

## September and May

By Kenneth C. Beatson.

**J**ONAS PAYTON, the senior partner of the firm of Payton & Seymour, put down the pen with which he had been writing, removed his glasses, and rubbed his puffy eyelids.

"Come in!" he called.

The door of his office opened, and Smith, the head clerk, entered. Smith was a tall, slender, middle-aged man, as dignified as a minister and as precise as a college professor. He looked as if he suffered from dyspepsia, and probably did. Closing the door after him, he approached Payton's desk.

"If you are not busy," he said, in his slow, deliberate manner, "there is something I would like to speak to you about."

"I'm not busy," said the senior partner. "Sit down."

Smith sat down, folding his hands in his lap.

"It is about Miss Dalton, our stenographer," he said.

Jonas Payton started ever so slightly, and cast a quick, keen glance at the other's face. What he saw, however, told him nothing. He nervously shuffled two papers together.

"Well, what about Miss Dalton?" he demanded.

"She has been setting a bad example for the other employees. She has been late every morning for a week. As you asked me to be as easy with her as possible, I have said, nothing to her. But the other employees, seeing that she is not reprimanded, are commencing to follow her example. Pardon my saying so, but I think she should be given a severe reprimand and that she should be fined."

Jonas Payton became suddenly conscious of the fact that for the last few moments he had been holding his breath. He now ceased to do so, leaned back in his chair, stuck his thumbs in his vest pockets, and gazed quizzically at the other.

"Smith," he said, "did you ever have to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning, light a fire in a wood stove, get breakfast for yourself, an invalid mother and three small sisters, get the sisters off to school, make up three beds, wash the breakfast dishes, clean up and put in order a five-room house, and get to work at 8:30?"

"Why—no, sir."

"Do you think you could do all those things and get to work at 8:30 on time every morning?"

Smith coughed.

"Probably not," he said, "In fact, I'm quite certain I could not."

"Well, Smith," said Jonas Payton, "I happen to know that Miss Dalton goes through the program I have detailed every morning before coming to work. You can see, then, that it would be hardly the right thing to fine her for being a little late once in a while."

Smith got to his feet and turned to go.

"Very well, sir," he said.

Payton stopped him as he was about to turn the door knob.

"One minute, Smith," he said.

"There's a little matter that I want your opinion about."

The head clerk came back and again sat down.

"You're a family man, aren't you?" asked Payton.

"I am," Smith.

"And a church-going man?"

"Yes, sir."

"I understand that you hold some office in the Second Congregational Church?"

"Yes, I am one of the deacons."

"It seems to me, then, that you are pretty well qualified to pass on a question of—ah—ethics. Don't you think so?"

"Why, I suppose I am. That is—"

"Well," interrupted the senior partner, "tell me what you think of a marriage between a girl of 20 and a man of 50?"

Smith raised his hand and rubbed his chin. That was as near as he could come to showing surprise.

"It would depend entirely on the circumstances, I think," he said, after a moment's thought. "If they loved each other, I do not think the mere disparity in their ages should prevent them from marrying. Such marriages are assuredly not infrequent, and many of them result happily."

"And if they didn't love each

other? That is, if the affection was all on the man's side, and the girl was willing to marry him because of the things he could give her?"

"A marriage under those circumstances," said Smith, with considerable spirit, "would be highly improper!"

"Here is another case. Suppose the man for some reason could not be certain whether the girl was marrying him for love or for money?"

Smith hesitated.

"I am afraid I do not quite understand."

"Then I'll give you an example. Suppose I fell in love with Miss Dalton, our stenographer, and wanted to ask her to marry me. I am 50 and she is 20. Now, if I had done certain—ah—favors for her—for instance, if I had paid for an operation on her mother, if I had financed a legal fight to recover her mother's share of an estate left by a distant relative, if I had supplied the funds for her brother to go through school with—she might feel that she was not at liberty to refuse to marry me. Knowing this, would it be right for me to ask her to marry me? Would it be right for me to take a chance on whether she would accept me because she loved me or because she thought she ought to?"

"Why, if you had done so much for her," said Smith, "I hardly see how she could help loving you."

"Still, that doesn't answer my question."

Payton had taken up a small check book. If Smith had noticed he would have seen that the senior partner was gripping the book so tightly that it crumpled. But Smith did not notice.

"It seems to me," he said, "that it would be all right for you to ask her to marry you, if you first explained that she was not to feel bound to accept you because of the favors you had done for her."

Payton dropped the check book and frowned at the top of his desk. That frown really meant nothing, for the senior partner always frowned when he wished to mask his true emotions.

"What if it was your daughter who loved a man of 50, instead of Miss Dalton?"

It took Smith several minutes to frame an answer to this.

"If she really loved the man of 50," he said finally, "I would not come between them. I would make very certain, however, that she really loved him."

The senior partner replaced his glasses, took up a pen, and drew a sheet of paper toward him. Then he wrote the following:

"My Dear Miss Dalton: If you don't mind waiting for me a few minutes after closing hour this evening, I would like to walk with you to where you take your car. I have something extremely important—to me, at least—to talk over with you. Sincerely, Jonas Payton."

He folded the paper, put it in an envelope, and handed the envelope to Smith.

