

THE WOOING OF A WILFUL MAID

A Story of the Course of True Love Which Finally Ran Smooth

By ANNIE O. TIBBITS

JIM LEDWAITE stood beside his desk with his face growing slowly grey. His eyes were staring out of the window; his back turned to the old man who seemed oblivious to everything except his own concerns.

"Yes, it's that I'm afraid of, Jim," the old man was saying, "and I want you to help me to find out if you can. If she's in love with that scoundrel it'll break my heart. But I'm afraid there's not much doubt about it. He's always there in the evenings—always hanging about her. Just find out for me, lad."

For a moment Jim made no reply. "Stella wouldn't," he gasped out at last, his voice shaking. "You must be mistaken, sir. Stella can't care for Reid—it isn't likely."

Mr. Herman's face looked a trifle hard in the morning sunshine, and he apparently did not see Jim Ledwaite's strange pallor when he turned after a moment and faced him.

"But—why did you ask me, sir?" Jim asked. "Well, two heads are better than one, and I've nobody else to help me. If her mother was alive she would know, but a young lass is a difficult thing, Jim, and you've known her so well—been so close to us all these years. You'll be the very one to find out for me."

All these years! How the words echoed in Jim's mind. "All these years" dated back to the time when he had been brought, a waif of six or so, into Mr. Herman's house. Though eighteen years had gone by since then, that day stood out clear in Jim's mind as though it had been yesterday. He remembered it as a nightmare—a sullen, foggy day when his mother had been carried out of Herman's factory a shapeless mass, a helpless, covered body that lay strangely still when they put it on the table—that never moved again.

Dimly, through a fog, his mind had gathered what had happened. Only vaguely in his six small years had he heard from the fragments of talk in the streets that such things as "accidents" happened in the factory where his mother worked, but he had never thought what an accident meant until then—until the moment when a ghastly whisper told him that that still and awful thing was his mother.

After that he remembered only a figure coming out of a group of people towards him—the figure of young Mr. Herman, the master.

"You come home with me and play with my little lass a while," he had said. "Will you, lad?"

Jim's eyes shot to the figure of his mother, but she never moved—she gave no sign.

"Your mother will not say nay," Mr. Herman said, with a choke in his voice, and a minute later with the boy in his arms he strode out of the cottage up to the great house on the hill.

And Jim, remembering now the little fair-haired child who came running from the firelight to meet them, felt his heart jump and throb in his breast at the thought of that moment, even though eighteen years had gone by.

"Stella, my lass, I've brought a playmate for thee. Come and give him a kiss and tell him you're glad to see him."

And Stella, who had grown into a grand lady, who had been to France to school, who wore silk clothes and rode in a carriage, who was an heiress now—had flung her arms about his cold and ragged body eighteen years ago and kissed his tear-stained face.

In the eighteen years that had gone by he had worked and risen. His master had done well by him. He had fed and clothed and educated him, and at last put him in the office in the factory where, until the last month or two, he had done well.

If Mr. Herman had been a bit disappointed in the last month or two, he said nothing now. All his thoughts were on his daughter Stella, the beautiful young lady who was so different from the tiny child who had hugged the dirty boy in her chubby arms eighteen years ago.

"You see, there's nobody else, Jim, that I can think of," Mr. Herman was saying. "She's in love with somebody, Jim, and if I only knew whom, I should know how to act, maybe. You and she were such chums always, I thought you'd be able to find out better than anyone."

Jim's mouth gave a bitter twist. "But—she's grown up," he stammered. "She's different now since she's come from school, sir. Things have altered, and she doesn't make a chum of me now, sir."

"Doesn't she?" Mr. Herman sighed. "Tisn't to be expected, sir," said Jim. "There's a difference between her and me. When I think that if it hadn't been for your goodness I should have been at the workhouse"—his voice choked—"I—"

"Tut, tut, lad. I don't want you to think of that. And anyhow, if you do it's all the more reason for helping me now. The lass is in love with some one," he went on. "That's very clear. I've seen it this last week or two since she's been home, and I want to find out who it is, for it's plain enough she's ashamed of it and afraid for me to find out. I don't want to ask her outright. If my suspicions are right, she won't tell me. I believe it's young Tom Reid. But I shall know what to do if we can only find out. Will you try, Jim, lad?"

Jim turned and nodded. "I'll do my best, sir," he said. "Only since she's been to France she's got new friends, and she doesn't seem very friendly to me. But I'll do my best, sir."

"That's right. Now for certain we shall get at the bottom of it—two heads, you know, Jim; and if it's young Reid I'll take her for a trip round the world the week after I find out. She shan't have him if I can help it."

"But she may be fond of him, sir, and then—"

"Then I'll cure her," said Mr. Herman. "You help me—"

He broke off to look a little sharply into Jim's face. It looked white in the morning light, and there was a weary look about the his eyes, as though he did not sleep at nights.

"You find out, Jim," he added, and then turned abruptly to his desk. As Jim left his office he looked after him, sighing a little.

"I hope it's only a phase," he muttered to himself. "I hope that lad won't go wrong."

