

A STORY MADE TO ORDER

A Man's Idea of the One Who Should Win

By W. J. JEFFERS

I AM going to write a story for women. I am a man, and my story will show a man's idea of what a woman likes. My story must be one of love, for I am perfectly certain that in no other way can I interest women. My hero will be big and strong and handsome, because women like that kind of man. I will have to make the heroine as beautiful and as fascinating as you can imagine, or you will be saying that you don't see how my hero ever came to fall in love with her. And there must be a villain, darkly handsome, delightfully mysterious and the very pink of courtesy, because women like that kind of a villain. But the woman does not know that one of her suitors is a villain, nor that the other is a hero. She thinks they are both "just perfectly lovely," and she doesn't know which she likes best. All these things she, you and I have to find out as the story proceeds.

I know a great many women would like me to call my heroine Felicia, but I am going to call her Jane because I know somebody by that name I like very much. My men I will call Henry Smith and Peter Jones, because a man can be as big a hero or a villain with those names as any others. Having settled these things, I am nonplussed as to where I should locate my story. If I place the scene in a drawing-room, likely enough the villain will carry the day; if in a green forest or shady lane, honest worth would show to best advantage. Being a man, I wish to be perfectly fair to both, and here I must confess that I don't know myself how this story is going to come out. Mainly I want the woman to be happy, and a hero might be a difficult kind of a man to get along with. And then the villain might turn out a decent sort of villain, might love her very much, and make her very happy. I think it will be best to have both a drawing-room scene and a forest episode.

Very well, then, the story begins the night of the ball at Mrs. —. More things than the ball were started rolling that night, as you will see very soon. It was this night for one thing that I first met Jane, Henry and Peter, and became interested in their little romance. I wish I was a woman for five minutes so that I could describe to you the dress that Jane wore that night. Just close your eyes—every woman of you—and imagine you have millions of dollars, and can buy just the perfect love of a dress you have always been longing for. That was the kind of dress Jane wore. Look in your mirror to-night before you retire, and imagine yourself as you would appear if with some magic power you could make yourself over to fit your own highest ideal of beauty. When you have done that, you will see Jane as every man in that ball-room saw her that first night of many things. I won't describe the men. They were men—that ought to be enough for you. If I were to tell you one was fair and the other dark, you would leap to conclusions as to which was the villain. As it is, you can pick your own villain, and picture him to suit yourself.

The ball-room is hardly the place for a love scene. So it was in the conservatory that Jane first heard the words of impassioned love with the music of the orchestra as a background. A delicious, dreamy sense of acquiescence in all things possessed her, and her whole nature hung for the moment at the melting point as ready to flow into love or anything. And Henry certainly was handsome and undeniably in earnest as he leaned forward saying the old hackneyed words that nevertheless were new in her young ears.

"Jane, I love you. I think I always have loved you. From the first moment that I saw you, your image has been ever in my heart. There is a madness in my brain when you are away, a delirious joy in my heart when you are near. I cannot think of life without you. I must have you, Jane. I cannot do without you. Won't you be my wife?"

Jane half-yielded the hand which he had taken. The next moment she was in his arms, and mad kisses were pressed on her brow, her lips, her hair, and stormy ejaculations of endearment broke from his lips. But though Jane could have drifted quite easily into love, there was something wild and passionate in this method of wooing that frightened her. She broke from him, and faced him, breathless, half angry at his actions, and yet yearning to his words.

"Will you be my wife?" he asked again.

"I don't know whether I love you or not," she fathered. "Let me have time. Perhaps—"

But he wouldn't give her time even to think. He urged his suit in low, impassioned tones, again took her in his arms, but this time like the gentle and not the savage lover. So she drifted with the influences of the hour into an engagement.

She had a partial awakening an hour later when Peter Jones looked straightly into her eyes and said, "Jane, I love you. Have I any chance?"

"Oh, Peter, you are my friend. Don't spoil it all."

"I understand," said Peter. A little later he added, "You can always count on me," and left her abruptly.

impetuously affectionate as ever, but somehow she could never feel again as she had on the evening of the ball. And so it was not without a sense of relief that she accepted an invitation from a relative at a distance to spend the summer months with her.

