

A Leap Year Proposal

By W. R. Gilbert

THE girl sprang from her hiding-place. The man—he had just flung himself moodily on to the stone seat—looked up with a start of surprise. "You!" he exclaimed. His tone was distinctly the reverse of pleasant. "You've been listening," he accused.

The girl flung back her head defiantly. "Well, I couldn't help it," she answered. She came slowly forward. She was not unattractive looking, despite her wisp of a pigtail and her unusual length of limb. She seated herself on the extreme edge of the seat, clasped her hands round her knees, and gazed meditatively before her. "I must say," she remarked, "you did it very badly."

"What?" inquired the man irritably.

"The proposal," she answered him.

He eyed her sternly.

"Do you know," he said, in a voice admirably controlled, "it's the meanest thing on earth to—eavesdrop."

"Is it?" Her mouth had a curve of amusement.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," he wound up severely.

"Oh, I don't see why," she responded.

"To tell the truth"—she hesitated. He sat in disdainful silence. "I take rather an interest in you," she concluded with a blush.

He turned and looked at her. His lips quivered a little.

"I'm extremely obliged."

She challenged him with her eyes. Vaguely he became aware that they were remarkably fine eyes. A trifle bold, perhaps; large, dark, and heavily lashed.

"You've need to be," she retorted.

"Some day I shall be a very influential person, indeed."

"Really?" His tone was polite, but it lacked interest.

He drew out his cigarette case.

"You see, some day," she explained delicately, "I shall be very rich."

"Oh, yes!"

Through the dusk his lighted match flashed like a tiny meteor as he flung it away.

The girl was surveying thoughtfully a rather startling amount of black stocking that was visible between a pair of shabby shoes and the hem of a much-washed white pique frock.

"I do grow," she said, almost apologetically. "Isn't it fearful?"

"I say," said the man. He began to think that, after all, he preferred his own society just now. "I say, don't you think you ought to be in bed?"

"Perhaps I ought," she acknowledged.

"Then, why—?"

She wriggled a little.

"Oh, I have something rather important to say before I go."

He sighed.

"Don't you find it rather damp?"

"Not at all. I say—"

He lifted a long-suffering countenance.

"Well?"

"Are you very much cut up about it?"

He drew his brows together haughtily.

"You mean—?"

"About her refusing you, you know. Somehow or other"—she paused in perplexity—"your tones didn't ring true. I said to myself, 'He doesn't love her. He only wants her money.'"

He had risen to his feet, scarlet with indignation.

She looked up at him innocently.

"What's the matter?"

"You're—you're the limit!" he gasped.

She grinned. No other word can adequately describe the sudden widening of her mouth and narrowing of her expression.

"That's what Miss Towner tells me," she said.

He gave a short laugh of reluctant amusement. He hesitated a moment and finally sat down beside her.

"Go on," he invited.

She nodded slowly.

"I'm going to."

She seemed, however, to experience some difficulty in "going on." She opened her mouth several times as though about to say something, and each time closed it with a snap.

"I thought," said the man presently, "that you had something to say."

"Yes, yes," she hesitated, "but—it's rather difficult to express myself. You will realize that when I tell you what it is."

"You know," he reminded her, "we can't sit here all night."

"An aspiring one," he said shortly.

"And you're poor?"

He moved restlessly and flicked off his cigarette ash with a nervous finger.

"Confoundedly!"

She chose her words deliberately.

"I've been thinking—"

"Yes?"

"Of course you ought to marry money."

She was voicing his own thoughts of the past few months. He decided that they did not sound exactly nice on anybody else's lips.

"Look here," he said with determination. "Let's drop the subject. What?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, no." He moved impatiently. "I come into twenty thousand pounds when I'm twenty-one," she informed him.

"Ah! But what the deuce—?"

She was profoundly interested in her artistic attempts on the gravel path.

"I was wondering how it would be if—if—you married me."

"I'm fourteen," she retorted. "You'd only have to wait three years."

"But I don't even know your name!"

He protested. "We've only seen each other a few times. Ours is merely an accidental acquaintance."

She stood looking down at him.

"Look here," she said in businesslike tones, "I know we don't know each other very well, but I live near here, and when I once found out who you were I determined to get to know you somehow. I like your book awfully. I took a sort of interest in you. To-night I knew you were going to propose to her. I've watched you together heaps of times. I don't blame you. I know you want money and influence more than anything else. But I was fearfully glad that she refused you. I—I don't think you would have been happy together."

"You don't?" he inquired.

"No, I don't. Well, it's money you want. Why not wait and marry me? Surely I will do as well as anyone else?"

He looked up at her gravely.

"Suppose—suppose you are less philanthropically inclined when you grow up?"

"It shan't be," she announced decidedly.

"Well?" asked the girl.

She waited expectantly.

He rose to his feet and stood looking down at her sternly.

"My dear child," he said with severity.

"You've been reading books that are too old for you."

She eyed him gravely.

"Well?"

"I think," said he, "that you had better go home to bed."

