

A Fiance by Express

... By ...
HOWARD FIELDING

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IN the old days when a father did not wish his daughter to marry the man of her choice he locked her up in the turret chamber of the castle and kept her on a diet of bread and water until she was too weak to oppose paternal command. The method is unusual now in this part of the world, and therefore the luck of Stuart Hollingsworth may be called exceptionally hard.

Hollingsworth was engaged to Ruth Warren without her father's consent. Hollingsworth had a great reputation as a wit and had said one or two very clever but not unkindly things about Albertus Warren.

Otherwise Hollingsworth was unexceptionable. He was not so rich as Warren, but he was in a good way of business and striding on toward great success. A brisk, bright, cheery fellow he was despite the melancholy cast of his countenance and the sad, sweet voice which lent itself so well to the purposes of his unfeeling jests.

Warren was different from everybody else in the world, but most particularly from his daughter, who possessed a very amiable disposition. She was plump and pretty, exceptionally cheerful in a gentle way and quite destitute of any trait that could be called an eccentricity. It could be seen with half an eye that she was saturated with love for Hollingsworth in the way of a piece of cake dipped in wine.

Her father had done his best to make an old maid of her. She was already twenty-four. Many a suitor had been frightened away from the great, square house, with its antique iron fence and its strips of dusty lawn. But nobody could frighten Hollingsworth. He was not a tall man, and he was slenderly built, but he was armed always with the mighty weapon of invincible good humor. Not even Albertus Warren could quarrel with him, and perhaps that is why the old sinner resorted to desperate measures.

Whatever the explanation may be, this is the situation: Hollingsworth knew that the young lady was in her father's house. He had faith to believe that she still loved him, but he could neither see her nor get one word from her. The truth dawned upon him slowly. He was informed at the house two or three times that Miss Warren was not at home. He expected a note from her by mail, and it did not come. A very earnest communication from himself brought no response from her. Then he called at Mr. Warren's office and was denied.

At the end of a week Hollingsworth had a confidential talk with his friend, John Breck, who was a lawyer. Breck treated the subject with levity. He had recently been the victim of a very good joke which Hollingsworth had "put up," and he expressed a mean spirited gratification that fate should have avenged him. Coming to a more serious view at last, he said:

"There are various things that you can do. The young lady is of age. She can claim her liberty."

"That's the way I look at it," responded Hollingsworth.

Breck shook his head. "The old man will get tired of it," he said. "He won't imprison her long."

Two or three days elapsed without bringing any new developments, and then Breck called at Hollingsworth's

apartments. He looked worried.

"I've seen Albertus," he said, "and I'm afraid that the matter is more serious than I had supposed. The old villain has got something up his sleeve. What it is I don't know, but he evidently believes it to be a winner. If he didn't, Stuart, my boy, I could fix this whole matter for you. This in confidence to you: I've got a very strong hold on old Albertus Warren, and I wouldn't scruple to use it in a case of this kind. If he were merely holding out obstinately against you, with no definite plan in view, I could swing him. But he's trying to accomplish something. I'm sure of it, though I don't see what it can be unless he intends to make her marry somebody else. She is the sort of girl to mind her father."

"It is her only fault," replied Hollingsworth. "But, see here, Jack. There's one thing obvious—she is being tricked. Nobody can convince me that she doesn't suppose that she has sent word to me. She has trusted her letter to some rascally servant—"

"Is there anybody in the household whom you know particularly well?" asked the lawyer. And Hollingsworth replied that he had occasionally held amicable conversations with the housekeeper, who seemed to be friendly disposed toward him.

"But," he added, "I've written to her already and have got no reply."

"Write again," said his friend, "and I'll try to deliver the note and get an answer. Ask her if she can suggest any way by which you can get into the house without Mr. Warren knowing it. That's the point. You must have an interview with Miss Ruth if it's in any way possible. This case is desperate. It will come to a runaway marriage before you get through with it, and if you take my advice you'll arrange for one at the earliest possible moment: provided that you get a chance to talk to the young lady."

Hollingsworth wrote the note, and Breck hurried away with it. He did not return in the course of the evening, but several other fellows dropped in. The rumor that the course of true love was not running smooth seemed to have circulated widely, and Hollingsworth received the sort of sympathy which one ordinarily gets in such a case. He telephoned to Breck's office half a dozen times next day, but could not find the lawyer in. About noon, however, he appeared at Hollingsworth's rooms.