The place to which Jane had come was a delightful place in which to pass the summer. It was in the country among the hills, and not very far from her Aunt Faustina's house was a perfect gem of a little lake. Near the lake was a house which belonged to me, and so it came about that I met Jane the second time. As she was rather lonely, and I am of a sympathetic nature, our intimacy developed to such a point in a week that Jane told me the whole story.

A lady friend of mine said the other day that she thought there were very few men, if any, who were really worthy of a fine girl. I was rather surprised to hear her say so, although that, I believe, is the opinion of most men. Needless to say, it is each man's firm belief that he is one of those very few, and that most other men—if worth were the criterion—would be entirely out of the running. No matter how bad he may be, every man fastens on something in his heart of hearts which he fondly imagines distinguishes him from all other men, and he sees a thousand things to excuse or palliate his wickedness or weakness that no one else ever discovers. Well, I, like any other of my sex in this particular (note how I cannot keep out "in this particular"), did not think Henry Smith at all the kind of man that Jane should marry. I had only met him once, and I knew he was a fine-looking fellow, but I am not handsome myself, and so have learned to distrust good looks in a man. I judged Peter to be stronger, more rugged, not nearly so impetuous as his rival, but much more capable of a sustained affection as well as being safer in other ways, and so I threw my influence into the scale on the side of Peter. My method was to make sly little attacks on Peter, irritatingly unjust, and contrasting him unfavorably with Henry Smith where I knew him to be better. This brought her warmly to his defence, and so I gradually accustomed her to a slight feeling of hostility to Henry Smith. This was mean, I acknowledge, but there was worse yet. I wrote to a commercial agency, and had them make me a detailed report of all they could learn concerning both of the men. Except for one thing, there was little to choose between the reports, but that one thing was not favorable to Henry Smith. It showed that financially he was on his last legs, and although I knew this, would not influence Jane, still it did worry me. I determined to find out whether Smith was deceiving Jane in regard to it.

Next day we were strolling along a winding path that led down to Pearl Lake, that little lake already mentioned. It was one of those hazy, sunny days, one of those lazy, hammocky or strolly sort of days when one talks with the mood, and confidences slip out as naturally as leaves fall in autumn.

"Do you ever hear from Henry?" I asked.

"Certainly," said Jane. "Every day."

"I only saw him once," said I, reflectively, "but I think his letters would be terribly affectionate things. If it were Peter, now, he would tell you all about his business and about everything else. I daresay Henry never says anything about anything but love. He makes a fine lover, I expect, but I don't think he is very ambitious in business."

"There you're wrong. Every letter is full of what he intends to do, and what fine things he will be able to give and do for me by-and-by when we are married. He sends me far too many presents as it is—the foolish boy! As if though money mattered! I wouldn't mind if he hadn't a sou. I have plenty of my own, anyway."

"I still maintain what I said. That is only a lover's talk about business. I bet he promises grand things, but doesn't he say, 'I must have you by my side. Without you I can do nothing. With you nothing seems too great to attempt! And doesn't he immediately press you to name the happy day right away?'"

"Yes, of course he does," said Jane. "And he threatens to come here after me if I don't go home soon, too. But how in the world did we ever come to be talking of these things, and whatever possessed me to tell you so much about everything that I shouldn't speak about. Let's talk of something else. Or, better still, let us just say nothing at all for a while. It is too fine a day to spoil with conversation."

"That suits me," said I, "for I know how you make silence eloquent."

That night I thought deeply. Henry was evidently pressing her to marry him, he was head over heels in debt, and Jane had money. Perhaps there was no connection between the three, but I thought there might be. I at last shifted the responsibility and the odium of interference in a love affair by enclosing the report of Henry Smith's financial condition in an envelope addressed to Peter Jones. I posted it next day in a city thirty miles away. A few days later I dropped an anonymous note to Peter saying that Henry was coming out the next day to induce Jane to agree to an immediate marriage. I also dropped the same kind of a note to Henry, saying that Peter was in the vicinity, and about to renew his attentions to Jane.