"Does that mean—?" She gasped a little. "It's a refusal?" she cried.

He held out both hands, and there was a genuine ring in his voice when he spoke.

"Child, even if I loved you, I couldn't take advantage of what you say now."

"You mean I am too young."

"Yes."

Her voice was very soft as she answered.

"Some day," she said; "some day I will make you ask me yourself. You will be sorry then that you refused me."

He stifled a yawn with the fingers of a thin, nervous hand.

"Shall I?"

She moved a little nearer to him. He saw her great eyes shining through the darkness like stars.

"When you ask me to marry you I shall refuse," she said between her teeth. "I—I swear it!"

She clenched her hands.

"Little girls shouldn't swear," he said gravely. "It's wicked."

She had turned away from him.

"Au revoir," she said, and he watched her white pique vanish into the darkness.

"Queer little kid," he murmured, and lit another cigarette.

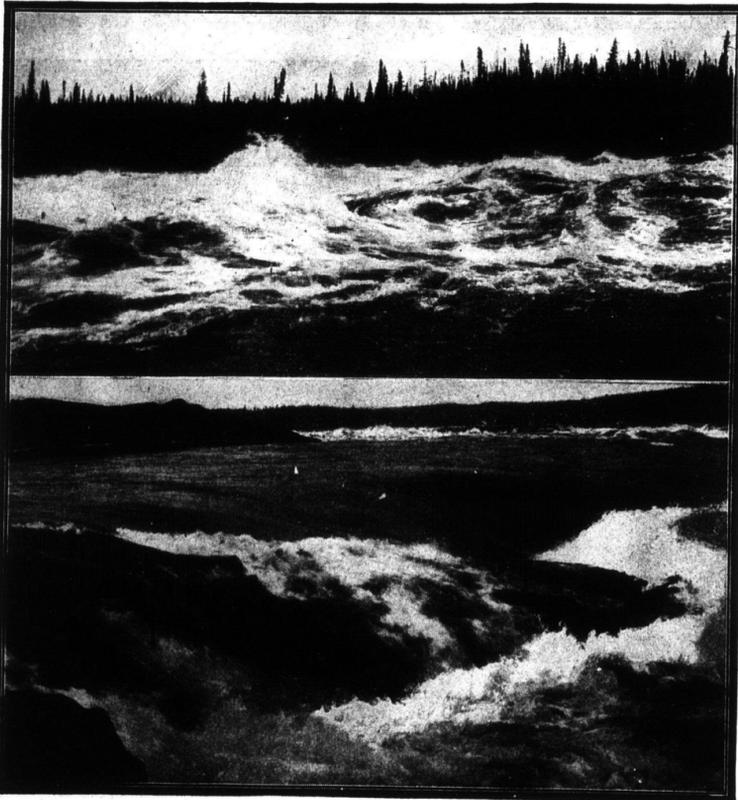
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It was four years afterwards that the man wrote his book "The Crux," and found himself suddenly famous and ranked among the greatest contemporary writers. He was promptly "lionised," and it was at a select little dinner party given by Lady Exhampton that he met the girl.

She was introduced to him as Miss Delaney. He found himself making conversation with a pretty, fashionably dressed young lady who possessed the most enormous gypsy eyes he had ever seen, and a provoking red mouth.

She sent him swift glances under her long lashes when he was not looking. He had not altered much during the last few years. He looked a little older, and his hair was silvered at the temples.

"I say," he exclaimed suddenly, "you remind me of somebody, you know."



Kettle Rapids, Nelson River, Manitoba

Above are two views of the Kettle Rapids on the Nelson river, about halfway between Manitou and Port Nelson. At this point the river is not only turbulent but very rapid running, presenting a very attractive view to the lover of this kind of scenery. The upper picture shows the "boiling" condition of the stream and the lower one the rush of water over the rapids proper. The steel bridge of the Hudson's Bay railway will be right over the rapids, giving fine view.

"That's real, rightdown common-sense," she remarked encouragingly. "They might wonder where we had got to."

"They very likely would," he agreed.

"They might think we'd eloped," she ventured, stealing a side long glance at him.

He could not restrain a laugh.

"Extremely likely."

Her cheeks were redder than their wont. She drew a pattern on the gravel with the tip of a square-toed shoe. At last she said with a gulp:

"You're an author, aren't you?"

He glanced at her quickly. Her head was bent, her eyes cast modestly on the ground.

"I shall refuse."

"Great Scott!"

His breath forsook him.

She looked up.

"Well, what do you say?"

"Is this—is this a proposal?" he asked, in an ominously tremulous voice.

"It's leap year," she reminded him.

He was silent for a long time. Presently:

"This is very sudden," he murmured in a choked voice.

She sprang up from the seat, her dark eyes blazing.

"You're making fun of me!" she cried.

"But I'm in earnest."

He raised an expostulating hand.

"My dear child, you're too young."



Hudson Bay Railway Terminus at Port Nelson

View from end of the Breakwater, showing the "foundation" work for the terminal of the government road at the Port