

# A STORY OF AN ACTRESS, AN ACTOR AND TWO FRIENDS

## A Lesson From the Play

By HOWARD FIELDING

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HERE were long racks for hats just outside the door of the hotel dining room, and as I was endeavoring to find my own head gear in the midst of the great and varied assortment a man spoke my name in a tone of surprise.

"Upon my word," he exclaimed with unusual earnestness, "I'm glad to see you! I'm mighty glad to see you here!"

I was glad to see him, too, though I might not have stated it in a manner so emphatic as his own. To me he was merely a friend unexpectedly met in a strange city, to him I certainly seemed to be something more. He was John M. Crawford, whom I have known intimately since our school days twenty-five years ago. We are both in business in New Haven, and one of us has been very prosperous, as anybody might guess from Crawford's aggressive and confident demeanor.

"I heard you were in Denver," said he.

"I'm half way home," was my reply. "I had a bit of business in this city and stopped off for a day and a night."

"Well, I've a bit of business here, too," he said, "and you can help me out with it. It's not exactly in my line nor to my liking, but it's got to be done."

Naturally I asked him what it was. He led me to a retired spot in a corner of the hotel office, and when we were seated he pulled a folded piece of pink paper from his pocket. I perceived immediately that it was a theatrical programme, a single sheet such as one will see in "one night" towns. I looked at Crawford in surprise, for he is not a man who takes an interest in the drama.

He held the programme up before my eyes and put his finger upon a name in the list of the performers. It was Wallace Ford.

"Yes," said I, "he's an actor. His mother told me last winter that he had gone into the profession."

"She told me so, too," replied Crawford, "and I was sorry though I had no prejudice against the stage; none whatever."

He spoke almost as if he were repelling an accusation.

"Well," said I, "this boy has got himself into trouble."

"That's why I'm here," said Crawford. "That's why I'm here. His mother asked me to see what I could do. She would have come herself, but she is not well enough to make the journey."

My sympathy as well as my curiosity was aroused. Nellie Ford was a school friend of mine many years ago, and she was the sort of girl that one always remembers; her childish beauty and unfailing buoyancy of spirit seem to be a part of my own youth. Her name

wasn't Ford, of course, in those old days when Jack Crawford and I used to sharpen lead pencils for her and be darkly jealous of each other. We were never jealous of Ford, who was a much older boy and quite out of the field of rivalry as we viewed it then. But he was the candidate of fate, and to such there can be no opposition. He had "prospects" when he married Nellie, and they were no more than prospects when he died ten years later. He bequeathed them to his wife and his son. Some day they would get a share of a considerable estate, but it was a long time coming.

"So Wally Ford has got himself into trouble," said I. "Well, we'll get him out. That's all settled. Now, I'll hear the story."

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entirely mercenary. You know Wally must get his money soon in the measure of nature. Old Timothy Ford can't live forever. And this girl has found it out and has made up her mind to marry Wally. The boy has written to his mother, and she is fairly prostrated. So here I am."

"Have you seen him?" I asked.

"Yes. I had a talk with him this afternoon, and he is the most obstinate young blunderhead that ever I encountered. Before I had fairly approached the subject he said he would throw me out of the window for venturing to hint that the young woman's past might be a source of obstacle. Well, you know me. I'll make an affidavit that no man lives who is more careful in the matter of a woman's good name."

"You may have been too careful," I suggested. "The boy should know the facts. He'll know them some day. Let's go and see him now together."

"It's too late," said Crawford. "He's gone to the theater. I'm to meet him afterward. Suppose we have a look at the play?"

I assented, and after we had smoked together for a little while we strolled over to the theater.

The play was a sort of sentimental comedy by an English dramatist; a very good piece of work, it seemed to me. I had heard of it, but had never seen it performed and was ignorant of the story which it presented. Its leading idea was that a very good fellow upon his deathbed had put his motherless boy into the care of his best friend, who had accepted the trust with the highest resolve to execute it faithfully. Three other men who had known and loved the father were colleagues in this great and difficult task of bringing the orphan through all perils which might beset him up to a noble and honorable manhood.

