

I Win the Wager

A Christmas Love Story

By GENEVIEVE KENNEDY

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RETURNING ever and anon to the town which held the one thing desirable to me, I was fated in the usual manner. It was Mrs. Jack Copita's 5 o'clock that was responsible for the wager which won me the wedding, a function I had grown to despair of ever arriving at.

One fine summer day, boorish by enough, I was berating the stupid habit of Main street—a primordial and inalienable habit of blazoning abroad mistatements and woefully garbled versions of "the truth concerning the matter," whatever the matter might be. However, they spoke truly enough who said of Sue and me, "She's rebused him every ENGAGED BEFORE WE REACH THE END OF THE STREET."

They'll have us summer for the last ten years. Sue's hatred of gossip is as pronounced as her love for her native town, and what the board walk is to Atlantic City even so is Main street to Hilton.

"I'll wager," said I to Sue as we passed the postoffice on our way to Mrs. Jack's tea, "that they'll have us engaged before we reach the end of the street." Sue's hatred of gossip is as pronounced as her love for her native town, and what the board walk is to Atlantic City even so is Main street to Hilton.

"I'll wager," Sue challenged, ignoring my remark, "that I can have and hold against Main street for three months, if necessary, any matter which you may care to intrust to me, provided you swear to keep faith also."

"You for accomplishing that," said I, warily reviewing the weak points of a plot I had in mind. Sue's capacity for silence was the poser in my little scheme.

Arriving at Mrs. Jack's, it was very near the end of the allotted hour of "gobble and gabble" that I found myself unexpectedly in retreat in an alcove near the portiered entrance to the dining room. I had blundered upon a tete-a-tete between Sue and her inseparable ally, Mrs. Jack Copita.

"A thousand pardons," I murmured meekly, my eyes on Sue. "A few less will do," she laughed. "There is Mrs. Fish morning doorward, and I have something of importance to say to her. Wait here awhile," said Mrs. Jack as she flattered away, leaving Sue and me together.

Drawing my chair ever such a trifle closer, so that I might the better feast my eyes on that adorable face whose allurements for me neither time nor change nor any other creature could ever lessen, I said, "SAY BOB MARRIES US AT THE REEF," I REPEATED. "I dote on tea," I REPEATED.

"I judge you came for that reason," Sue replied. "Do you remember?" "I seldom or never do," she interrupted.

"That little thing," I continued usually, "concerning the uselessness of trying to queer one's proportioned concerning cargo of fate and how the little stars and tidal waves and other natural impediments are greatly in error, imagining that they can butt in between us and our natural belongings?"

"Your translation into the vernacular is not at all smart," Sue commented.

"And has nothing whatever to do with the subject I had in mind?" said I. "For what I was wondering is, are you going with the Percys and yours everlastingly, for the week end, at the Reef?"

"Yes, I believe we're all to go together in the big car. We're to be there in time for dinner at 8. The Reef is rugged and lovelier than ever."

"Dear Reef," said I. "It's rather a coincidence that I first saw you there. Heavens, it was at a picnic of the Percys, come to think of it."

"Yes, but the coincidence?" Sue queried. "Merely it may be the last place I shall see you." That this was my moment I knew. Yet but for my past experience of miserable wadings in shallows and through miseries and my knowledge of some of the strong points of Sue's philosophy I might have hesitated and forever have lost my venture. "So I'm going to take your wager," said I. "You remember 'Holy Bob'?" Sue nodded. "He did take orders and is curate this year at the Reef. You may not remember his penchant for secrecy. At school it amounted to genius. 'I'll die, but not divulge,' was Bob's motto. 'Then,' continued I, with the airy unconcern of true sport, 'say Bob marries us.' Sue is so uniformly master of herself she scarce lifted an eyebrow, and of

course it may have been a gift of the westerling sun that shone in her eyes, but I can swear to the shine in them. "Say Bob marries us at the Reef," I repeated, with nonchalance, "some time between now and Monday a. m. Why, I'll give you a month—two, three—any time you say for Main street to find us out and gossip us to housekeeping. I'll stake my life and Bob's that death will find us yet dumb. If I win you lose, maybe. If you win I lose all," I whispered.

"If," said Sue slowly, deliberating, chin on hand, "Bob swears, too, I'll accept the wager. It's as good as lost to you, though. I have, and still do hold, matters of more or less moment and less strenuously guarded than this will be, which have never reached the ears of Main street."

"This is the 23d," said I. "Two months from tomorrow will be Christmas eve. 'Merry Christmas,' I murmured anticipatively. Won't I look sweet all done up in tissue paper and Santa Claus seals and holly ribbon? But supposing I shouldn't. Suppose I lose?"

"That is the end," said Sue tersely. I tried to read in her inscrutable eyes ever so small a blot of interest in Main street gossip. She smiled slightly and repeated her creed. "Serene I fold my hands and wait, nor care"—A sound as of muffled scraping and a sharp click caused us to turn toward the portiered alcove. Then some one joined us.

