

# MISS CONIFEE

Third of a Series of Short Stories on Marriage  
By the Best American  
Fiction Writers

## By Joseph Hergesheimer

JUST as she was about to vanish from his office Lewis Beitleman stopped Miss Coniffee. While she had been sitting beyond the arm extension of his desk, listening, as usual, with her gaze concentrated on a pencil turning in her thin fingers, he had been half-conscious of something disturbing in her appearance. This impression had left him, been absorbed in the immediate subject of his address, but it had returned in time for him to bring her to a stop at the door.

"Miss Coniffee," he said. She came half-way back, her brow marked by a query in which there was a trace of impatience. "What I wanted to say was—" he began; but this displeased him. "I was thinking lately," he went ahead more directly, "that you've had too much to do. Now this last matter is disposed of, you might as well take a rest. The shore's nice late in May; you'd better run down for a week or so."

"But this last isn't done," she replied, sharply. "We don't know as we can get a leather that will suit our purpose; the prices'll have to be lower than any we've quoted on first-class material; and we ain't right certain how many jobs it would take to bring us out."

"Details," he replied, dismissing them with a waved hand. "No, I'm set on you getting a rest. You've been going it too hard at the office again."

A slightly deepened color answered his solicitude. "No more than usual," she answered him. "I can take a day or two later, when things are fixed." In reply he asked how her mother was. "Well enough," she replied almost defiantly.

"You work yourself to death for me here, and the same at home for your mother." Lewis Beitleman grew excited, angry. "The fact is," he exclaimed, "that you ought to have an interest in this office. If the world was run right you would have, too; you'd own 50 per cent of this business today. It would have been nothing without you." She tried to stop his speech, but it swept her remonstrance aside. "You've been with me fourteen years in all; and, since Swope died, you and me have been it. You've seen it come right along from a half-dead carriage repository to a pretty lively little automobile accessory concern. You brought it up as much as any one, that's what you did; yes, sir, and more. You gave it taste, you gave our jobs tone; and that's what sold them. And now I won't have you working yourself to death. If it wasn't for my family—"

Suddenly Lewis Beitleman's energy suffered a collapse. "I want you to take a holiday," he added impotently. "Is that all, Mr. Beitleman?" she demanded.

He wouldn't answer her nor glance up, and, after a moment, he heard the soft impact of the door. "Hell," he swore, silently fidgeting. All that he had said to Miss Coniffee was true; it was, rather than an exaggeration, an underestimate. She had been invaluable. As it was in the last year—the worst of years—he had made \$14,000. This year, and it was only May, it was clear that the profits would be sixteen or better. Or better! Miss Coniffee, that was the answer.

He wondered how old she was—near to forty, certainly, not a good-looking woman, nothing like as pretty as Nanine, his wife, had been; and, of course, not within sight of Eldreda, his daughter. Miss Coniffee was too thin, too small; and then her hair was no particular color. She wore glasses of an unbecoming pattern, that a little magnified her very earnest onyx-brown eyes; and her clothes—to save his life, after being with her day and day for fourteen years, he couldn't remember a detail of her dress; inexpensive, it would be that. The care of her mother must absorb most of her salary.

He had spoken of her good taste, exercised in the direction of specialties for automobiles; that was splendid, but it wasn't her best quality; she was principally remarkable for the energy of her mind, her energy and a quality of determination, of no courage—but on Nanine's account, she was showing the effects of this; or, as he had said, perhaps she was only tired. He would make her take a rest; he'd shut the office, close it down, he thought extravagantly, if he couldn't get her away by other means.

Lewis Beitleman smiled; but, at the same time he was annoyed—all women were so infernally set, Miss Coniffee and Nanine and Eldreda. Following indirectly this fact, he wondered what Nanine would say to a proposal of giving Miss Coniffee something more; enough, in a necessarily limited way, to make her future safe. Not a half, but a fifth, a sixth of the business.

