"WILL YOU WAIT FOR ME?"

"Call him up! Tell him you are not going."

She slipped away from him and led the way to the telephone. He called the number. Intermittent seconds passed.

"Busy," said central.

He waited one minute by his watch and called again. "Busy." Another minute and another. The same answer. Then suddenly both he and she fell into a listening attitude, looking into each other's eyes. From outside the house, from the rivers that surround the city, there came a great and growing drone of whistles, the greeting to the new year.

"My watch is slow," said he. "I am too late."

He hung up the receiver of the telephone and turned toward Dorothy. He was very pale.

"I shall be gone a year," he said. "Will you wait for me?"

"No," she answered. "I will go with you."

The Bad Spot.

An Irishman one day was told to put up a signboard on which were the words, "To Motorists—This Hill Is Dangerous."

Away went Mike with the signboard and placed it at the bottom of a very steep hill. A few days later his employer went to see how the sign was put up and, finding it at the bottom of the hill, sought and found Mike.

"You blooming fool!" he cried. "Why didn't you put that sign in the right place?"

"Shure and ain't it?" asked Mike. "Don't all the accidents happen at the bottom?"—Harper's Weekly.

Crazy to Expect It.

Harduppe—Say, old fellow, lend me a hundred, will you? Riggs—A hundred what? Harduppe—A hundred dollars. Riggs—Oh, stop your joking. Harduppe (earnestly)—Joking? I was never more serious in my life. I'm broke. Riggs—My dear man, you're not broke; you're cracked!—Catholic Standard and Times.

Not Designed For Lovers.

He—I am sure Cupid had nothing to do with the alphabet. She—What gives you that impression? He—If he had been doing it he would have placed U and I much nearer each other.—St. Louis Republic.

The Pure Food Law.

Secretary Wilson says, "One of the objects of the law is to inform the consumer of the presence of certain harmful drugs in medicines." The law requires that the amount of chloroform, opium, morphine, and other habit forming drugs be stated on the label of each bottle. The manufacturers of Chamberlain's cough remedy have always claimed that their remedy did not contain any of these drugs, and the truth of this claim is now fully proven, as no mention of them is made on the label. This remedy is not only one of the safest, but one of the best in use for coughs and colds. Its value has been proven beyond question during the many years it has been in general use. For sale by Frank Hart and leading druggists.

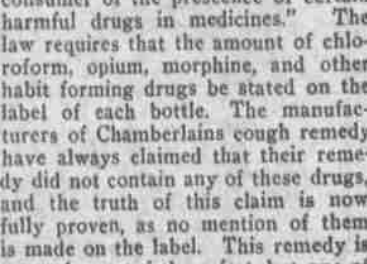
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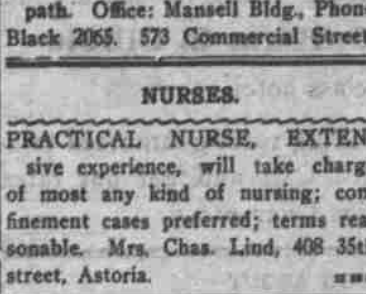
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