At the rise of the curtain the youth is supposed to have attained his twenty-first birthday, and the story of his guardianship is disclosed to the audience in the first act, together with the facts that the four protectors have led a gay life in their time and that the boy shows signs of a tendency to do likewise.

Wally Ford played the part of the young man, and I thought that his work was really excellent. Indeed, the whole company was surprisingly good, especially the young woman who (in real life, not in the play) had ensnared Wally's affections. Upon the stage she had the role of an innocent girl to whom the four guardians have betrothed the boy.

"She's rather pretty. Don't you think so?" said I to Ford.

"Yes, confound it," he replied, "she is with her make up on."

"There's no make up that is equal to the self delusion of a young fellow in love," said I. "This girl never painted her own face as Wally's fancy paints it."

"It's a queer thing," said Crawford a moment later, "that there's a splendid girl

in this company. Mrs. Ford told me about her—good family, irreproachable character and all that. If Wally had fallen in love with her, he'd have had the maternal blessing. Mrs. Ford has no prejudice against actresses. She's a broad minded woman. She knows that there are lots of nice girls on the stage, and she believes in the work if a person really feels called to it. She put no obstacle in Wally's way when he expressed a wish to be an actor, and I think she's right. It is an honorable work. Now, this play, for instance, is full of fine feeling and teaches a good lesson. You'll see."

"Which is the nice girl—the one whom Mrs. Ford likes?" I asked.

"You won't see her till the third act," he said. "She plays the adventures."

"The deuce she does!" said I.

"It is the plot of the piece that this adventures is led to believe that the youth has a lot of money, and she therefore agrees to marry him—if he will settle it all upon her. In reality he hasn't anything except what his guardians give him. The adventures is connected with

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"It does fit his own case to the life, doesn't it?" said Crawford.

The curtain had fallen upon the second act, at the close of which the chief trustees of the boy decided to buy the adventures outright for the small sum of \$1,000 as the only way of rescuing the youthful prey from her clutches. We could speak more at our ease between the acts.

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"No," said he; "not really."

"Well, neither is Wally in love with the adventures? He is suffering from a species of self delusion. He is under the influence of a delusion. We must wake him up."

"I'll have another try at him after the show," said Crawford. "The company doesn't leave town till tomorrow. He is coming to my room at the hotel. We'll both do our best. It's a serious matter, my friend. Wally may marry the girl any day."

We saw the remainder of the play and then walked back to the hotel. Half an hour later there was an unnecessary loud rap at the door, and Wally Ford strode in, tall, handsome and strong. I observed an excess of dignity, an effort to seem older than his years—in fact, very much the same demeanor that he uses on the stage when he says, "There comes a time in every man's life when his own judgment is of far more use to him than any other person's."

The reply in the play is, "Perhaps this is not one of those times."

But the infernal difficulty is to beat such a conviction into the head of an obstinate boy.

Wally started at the sight of me, and there was an added defiance in his manner when he returned my greeting. I hastened to assure him that my presence in the city was entirely accidental, and he said, with a withering glance at Crawford, that he was glad to hear it.

There is really no use in setting down here what we said to that night. It would have been just the same if we had read to him out of the city directory. My statement that the very part he played should teach him prudence and respect for the judgment of his elders nearly procured me some broken bones. Did I venture to compare Miss Hartington with the woman of the drama? Oh, dear, no; not for the world. Still there was a faint basis for comparison in the fact that she was five years older than himself.

"Miss Hartington is but twenty-six," said he. "She is two years older than I am."

I shook my head in blank despair. The boy even believed her in regard to her age.

"And," he added, "you would hardly urge the difference in our ages as a reason for my delay. It is a reason for haste. Life slips away. We should not waste our youth. It does not come again."

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