As it was, he paid Miss Coniffee as much as he could get her to accept. She had positively refused a further raise. He wished, vainly, that Nanine and Miss Coniffee might be closer to each other, as close as possible—but on Nanine's account. This desire suddenly recalled to him the startling fact that Miss Coniffee, except once when he had been ill, to take dictation, had never been in his house. The Coniffees, mother and daughter, had rooms in the congested city, but his house was in a suburb, where it was restful, quiet and green.

HIS customary train of late afternoon carried him for forty minutes through the city to its outskirts and the development of which his home was a part. Eldreda was outside, in a deep wicker chair, absorbed in a magazine of the moving-picture world. She was nineteen, her large, appealing eyes, a specimen of naturally blonde hair, and



she had taken third prize in a beauty contest conducted by just such a magazine as she was reading.

The photograph of her upon which this triumph had been based, greatly enlarged, hung prominently on the wall of the living room. In it her firm shoulders were draped in a precariously informal-seeming piece of silk, her hair was dressed to its utmost effectiveness, and she celebrated, the appealing eyes regarded the world with an innocent and tender surprise. Her mouth the photographer had softened in shadow.

She nodded to her father, and instantly returned to the page before her. Eldreda, he knew, was cross because he wouldn't send her to California in order to complete the success already so auspiciously begun. Sending her West, he had discovered, was not a simple concern of transportation; it included clothes; the right clothes; a hotel in Los Angeles, the right hotel for, perhaps, a month; and then she would be off, or rather, on. At least she, supported by her mother, said she would.

"With your favorites," he commented in a determination of cheerfulness. Eldreda raised her eyebrows. "In my opinion," he said, "Gloria Swanson is absurdly overestimated. What they all see in her personally I can't make out. But, then, every one agrees that what the screen needs is new types, something different." Her breath heaved sharply. "Never has there been such an opportunity." Her chin drooped gracefully on a hand steadied by the chair arm; her body expressed a sort of resignation; the eyes sought the far horizon.

"I hear the studios are all coming East," he observed hopefully. "In time for me to play old women bits," she retorted, in a voice with a perceptible edge. She turned abruptly away from him, the line of her cheek,

"Mr. Beitleman!" her voice was so choked that she was practically inarticulate. "What—what do you mean? What—ever in my conduct gave you the liberty to say such things?"

her clenched hand, registered hardly contained resentment.

He went on into the house, and up to Nanine's and his room. His wife was reclining on a couch. Since she had grown so fat she found it necessary to rest a great deal. That fatness had come upon her so overwhelmingly that any vestige of struggle had been doomed from the first. She had simply expanded until she resembled an inflated caricature of Eldreda.

"There you are," she said languidly. "Yes, here I am," he agreed, "I thought, maybe, Nanine, the evening was so fine we'd all take a little ride after supper."

"It blows my hair," she answered, without interest; "and that back seat is too short. To say nothing of Eldreda's complexion."

"Now look here," he cried, "I've heard enough about that back seat and Eldreda's complexion and your hair. There's a nice little limousine I fixed up and the owner can't pay for it. Well, I can get it right and I'm going to buy it for you girls. How's that, hey?"

"It might be good and then it mightn't," she told him; "it depends if it roars inside. If it does it will hurt my head."

"I'd hate to think over the times my head's been hurt through roaring," he retorted, with a display of spirit, "and there is another thing I got to speak of—that's Eldreda. I'm not going to give her \$3000 to go to California with, and she might as well stop posing and posturing. I ain't a camera, I ain't a director, and it'll get her nowhere."

"Sooner or later," Nanine asserted. "What do you mean?" he demanded heatedly.

"Genius will be justified," she added emphatically. "Genius!" he was practically shouting, "if either of you think rolling your eyes is genius you're fooled before you go a mile. It's the capacity for pains; and that, on the other hand, is what you give me—pains."

"You will keep on getting them, too," her voice and manner were placid.

Suddenly he felt absolutely helpless; nothing he could say would move, affect his wife, nothing touch his daughter. It might be wiser to give Eldreda the money at once to speed her into the West to the acclaim and fortune so surely—in her estimation and her mother's—waiting for her.

