

GERALD TO JANE THE STORY OF A CHRISTMAS GIFT By HOWARD FIELDING

[Copyright, 1898, by the Author.] I gave Jane a locket on Christmas day, 1896. It was of gold, enriched with a design in diamonds.

I pointed out to Jane the advantage of having diamonds so small that every one would know they were genuine, and she said with delicious flattery that no one else could have thought of that.

The locket was shaped like a heart, as that organ is figured in the jeweler's physiology. It was very beautiful on the outside, and it had my portrait on the inside. So that, viewed throughout, it averaged well, as lockets go.

Opposite my portrait were some words engraved in the customary copy book script, so appropriate to the majority of sentiments that are chosen on trinkets. That which I had chosen, however, was not open to such criticism.

In explanation of it let me say that Christmas day, 1896, was the first of our engagement. We did not know that we loved each other till quite late in the afternoon of the day before.

My office boy could have told you that I was in love, and as for Jane's family—the Wetherells—from the head of the house down to Jane's little fox terrier with "Beauty Wetherell" on his collar, they were all fully aware of our sentiments.

Beauty didn't bark at me, and the rest of the family were obviously studying my good points in order to prepare for the inevitable.

But I was fairly shivering with fear lest Jane did not love me, and when I had told her what my heart would hold no longer, she said with tears in her eyes that it came as a great surprise to her.

I had a ring that had been my mother's, but as for the locket, I had just time to buy it before the stores closed on Dec. 24, and I bribed an engraver by a great fee to work by night upon the lettering.

The portrait was stripped from a photograph she liked, and pasted in. So the locket and our love were new on Christmas day. And now for the idea that I have mentioned.

"When you cease to love me, Jane," said I, "fill out that line with another date. Thus we shall have the life of a dove, as men's lives are recorded on their tombstones—'born, so and so; died such a year.'"

"There will be no dates when I cease to love you," said she, "for dates end with time."

That should have satisfied any one, yet I was not willing to give up my own idea. Few men are, even when they're in love, and a great deal of trouble grows out of it.

"Promise me," said I, "that you will keep the locket always, and that you will add the other date when love is done."

Under protest and with her hands clasped in mine so tightly that it seemed nothing could ever part them, she promised.

What would either of us have said to any absurd creature who had dared to prophesy that before another Christmas should come we would be estranged? Nothing that he'd have liked to hear, you may be sure.

Yet it happened. The cause? Heaven may know. You cannot learn it of me. Perhaps I made a nuisance of myself by nagging her too much; it is a great mistake.

I remember that our first difference resulted from Jane's assertion that love did not make me happy, and also that my attempt to prove that it did was productive of great unhappiness for both of us.

Still I don't see how so small a matter as my happiness could have parted us or why we supposed that such a parting would help it. I only know that one evening when I left her house I wasn't engaged any more, and New York wasn't New York any more, and the moon in heaven was not the moon.

My happiness—or whatever it may have been—had lasted a little less than a year.

We did not publish our estrangement.

Few persons outside her family know anything about it.

Christmas was drawing near, and a doleful day it was likely to be for me. The last three I had spent in the Wetherells' home, and the change from that to a lonely bachelor apartment and a cheerless dinner at a club was enough to make me wish that I had been a pagan with no knowledge of this sacred festival.

In any event, however, I should not have been at the Wetherell house that year, for since the early part of November Jane and I had been bound by a promise to the Grays of Princeton, who were to give an old-fashioned Christmas party in their historic mansion.

Of course we could not go under the new order of things. I had written a note of regret, with some mild falsehood as my excuse, but I understood that Jane had told the truth in her own letter of declination to Mrs. Gray.

At the last moment I was seized with a desire to go. Perhaps it was impossible for me to face the prospect of spending the day alone. Whatever may have been the impulse, I wrote again to Mrs. Gray and begged to be allowed to change my mind.

My friendship with them all was close enough to permit of such an unconventional act and to justify me in expecting the cordial reply which I received by the earliest possible mail.

Thus it happened that I took a train from New York on Christmas forenoon with a heart so heavy that I don't see how the engine managed to haul it.

I would not positively assert that this overweight was responsible for the disaster of the day, but whether from that or some strictly mechanical cause the train on the little branch from the Junction to Princeton jumped the track about 300 yards from Princeton station and distributed itself crosswise upon the rails.

No one was hurt, but there was considerable excitement. A woman who was sitting behind me clasped her large, warm arms around my neck and yelled into my ear that we should all be killed, and if her husband had not come to my rescue I should never have breathed again.

