

Fiction

"He's in love with you," Peter said. Her face softened. "I should wait five years!" she laughed.



Love Settles an Old Score

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THE CARS, carrying his guests, were coming up the drive. In less than five minutes, Peter Hoffman thought as he watched from his dining-room window, he would begin to have again all the things that had been taken from him in his youth. Making out Eulalie Brenner's blonde head in the first car, he added aloud, a habit he had from living alone so long, "Perhaps even the love."

Starting toward the door, he glimpsed in the china-closet mirror, appraising himself as Eulalie might see him—a man with a care-worn face and a body lean and slack-muscled from years of frugal and sedentary living.

"All right," he answered the challenge of his reflection. "What if she is only 21 to my 45?" He could give her this farm and a generous income from invested savings. Money could buy love. That he had learned more than 20 years ago from Dolly Rand, the only other girl he had ever wanted to marry. She had turned him down for a man twice her age.

Dolly—even after all these years, the memory of that injustice still made his hands curl into fists. It was so vivid. He could see again how beautiful Dolly looked standing behind the counter in Hank Lahr's grocery store where they had worked during those depression days of the thirties. And he could feel again the avaricious eyes in Hank's pudgy face boring into his back, watching to see that he never took a minute's rest from his sweeping, mopping, and stock arranging.

Yet when payday came, Hank often said sorry, but he couldn't pay full wages of \$12; five would have to do. Business was bad. If Peter didn't like it, he hinted darkly, there were thousands of unemployed, just waiting.

"I had to like it," the young Peter, still encased in the middle-aged shell, said aloud to his aging reflection. "Only I couldn't take Dolly anywhere, except for walks." Then one night there was a movie she had wanted to see. He had counted the change in his pocket, but he didn't have enough. He wanted to give her everything in the world she might desire, but he couldn't even give her a dollar's worth of fun.

The next time he'd called on her, she said, "I can't see you anymore. I'm engaged to Hank." And she held out a diamond ring that must have cost \$300. As he stared at the ring all he could think of was how Hank must have paid for it with money held out of his wages.

The man in the mirror had his fists clenched tight now. Peter turned away from the memory to the window. The sight of his wheat field, transformed by wind and sun into shimmering gold, sent his thoughts even further back, to the first time a want of money had taken from him something else he had loved—this Wisconsin farm. He was 12 when Pa lost it and moved his family of four to the three-room flat in Chicago. How he had hungered for the sweet country air, his secret haunts along the Branch River, and most of all, for the security and bounty of the big house! In the following years he had only to close his eyes to see the old-fashioned parlor on special occasions, smelling of spice cake and roasting chicken and filled with neighbors and relatives laughing and chatting and dancing to Old Man Hickman's concertina music.

Well, he had the farm back again! And all those people getting out of the cars had come to see him. How strange and how good that was after so many years of living alone since the folks passed