"Now if I was West I could get about more," Nanine asserted. "The weather there, they say, is elegant." This was a new phase of the Western project and he was startled at the possibilities it opened. Did she mean that she would go out with Eldreda, he asked. Nanine did. He could spend the winters with them.

"Who would run the business to pay for so much?" This question very silently he answered for himself, Miss Coniffee. She could, very neatly, almost, do just that. But not quite; it was the combination of Miss Coniffee and himself that was so potent.

THE memory of the weariness he had discerned in his secretary came back to trouble him. She had grown visibly older in the last year. The day had stayed warm into evening, and they, Nanine and Eldreda and he, were seated on the porch. There was an illusory glimmer of moonlight, at intervals there was a faint stir in the locust trees along the sidewalk, and the ingratiating subdued ripple of a piano. At irregular intervals Eldreda sighed explosively, agonized with the tragedy of everything; and though she was veiled from Lewis Beitleman by the dark, he knew exactly to which emotions she was giving form and body.

Perhaps, with his slight assistance, she might mount in a dazzling arc to stardom in the sky. He wasn't, he felt, mean, but, aside from the already comparatively large cost of his family, there was the greatest need now to turn everything possible back into his business.

It could be counted on to make, when all was considered, tremendous returns. In three years, it might be; they could easily send Eldreda to the South Seas, and he said so aloud. "I suppose," her voice answered out of the gloom, "you chose the South Seas so you wouldn't have to buy me any clothes."

could. It seems like, with you and your mamma, a person is always misunderstood."

"Don't pick continually on Eldreda, I won't have it," her mamma put in. "You can't seem to learn that Eldreda's delicate. She's not a pot, but a fine vase easily shattered."

"Well," he replied pacifically, "it's too nice an evening for ructions. Things are going too smooth for that." The smoothness of "things" brought Miss Coniffee back to mind; and, after a moment's forced hopeful consideration, he spoke of her to his family.

"Now, take Miss Coniffee—" "Who's she?" Nanine demanded. "That's his stenographer," Eldreda explained.

"She is more than that, Eldreda," he patiently corrected her; "Miss Coniffee is a good half of our business. She's been with me now for fourteen years, and in the first month after I got her she near to paid for all she's had since. Taste! That's where she's valuable, that's what she is; we're a small house, but I tell you our work's been complimented by big people. We are going, not coming. What I am getting at is this, and I know—" he hesitated shortly, and then began again with a rush, "I know you'll both back me up. Miss Coniffee's been with me, us, for fourteen years now, and she's a part of the place. The truth is she can't work any more without me than I can her. If anything happened to that, she'd be gone. It's her mother and her honesty both together; her mother's got a kind of expensive sickness and Miss Coniffee won't take anything from me but a dog-goned moderate salary. She won't have a penny more, after all she's given us; but with your help, with your approval, I've thought of a way to make her safe, when I pass on to my California. It's this—we will give her an interest in the business, make her a small partner like."

He waited, on the mark of an optimistic interrogation, through the deep silence that followed, a silence finally shattered with an unqualified derision. "Partner," said Nanine, "partner, her a stenographer? You're mad, ain't you?"

His momentary unwarranted expectations, like glass, fell swiftly, shattering, on the hard ground of reality. Eldreda giggled.

"You don't know the best, because you haven't seen her—why, she's a million and looks like an old whiskerom with most of the straws out. I'll tell the street Pa's got some taste himself, I'll say so."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," Lewis Beitleman's wife told him, "trying that on us. You must think we never see anything of life. What makes me mad is your speaking it right out to us, before your daughter."

"What do you mean?" he demanded, vaguely trying to face them both.

"Take it to the fireplug," this was Neda's.

"How long has this been going on?" Nanine asked.