He sat looking at the closed door for some minutes. Many rumors had reached him of late—whispered hints that Jim Ledwaite had started on the downward path—that the lad he had taken and reared and befriended was becoming a gambler, a fre-

quenter of a bad club and a boon companion of Tom Reid, a man who was, in his opinion, a scoundrel.

Jim had been always punctual in the mornings so far and had not neglected his work, but Mr. Herman had looked anxiously often at the tell-tale lines about his face, at the heavy look in his eyes that spoke of late hours, and perhaps worse.

"Thinking about Stella will cure him, maybe," he said to himself as he settled to his work. "I'll give him something to do, and"—he suddenly chuckled—"two heads are better than one, they say. Well, we'll see."



JIM'S task was bitter enough. All his life he had adored Stella Herman, and now to be set to watch her, to look for the lovelight in her eyes, to find out who was the lucky man she loved, was almost more than he could bear, even though she had grown proud and cold since she had been in France. She no longer seemed even friendly. But he loved her just as he had always done all his life.

Ever since Mr. Herman had adopted him he had lived in the great house on the hill almost as if he had been the millowner's own son. Stella had treated him almost like a brother until lately, and now the sense that he was in the way in the drawing-room at night when he returned with her father from the factory, that she resented his appearance at their dining-table, had sent him out into the streets, to wander about restlessly until one night Tom Reid had introduced him to the club in the town.

After that he had always somewhere to go, and it seemed to him better that than face the coldness in Stella's eyes or risk the snubbing she might give him.

Now he would have to stay at home to keep watch, and it seemed to him that he was face to face with a crisis in his life as bitter as the one of eighteen years ago when his mother had been killed. It meant another break—another upheaval, for he could not remain in Medchester. He had, in fact, been on the point of telling Mr. Herman that morning that he wanted to go, and it was only the suggestion about Stella that prevented him. He would do just what Mr. Herman asked, and then go somewhere out of sight of Stella—and out of memory of her—if he could!

But at the door of the drawing-room that night he stood aghast. How could he ever forget her?

She stood by the fireplace, tall and slight, and fair, and as he opened the door she turned her head quickly. A strange flicker passed over her face when she saw him.

"You!" she said coldly.

Jim crossed the floor with an effort to appear indifferent that seemed to drive all the blood from his cheeks; and sat down in a chair on the hearth. He did not look at her, but he seemed to feel her hard, cold eyes upon him—seemed to see reflected in the very fire the proud curl of her lips. He knew the contempt she had for him, but he dared not look to see it in her face.

From a confused want of something to do, he took out a tobacco pouch and began making cigarettes. Stella stood looking down at him, with her face curiously hard and white. If he had looked up he might have thought she hated him.

"Has the attraction in the town paled—or what?" she asked with a slight sneer. "I don't believe you have spent an evening here for weeks. You'll be bored to death."

He did not lift his head.

"I daresay," he said. "Besides," she paused, "besides, Frank and Alice Currie and Mr. Reid may look in. We shall probably play cards, and you'll be out of it. I wonder why you came in to-night?"

His fingers paused in the act of rolling a cigarette.

"I wanted a change," he said. He looked up. Ah, why did she hate him so? What had he done? How was it that his own wild love for her seemed to rouse in her such fierce antagonism?

"I believe you hate me," he said suddenly.

She turned away her head.

"Don't be silly. Why don't you go out as you always do? You'll only be in the way to-night—you'll put everything out. The others won't like to play unless you do, and you'll be the odd one. Why have you chosen to-night to stay at home? It's just like you to do such a stupid thing."

He did not speak for a moment. He rolled another cigarette, and a sudden queer silence fell between them.

"I suppose," Stella said abruptly at last, "that the girl has given you up, or something."

"What girl?" Jim lifted his head sharply.

Stella's lips curled. "Of course there is a girl," she said. "Do you suppose I don't guess? You're like an ostrich, burying your head in the sand. But, after all, who cares? And hark! Isn't that someone outside?"

She lifted her head to listen. As she did so there was a knock at the door, and Tom Reid came in.

Jim felt the blood stand still in his veins as he watched her, and for a moment he could not believe his eyes, for a decided look of annoyance flashed over her face before she went forward to greet him.

Then it was not Reid!

Jim drew a breath. Reid came in, gave an abrupt, condescending nod towards him, and settled down to talk to Stella.

If it was not Reid, then who was it she loved? Not Reid! How his heart bounded now in his body! Not Reid!

He waited impatiently for the others to come in, and when they did at last, he rose to his feet, standing with his back to the mantelpiece almost as if he had a right to be there, forgetting for the moment that he was a nobody, and that the Curries looked down upon him just as Stella did.

She glanced towards him sharply, and for just a breathing space stood watching him—watching him, Jim thought, with a fierce, angry pang, as if she was thinking of some way of getting rid of him.

But nobody should get rid of him to-night. He had one thing to do—he would do it, and go! He was independent even of Stella's opinion to-night. He was like one at bay, and just then he did not care.

She seemed to toss her head a little. Doubtless it was his imagination. And then she bent forward, and it was no imagination now that she greeted Fred Currie with warmth.

Jim's heart burned within him. He felt hot, desperate, and