"Will you please hand this to Miss Dalton when you go back?" he requested.

"Miss Dalton went out to lunch with young Norton just before I left," said the head clerk. "I shall give the note to her as soon as she returns, though."

"Very well," said Payton. "And thank you, Smith, for answering my questions."

As soon as Smith was out of the room Payton took up a telephone directory and turned to the pink "classified" section. He hunted through the "J's" until he came to "Jewelers." He knew Liffany & Co. to be the biggest jewelry store in town, and found their number. Then he called them on the

phone.

A soft Jewish voice answered him presently. What was that? Could they have a \$500 diamond engagement ring delivered to Jonas Payton's office before 5 o'clock? Surely, they could! But—h'm—what size of ring did Mr. Payton wish?

Mr. Payton scratched his head.

"Why," he said, "to tell the truth, I didn't know they came in sizes."

The other offered to send someone over to talk it over with Mr. Payton. He could probably give a pretty definite—

"Oh, never mind doing that," said the senior partner. "You just pick out a ring you think will fit the most perfect second-finger in the world, and it'll be sure to suit."

He hung up the receiver, got up and went out. In the vestibule he turned into a little cloak room to get his hat and overcoat. While he was fumbling around in the semi-darkness he heard somebody enter the vestibule from the outside. A moment later he heard voices—familiar voices.

"Nellie," said the first voice, a young man's voice, "why don't you tell me just what you mean? You say you can't promise to marry me because of Mr. Payton, and that's worse than if you just refused me flatly."

"But I don't want to flatly refuse you, Fred," said the other—Miss Dalton's—voice. The words came chokingly, as if the speaker was on the point of breaking into tears. "I don't want you to think that I don't—don't love you. I want you to understand that it's because of—of Mr. Payton that I can't promise to marry you."

"What on earth has Mr. Payton to do with it? He's just your employer, the same as he is mine. He—"

"He isn't, Fred. He's more than my employer. He's—will, I guess I might as well explain it all. Two years ago my father died and left us with scarcely anything. I had studied stenography in high school, and I got a position in an office uptown at \$8 a week. My little brother started selling newspapers. We made enough between us to keep ourselves, mother and the girls alive. Mother needed to be operated on, but such a thing seemed out of the question. Then Mr. Payton saw me at work one day, and was somehow attracted by the way I took dictation. He offered me \$12 a week, and I accepted. Soon he began to show special interest in me. He found out about my mother, and offered to pay for the operation. I let him. Later I let him send my brother off to school. I could not begin to name the other things I've let him do. Don't tell me I did wrong, Fred. You don't know what it means to see your little brother going to the dogs on the streets, and to see your mother slowly dying because there isn't money to pay for a doctor's attention."

Payton could hear the young man's breath come in quick, short gasps.

"You don't mean, Nellie—"

"Oh, Fred, don't look like that!" pleaded the girl. "Mr. Payton's a gentleman. He says he does all these things for me because he feels like a father to me, and he believes that is the reason, too. But some day he'll realize it's—it's another reason. And when he asks me to marry him I'll have no right to refuse him."

"You will have a right to refuse him!" cried the other fiercely. "Why, you can't let an old man like him come between us, Nellie. He's old enough to be your grandfather!"

"But, Fred—oh, don't, Fred! Please—"

Payton plainly heard the young man gather Miss Dalton in his arms. He stepped out of the closet, affecting to be greatly astonished at the sight which met his eyes.

"Why, what in the world!" he exclaimed. "What does this mean?"

Miss Dalton drew away from young Norton, flushed, scared, trembling. The

young man, however, stepped up to his employer, his blue eyes blazing.

"It means that Miss Dalton and I are going to be married!" he said defiantly. "We love each other, and nothing in this world can come between us. If you think, Jonas Payton, that—"

"Why, bless my soul!" said the senior partner innocently. "What could come between you? I don't believe I've ever seen a more perfect match in all my life. It's hard to tell which of you is the luckiest. I congratulate you—both of you!"

Jonas Payton went back into the office with Norton and Miss Dalton, left them at the stenographer's desk, and went over to where the head clerk was at work.

"Smith," he said, "I've just talked with Miss Dalton, so there'll be no need of giving her that note. If you'll give it back to me I'll tear it up."

Smith handed over the note. Payton tore it into bits and threw the bits into a waste basket.

"By the way, Smith," he said, "what is young Norton's salary?"

"Eighty-five dollars a month, I believe," said Smith.

Payton dubiously rubbed his chin.

"You're a family man, Smith. You know what it costs to keep a family going. Do you think Norton could comfortably support a wife on the salary he is getting?"

"Well," said the other, "if they were willing to do without luxuries they could get along pretty well on \$80 a month."

"But," said Payton, "the particular girl Norton's going to marry has been doing without luxuries all her life, and it's about her turn to have a few of them. Could she do this if Norton was drawing \$125?"

"Yes, indeed!"

"Well, then, suppose we raise Norton's salary to that amount. The firm won't miss the difference. And say, Smith, I've got one more question to bother you with. I'm not as well posted on etiquette as I might be; would it be all right for me to give Norton a \$500 diamond ring to give his girl, or would he be insulted?"

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