"I've struck a desperate situation," he said. "I've given the housekeeper your note. She's a great creature and willing to act in your interest as far as she dares, but by the devil's own luck she's out of favor with Miss Ruth. The girl doesn't trust her; won't give her any message or say a word to her on the subject. So there you are. The housekeeper doesn't know what's up, but she knows that it's something serious and that old Albertus Warren regards the game as already won."

Hollingsworth's jaw dropped. He stared at Breck blankly.

"What in blazes am I going to do?" he demanded.

"I've been all over this subject," said the lawyer, "from a legal and every other aspect, and there's only one possible course of action. You must have a personal interview with Miss Warren; you must see her without her father's knowledge, and you must do it right away. Therefore it is absolutely essential that you get into that house."

"But I can't break in!" exclaimed Hollingsworth. "I can't do anything public and make a guy of the woman I love. 'Extra! Extra! Holy Moses, I can seem to hear it!'"

"Ruth Warren is to be spirited away," said Breck. "The housekeeper doesn't know where nor how. But if it happens it will be fatal. The poor girl will suppose that you know where she's gone; she fancies that she's writing to

you every day. If you don't follow her—and you couldn't because you would not know where she's gone."

Hollingsworth struck his dripping forehead.

"I've got to get into that house," he said, "even if I crawl in through the gas pipe."

"Precisely," said Breck, "and for that reason I've put up a job. It's queer, but the thing's been done dozens of times in New York—in fact, I've managed it myself for one of my clients when there was a question of serving some papers. And you remember the case of Mrs. Wilmington, who kidnaped her own daughter."

"Took her away in a trunk, didn't she?" said Hollingsworth. "But there's no trunk in the world that will hold me. You might bring my legs along in a dress suit case, but"—

"This is serious," interrupted Breck. "I've already arranged for the trunk. It will be here in a few minutes. It's the same one that I used in the case I mentioned just now, and my clerk lived in it for five hours without much inconvenience. By good luck, as I've learned from the housekeeper, that trunk is an exact mate for one that Miss Warren has in storage. It won't seem unusual if we have it delivered at the Warren house today. Come, Stuart. Have you got the sand?"

"Have I?" cried Hollingsworth. "Watch me. This is really the very best thing that we could do. It will settle the whole matter. And I'll remember you, Breck. You shall have \$1,000 if I live through this and \$5,000 if I don't. My gratitude will be the same in either case, but if I'm dead I can afford to be more liberal. Fix up my will. What's that?"

A sound of shuffling feet came from the hall, followed by a quick ring of the bell. Breck opened the door, and four men entered with the trunk. It was a monstrous affair and had already been stripped of its trays and provided with ventilating holes, sufficient and not too obvious.

"I can live in it for a week," said Hollingsworth, "if they set it on the right end."

The two men padded the inside with blankets and made experiments in the matter of the most comfortable position and the limits of movement when the lid had been closed upon the occupant. Then they went out and had luncheon, for the trunk was not to be delivered at the Warren residence before 5 in the afternoon. Hollingsworth suggested that it would be awkward if the real one should get there first, but Breck replied that he had sent a bogus message to the warehouse countermanding the order.

Promptly at 5 o'clock the expressmen whom Breck had engaged arrived at Hollingsworth's rooms. They were well bribed and carefully instructed. Hollingsworth got into the trunk, and Breck closed, locked and strapped it.

"Now, for heaven's sake," he said in a low tone to the men, "don't drop him on the stairs."

"What's the matter with the elevator?" came in anxious but muffled tones from the interior of the trunk.

"It's all right in this building," responded Breck, "but in the Warren house there are two flights, and they are pretty bad, the housekeeper says. Of course you'll go up the back stairs."

The descent to the street was easy, but the ride to the Warren house was long. The longer the ride the longer Hollingsworth's legs seemed to be, and before it was finished he would have paid any reasonable sum for the privilege of straightening them out.

"This is a singular paradox," he said to himself. "My legs are getting longer every minute and still I want to stretch 'em."