This incident delayed me so much that I was one of the last to leave the train. Looking ahead from the platform of the car, I saw the passengers walking the track in a long procession, and among them, to my inexpressible surprise, was Jane!

She was not more than twice a car's

the annoyance of meeting me. Neither, to be perfectly frank, could I stand such a collision myself.

The best course seemed to be to loiter until Jane had ridden away in one of the Grays' carriages that would surely be waiting at the station, and then to look up some conveyance that could take me back to Princeton Junction.

I approached the station warily, for I did not wish to be seen by any one who would report my presence to the Grays. I saw one of their equipages moving away filled with people, but could not be sure whether Jane was of the number.

Inquiring of a baggage man, whom I found in an obscure corner of the station platform, I learned that two coaches were already waiting for passengers who wished to ride over to the Junction. He pointed out an ancient and ponderous hack, and, after a word with the driver, I climbed in.

There was already one passenger, a lady who sat on the rear seat. I did not notice her particularly until we were face to face in the vehicle, and then I perceived that she was Jane.

"You saw me, then?" I cried. "Yes," said she, "I saw you on the train, and, thinking that it would be embarrassing for you to meet me at the party, I decided to go back to New York. You must get right out and go to the Grays'."

"Certainly not," said I warmly. "Do you suppose that I will spoil your day by driving you back to New York in this way? I am not such a brute. I will return, but you must go to the party. I never would have come here but that I heard you had declined."

"So did I," said she, "but I changed my mind before yesterday. Mother wanted me to go. She thought it would be well for me to do so."

"Jane," said I, with a trembling voice, "has this folly of ours so hurt you that your mother is anxious and?" "Not in the least," she answered quickly. "You entirely misunderstand me."

"It has frequently been my misfortune to do that," I replied. "But it's too late to speak of it now. Won't you please forget that you saw me today and go to the party as you had intended?"

But she wouldn't do anything of the sort, and we sat there disputing as to which of us should be the human sacrifice and which should go to the party until three more passengers for the Junction arrived and cut off our discussion.

The subject involved too many intimate details for us to talk of it in the presence of strangers, and the situation, which had been bad enough before, was rendered much worse by their advent.

Jane and I had been unable to arrive at a decision before they came, and we certainly couldn't do it afterward. Neither of us could leave the carriage without seeming to sacrifice the other, and the result was that we remained and were trundled over to the Junction.

We had to converse, because the others had heard us talking and subsequent

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Traveler's Guide.

BUFFALO & SUSQUEHANNA R. R.

Time Table taking Effect June 6th, 1898. "The Grand Scenic Route."

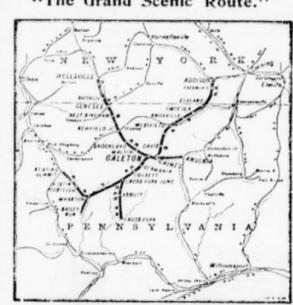


Table with columns for stations (Buffalo, Cheektowatch, Tonawanda, etc.) and times for different train services.

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STATIONS. Buffalo, Cheektowatch, Tonawanda, etc. All trains run daily except Sunday.

COUDERSPORT & PORT ALLEGANY R. R.

Taking effect June 15th, 1898.

Table with columns for stations (Coudersport, North Coudersport, etc.) and times for different train services.

Table with columns for stations (Ulysses, Coudersport, etc.) and times for different train services.

(\*) Flag stations. (\*\*) Trains do not stop. Connections—At Ulysses with Fall Brook R'y. for points north and south.

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"PROMISE ME THAT YOU WILL KEEP THE LOCKET ALWAYS."

length from me and was looking back when my glance rested on her, but she immediately turned away and began to walk with the others toward the station.

The sight of her filled my mind with confusion. Of course she could not be journeying to Princeton on that day with any other goal than the Grays' Christmas party. It was equally obvious that she would not have come if she had had any idea that I was to be present.

Undoubtedly she had been deceived by my declination of the invitation, as I by hers.

Such being the case, it was my plain duty to flee. I could not stay by to

silence would have seemed peculiar. As we could not speak of the one topic which interested us, we spoke of everything that didn't. I wish I could remember all the stupid things we said. They would make a first rate modern society drama of the innocuous kind.

The ride seemed so long that I was afraid the driver had lost his way, but if he had he found it again, for we pulled up alongside the station at last.

We went into the writing room, and there, in a corner, we renewed our discussion. I tried to persuade Jane to go back to Princeton, and she insisted that I should do so.

We became so interested that we let