Drawn rigidly up on the edge of his

chair, with his face burning, he was, at first, unable to reply to either. When he spoke it was in a repressed hard tone. "I told you," he said, "I told you Miss Coniffee had been with me fourteen years and I told you, too, that we had her to thank for a half of our success. What I was trying to find out was could she hope for a little kindness from you so she could look easy at any future. Do you understand—while Eldreda and you have been setting, sitting, at home reading moving-picture magazines, Miss Coniffee and I were in it with our last breath keeping a roof over your heads and wondering where we'd all be next year. She's helped to make every deal we've pulled out on—those nights I was so late we were sitting up figuring in dimes—"

A desolating feeling of the uselessness of any attempted explanation smothered his determined effort, and a fresh silence fell upon them.

"Don't you give her a Christmas present?" Nanine asked. "I said don't you give her a present at Christmas?" "Yes," he replied, finally.

"Well then—?" "Now, if she was young," Eldreda spoke speculatively, "if she was young and beautiful, with violet eyes and a mass of hair gold in the sun, and you were different \* \* \* if you were rich and distinguished looking and had a wife that didn't understand you \* \* \* and your secretary secretly was the daughter of a man your father had ruined, who was seeking revenge, and your wife was in love with—with a man who was plotting to get your secretary in his power, and—and—well, if it had any class it would be different."

"However did you think of all that, Eldreda?" her mother demanded. "It's as good as a picture."

Lewis Beitleman laughed, a sorry variety of mirth, "I'll tell you what," he proclaimed to the dark: "I'm going to bring Miss Coniffee right home to supper and let you see for yourselves."

He was doubtful about the wisdom of this later. Going to the office he revolved it again and again in his mind; but, confident that Miss Coniffee's splendid qualities must be clear even to his family, he asked her, very formally, to supper at his home. She was obviously startled, almost distressed, and instinctively she declined the invitation. "Nonsense," he replied, back on his customary footing with her, "of course you'll come. My wife said very particularly. That latter, he felt, since it was absolutely necessary, was justified.

Well, she'd think; Miss Coniffee didn't have a thing suitable to wear; the gray voile—that was Thursday, and, finally, it was arranged that she should go out with Lewis Beitleman, for an evening at his home, on Monday.

"Isn't it ridiculous we never thought of this before," he said to her on the train.

NEITHER his wife nor Eldreda was visible when, with Miss Coniffee, he reached the porch of his home. "Nanine," he called through the open door, "here we are." There was no answer, and he was placing Miss Coniffee in a comfortable chair when Eldreda appeared. Her manner, he recognized, was that of the Earl's daughter greeting the faithful retainers from the castle terrace—there was a quick smile, a widening of the notable eyes, followed by a congealing of every human aspect.

Lewis Beitleman knew this posture well, and it specially irritated him. "Mamma," she said, "has a touch of her neuralgia, and ask to—"

"I didn't know that," he admitted incautiously; "I'll go right up and see her."

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded sharply, standing before the recumbent Nanine. "It hurts my face to talk," she explained hastily. He gazed steadily at her, and then, without further speech, turned and left the room. It was too bad about Mrs. Beitleman, Miss Coniffee said. They were at the table, and he was eating in a savage silence. Eldreda's hands dropped like spent lilies on her wrists. She couldn't think why they had cottage cheese—a disgusting dish.

"Smear-case," Lewis Beitleman corrected her, taking a conspicuous second helping. His disappointment, his resentment and anger had hardened within him; he scarcely noticed Miss Coniffee, so slight in the gray voile, with an appropriate pale flower under the close rim of her hat. After supper the three sat uneasily in a May evening, palpably silver under the moon, a warm spring breeze barely stirred the foliage of the trees, a piano played and stopped.

LEWIS BEITLEMAN'S anger deserted him, but he ached as though it had left an actual wound. Eldreda rose, remaining immobile, statuesque, waiting, for a moment, and then, without explanation, vanished into the hall. This created in his mind an image of her leaving for the West, for California. His wife, as well, had spoken of going. He could come out and see them in the waters. Sharply a voice within him whispered, cried, that he didn't have to; they couldn't drag him to California.