One of the expressmen, who was sitting beside the trunk, informed him of his arrival at his destination and then climbed out of the wagon. There was a long wait. Then Hollingsworth felt a swaying of the vehicle, and immediately a voice spoke cautiously.

"There's a hitch somewhere," it said. "Don't speak loud. Old Warren is standing by the gate."

"What's the trouble?"

"He says it's the wrong trunk. He swears that this one is full of furs. They're hunting for the key, but the housekeeper's all right. Don't you worry. Whatever happens, you're safe. The old man won't get you. Hush!"

Another long wait, and then the voice again:

"We'll have to take you back. You been positively identified. You're a lot sealskin and stuff that belonged to X s. Warren when she was alive. S-s-s-sh!"

Presently the wagon swayed violently and then started. Hollingsworth felt the expressman settling himself down beside the trunk. Then came a very soft, hardly audible whisper:

"Don't speak. Don't make any noise. We'll get you out of this yet."

The wagon jolted along. It seemed to travel a thousand miles, and there were a thousand new pains for every mile. Finally the wagon stopped. The trunk was lifted out. Hollingsworth heard a confused murmur of voices. Then he felt the motion of an elevator. There followed a great bumping and dragging, followed by a stillness and a peculiar chill, gradually but surely increasing. It seemed as if drafts of icy air were blowing through the holes in the trunk. Hollingsworth stood it as long as he could, and then in a sudden paroxysm he pounded and kicked upon the roof of his prison and yelled like a wounded elephant. It was a marvelous relief. While he was enjoying it he heard a clanking sound, and then a strange, loud, scared voice cried:

"Who's here?"

"I am, hang it!" yelled Hollingsworth. "How could I be anywhere else? Holy Moses, do you think I can crawl out through one of these holes?"

"Caesar's ghost!" exclaimed the voice. "How did you come to be in here?"

"Where am I?"

"This is the Columbia warehouse. You're in the cold storage room. We always keep our furs"—

"Blast your furs! Who are you?"

"I'm the watchman. Everybody else has gone home."

"Well," said Hollingsworth in a voice of smoldering rage, "I want to go home too. Open this trunk."

"I ain't got no key," said the man, "nor no tools. This is a mighty strong trunk. How'd you get into it?"

"Never mind that. Kick the lid off it."

"Bless your soul," said the watchman, "I can't do that. It's bound with iron. But when the day watchman comes in the morning"—

He was immediately interrupted by a violent straining and groaning inside the trunk.

"I say," he continued, "it's pretty thunderin' cold in here. I can drag you into a warmer room. There's one where I can light a lot of gas, and I guess you'll be comfortable."

Without waiting for a reply the man seized the trunk and dragged it along the floor with incredible speed. Hollingsworth seemed to feel a change in the temperature, and he saw lights through the holes in the trunk.

"I'll lift you up on to this shelf," said the man. "It'll be warmer there than on the floor."

Hollingsworth felt the trunk lifted and set upon some sort of support. He had just sense enough left to wonder at the strength of the man who lifted it. Surely such an individual could find some means of releasing him. While this thought was in his mind there was a scratching sound, and then suddenly the lid of the trunk flew back. Hollingsworth, staring upward, beheld a dazzlingly brilliant and very ornate chandelier. A babel of voices broke out around him.

"I'm crazy," he thought. "Well, it's no wonder."

And with that he painfully scrambled to his feet. He was standing in the middle of a bountifully laden banquet table sur-

rounded by at least forty men in evening dress, and directly in front of him stood John Breck.

"Gentlemen," said the lawyer, pounding on the table, "I take great pleasure in introducing Mr. Stuart Hollingsworth. You will remember him well because there is not one of you upon whom he has not perpetrated some sort of joke in his day. Mr. Hollingsworth recently consulted me in an affair of the heart, and I was able to assist him materially. You will all be pleased to hear that the stern parent has yielded and that our friend's marriage will shortly be celebrated. Having served him in this way, I could not resist the temptation to square accounts with him by means of this merry jest from which you have just seen him escape with his life. As this is his bachelor dinner he will doubtless oblige the company with"—

"Speech, speech!" yelled all the men at once, pounding on the table with their fists.

Hollingsworth glanced around the circle. Then he slowly subsided into the trunk and closed the lid.