Two days later I was walking with Jane through the autumn splendors of the woods. We breasted a hill, and looked down into a little forest glade. Jane caught my arm with a little cry, and started running down the hill. Two men were fighting savagely, and though I had not caught their features distinctly, I gleaned from Jane's excitement, and also because I expected them, that they must be Peter Jones and Henry Smith. This was hardly what I expected, and much more than I wanted. Still, I never quarrel with fate, for we never know what is for the best until after the event. Henry was attacking his opponent with almost volcanic fury, but the other fought with a dogged persistence, and such an expression of deadly resolution on his face that the outcome could scarcely be doubted. They did not see Jane until she ran almost between them, and then they paused, panting, and still eyeing each other vengefully. To be surprised at Jane's presence did not seem to strike them.

"Peter Jones, what is all this about?"

Peter was silent.

"Tell me," she commanded Henry Smith. He also was silent.

"Was it about me?" The silence of the men answered her. "Tell me, Henry, for I will know, or everything is over between us."

"He said something about you," said Henry, adding hastily, "nothing bad, you know. Only I wouldn't stand for it."

"Oh, Peter!"

"That is not the truth," said Peter. "I only said about you that you were far too good for him. I am sorry you came. I wouldn't have had you know this for worlds."

"How did you come to say that?"

Peter opened his mouth, but Henry cried, "It is false. He said it worse than that. He said I was an out-and-out villain, or I wouldn't be marrying you!"

"Under the circumstances," corrected Peter.

"The circumstances?" said Jane, wonderingly. "What does he mean?"

Henry said nothing. She turned to Peter.

"Tell me, Peter."

"It is nothing that would seem wrong to you. It only seems so to a man."

"What is it?"

"Well, he is in debt," said Peter, with obvious reluctance.

"Is that all?" said Jane, scornfully.

"Yes, that's all," cried Henry, picking up heart at her tone. "He said I should tell you about it, but I didn't think I should worry you. I can bear my own troubles."

"There you're wrong," said Jane. "You should have told me. I don't mind you being poor, but I don't think you should deceive me. Are you very badly off?"

"No, I'll pull through all right, I'm pretty sure. He's making a mountain out of a molehill."

"I can't keep quiet, and see you wreck your life," broke in Peter. "Jane, I couldn't talk to you about a rival if I had any hope of ever gaining your love. I have not that hope, and I will speak. Henry Smith's only hope of retrieving his fortunes is to marry you, and even the money you will bring him may not save his business supposing you let him have it. I told him I thought it was caddish not to tell you. That was why we fought. I think so still. Good-bye." And Peter strode off, paying no heed to a cry from Jane.

"I swear it isn't true," said Henry eagerly. "All my business needs is a little more money in it, and it can't help but pick up."

Jane looked at him sadly for a moment, then slipped something from her finger, and handed it to him. "Here is your ring, Henry. You have attempted to deceive me. Perhaps you have deceived yourself. I could forgive you being poor. That is nothing. I have loved you truly, and perhaps you have me in your own way, but you have thought as well of my money. Your own words tell me so, though not directly. Good-bye. If I can do anything to help you through your money troubles remember I am still a friend, and will do all I can."

Then she would not wait nor listen to him, but joined me where I stood some distance off—waiting.

I have read this story a second time, and I see that I have not done what I set out to do. Instead of a fascinating villain I have only introduced a man of very common clay; instead of a hero I have painted a man who might be one if the opportunity were given, and instead of a heroine a woman who—. But I will hear nothing but the best things of her—for she is now my wife, and claims to be very happy, though she may only say that because she needs a new hat. However it be, she will get it, and I am not too curious about such matters. I know you wanted me to give her to Peter, but surely a writer can do what he likes with his own heroine, especially if he falls in love with her himself. The real love story was ours, but that I wouldn't tell you for worlds. If you do not like the ending, my character is in your hands. I have confessed to enough to give you grounds for calling me "villain." Anyway, I am a shameless one, and I am satisfied with the fruits of my villainy. The moral is that the man on the spot gets the girl.