I have but a pipe dream of the whirl into the Reef that night; a memory of a delicious sense of having to sit gloriously close to Sue in the well filled car; a sunlit Sabbath spent in hazy October woods and at midnight a solemn ceremony in a dim lit church, minus music or flowers or faces, QUESTIONSING save only three: "GAZE."

According to agreement, we exchanged no letters. The days followed each other with uneventful regularity. News—that is, the news I strained my ears to hear—came out until it seemed as though a cursed fate slew all the little birds that tell things on Main street. Sue preserved a silence which I doggedly forbore to break. Week after week, day after day, brought no sign nor the faintest breath of rumor till three days before Christmas, when there came a note from Mrs. Jack, which read: "I am having a surprise party for Sue Christmas eve. Fall me at your peril."

Had Mrs. Jack met me with a triumphant air as of "one who knows" I was prepared to have hugged her on the spot, but her bubbling mirth, candid and unsophisticated, struck chill to my heart as she proceeded to enjoy "the surprise" she was giving Sue.

Sue's back was toward the door as Mrs. Jack announced me. She turned, and for an instant I fancied her face paled. Perhaps it was but the reflection of my own. Then the dear, resolute chin lifted, and she calmly bade me welcome. The only other members of the party were Jack Copita, Mr. and Mrs. Percy and the Rev. Robert Clemmons. As I grasped Bob's hand I fairly pierced him with my questioning gaze. But his face was unresponsive. I fancied a bit pitying. I turned hopefully away. "Here," said I to myself, "endeth the first lesson."

At dinner I found myself at Mrs. Jack's left. Sue was next me and Bob directly opposite. The garishly diminutive Christmas tree seemed mocking me from its icy lake in the center of the table. Everywhere were holly and mistletoe, but across the happy hum of voices there floated to me a LEASLY. sound as of "sweet bells jangled out of tune," but it wasn't. Sue had evidently heard it also. Her little hand unconsciously touched my sleeve. In the alcove near the portieres Syd, the irrepressible ten-year-old Copita, stood near a table which held a big talking machine. "It's a little surprise Syd has been saving for Sue's party," explained Mrs. Jack. "It was a surprise to me also till a week ago, when I was

hunting for the last blank record. Would you like to hear it?" The chorus response was all in the affirmative. "All right, son," and she nodded to Syd to proceed.

A sharp click, a preliminary muffled scraping as Syd adjusted the record. Sue shot at me one look of startled apprehension as from the brazen mouth of the horn came an indistinct murmur of voices and clatter, then my voice, low, but unmistakable: "Say Bob marries us at the Reef some time between now and Monday a. m. Why, I'll give you a month—two, three—any time you say for Main street to find us out and gossip us to housekeeping. I'll stake my life and Bob's, the metallic echo of my voice ran on, "that death will find us yet dumb. If I win you lose, maybe. If you win I lose all."

The party around the table listened breathlessly as one waits the denouement of the third act. It came as Sue's voice replied clearly and deliberately and withal a trifle brassy. "If Bob swears, too, I'll accept the wager."

Mrs. Jack broke the spell. "That will do, Syd," she gurgled. "Hold up your hands, Sue. Last Friday I went to the Reef and while Mrs. Percy sang to Bob I secured the key of the church and searched the register." Then, springing to her feet, glass high in air, "I found," she said, "the bride of the

Reef, the loser of the wager, my dear friend—Mrs. Ted Moore." Sue touched her glass rim to mine and gracefully, gloriously surrendered. "Yes," she nodded comprehensively, and so in response I toasted. "The ubiquitous, the all pervading, the ever blessed Main street and its presiding genius, true son of his mother—Syd Copita."

"But whatever made you think of the blank record, Syd?" asked Sue. "Well," replied her youngest adorer. "There was such a racket when mum had one of her tea fights on I thought it would be fun to get it and let her hear it some time for a surprise—maybe her birthday. But I guess I got too close to you and Mr. Moore there, and of course if he wouldn't split on you I wasn't a-going to. Only for mum I'd died and kept it dark too. But it wasn't a bad surprise for your party, was it, Sue?"

Later, in the recess afforded by that ever blessed alcove, Sue assured me that if I would but loosen my arms enough to permit her to breathe she would tell me what she thought of the surprise, she meant, of course. "And as a small asset to start housekeeping on," I whispered, "would I do for a Christmas box without the holly ribbon?"

I'm afraid her answer tightened my arms again, but the memory of its thrilling sweetness will ever be to me the most exquisite music of all the bells of all the Christmas tides.

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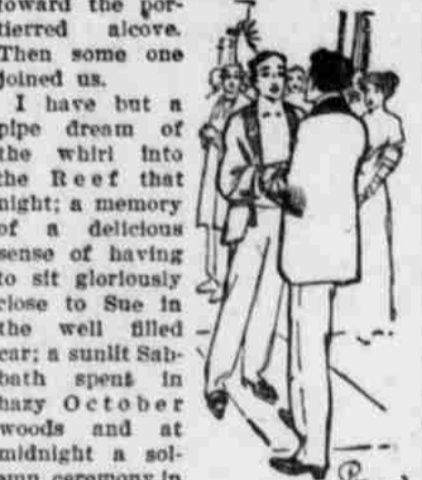
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