He could just see Miss Coniffee's profile, thin and worn, but fine. Her narrow precise hands were quiet, for a little, in her lap. She was the most restful woman in the world. It would be nice, he thought, to go for rides with her in the car, the open air, on June afternoons and through evenings in July. She knew a lot about wayside flowers, and they would stop for her to put some in her belt. Then he would drop her at the little place in the peace of the country where, with her mother, she lived; and he'd go home to a sweet and silent house—

It wasn't, however, of himself that he was thinking, nor of Eldreda and Nanine, but of Miss Coniffee. His admiration for her, he discovered, was immeasurable. And rightly; a person of integrity, who had given her vitality, her life, to him and his interest. Now she was an old maid. But he discarded that term as soon as it occurred to him—Miss Coniffee was nothing so absurd. With money, with the security he was about to offer her, she'd have more hats with roses, roses pink and not gray.

"Miss Eldreda is beautiful," she said, sudden and wistful. "We must see that she gets to California. Couldn't we do it this fall, Mr. Beitleman?"

"This summer," he corrected her; "and Mrs. Beitleman is going with her." "But who will stay with you?" Miss Coniffee demanded. "I'll be all right," he assured her. "I can go out and see them in the winters \* \* \* if I have to."

"I don't understand," she replied, slowly.

"You will soon enough," all his restraint was gone. "I don't care how soon they leave and if they never come back. If my money is all they want they can have it, most of it, and I'm well rid of them. What are they to me? I'd like to know, the way you are? Nothing you and me have slaved long enough. From now on we're going to work some for ourselves; we're going to have a little ease and days off rolling over the country."

TURNED toward Miss Coniffee he saw her sway in her chair, and then she blundered to her feet—

"Mr. Beitleman!" her voice was so choked that she was practically inarticulate. "What—what do you mean? What—ever in my conduct gave you the liberty to say such things?" She sank back into the chair. "I'm, I'm all in a tremble. There was the stopped heave of a sob. "Understand that I am leaving your employment as soon as you can get some body else."

"Miss Coniffee," Lewis Beitleman was aghast, "how could you think I'd insult you—you being you and me me. I only want to protect you, your old age, I mean. I tried to get Mrs. Beitleman and Eldreda to agree in making you a partner, but it was no good, they couldn't see it, so I was going to let them go."

"You put it very queer," she said, "but I'm sorry I took you like that. Thank you, Mr. Beitleman—" a tremor shook her, interrupted her. In the silence which followed he was conscious of the fragrance of the locust petals as they scattered through the air. Life might, it ought to be, the same; happy and free and—and sweet. Miss Coniffee's voice, small but inflexible, finally answered his vague rebellious aspiration. "I could never accept anything from you that way; remember who they are—your wife and daughter!"

From the floor above came the sound of a lacy and contemptuous snigger.

### Joseph Hergesheimer

Author of this week's story in the all-star American fiction series, is a Philadelphia writer who has taken his place among the foremost creators of our modern fiction.

His latest novel, "Cothera," caused a sensation and has gone to 48 editions.

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In talking with Mr. Hergesheimer, you travel back and forth through the years, in distant countries and customs, or, as in the present story, a jaunt into your own time and among your own people. The big thing that impresses one is his vital grasp of a vital subject. He deals with life honestly, he treats it directly, with force and human feeling. In a recent interview he made these observations regarding his outlook on life and modern literature:

"People detest truth. In an address before a women's college association I said: 'No matter what else you do, if your nose is shiny you might as well be dead.' They didn't all take it correctly, but what I said was truth. You know a woman's charm depends on her beauty.

"In the Victorian age—that age of conventional propriety and public morality—women wore lower gowns and got drunker than they have ever since. They drank sparkling hock and wore lovely little sprigged muslins and hoopskirts and caught their hair in nets of gilt thread. I'd like to have seen such women.

"Russians and Latins write best about women. To most of our men women are symbols, but not individuals. It must make women smile to read what men write about them.

"You mustn't take one woman as a symbol of what others are or should be. They should be studied individually to the last detail of clothes and period—inside and out."

