



# THE WAY OF A MAN

By EMERSON HOUGH

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tain Orme—since we must call him captain and not minister—was so good as to inform you of my private matters.”

“Yes.” Again she looked at me squarely with defiance. “I know all about it. I know all about that girl.”

So there it was. But I kept myself under whip hand still. “I am very glad. It will save me telling you of myself. It is not always that one has the good fortune of such early messengers.”

“Go on,” she said bitterly; “tell me about her.”

“I have no praises to sound for her. I do not wish to speak of this if you prefer to hear it from others than myself.”

She only smiled enigmatically, her mouth crooking in some confidence she held with herself, but not with me. “It was natural,” she said at last slowly. “Doubtless I would have done as she did. Doubtless any other man would have done precisely as you did. That is the way with men. After all, I suppose the world is the world and

that we are as we are. The girl who is closest to a man has the best chance with him. Opportunity is much—very much. Secrecy is everything.”

“Why should you not both have done so?” she resumed bitterly. “We are all human.”

“Why should we not have done what—what is it that you mean?” I demanded of her.

“Why, there was she engaged to Mr. Belknap, as I am told, and there were you engaged to a certain young lady by the name of Grace Sheraton very far away. And you were conveniently lost—very conveniently—and you found each other’s society agreeable. You kept away for some weeks or months, both of you forgetting. It was idyllic—ideal. You were not precisely babes in the woods. You were a man and a woman. I presume you enjoyed yourselves after a very possible little fashion. I do not blame you. I say I might have done the same. I should like to know it for a time myself—freedom. I do not blame you, only,” she said slowly, “in society we do not have freedom. Here it is different. I suppose different laws apply, different customs.”

“Miss Grace,” said I, “I do not in the least understand you. You are not the same girl I left.”

“No, I am not. But that is not my fault. Cannot a woman be free as much as a man? Have I not right as much as you? Have you not been free?”

“One thing only I want to say,” I rejoined, “and it is this, which I ought not to say at all. If you mean anything regarding Ellen Meriwether, I have to tell you, or any one, that she is clean—mind, body, soul, heart—as clean as when I saw her first.”

“Do you know, I like you for saying that!” she retorted. “I would never marry a man who knew nothing of other women—I don’t want a milkop; and I would not marry a man who would not lie for the sake of a sweet heart. You lie beautifully! Do you know, Jack, I believe you are a bit of a gentleman, after all!”

“But tell me, when is the wedding to be?” This last with obvious effort.

“You have not advised me.”

“Oh, I beg your pardon. I meant your marriage with Ellen Meriwether. I supposed, of course, you had quite forgotten me!”

“Ellen Meriwether is already married,” I said to her, with a calmness which surprised myself. But what surprised me most was the change which came upon her face at the words—the flush—the gleam of triumph, of satisfaction. I guessed this much and no more—that she had had certain plans, and that now she had other plans, changed with lightning swiftness, and by reason of my words.

“Lieutenant Lawrence Belknap and Miss Ellen Meriwether were married, I presume, some time after I started for the east,” I went on. “But they were never engaged before our return to the settlements. It was all very suddenly arranged.”

“How like a story book! So he forgot her little incidents with you—all summer—side by side—day and night! How romantic! I don’t know that I could have done so much, had I been a man, and myself not guilty of the same incidents. At least, he kept his promise.”

“There had never been any promise at all between them.”

“Then Captain Orme was quite mistaken?”

“Captain Orme does not trouble himself always to be accurate.”

“At least, then, you are unmarried, Jack?”

“Yes, and likely to be for some years.”

Now her face changed once more. Whether by plan of her own or not I

cannot say, but it softened to a more gentle—shall I say a more beseeching look? Was it that I again was at her side, that old associations awakened? Or was it because she was keen, shrewd and in control of herself, able to make plans to her own advantage? I cannot tell as to that. But I saw her face soften, and her voice was gentle when she spoke.

“What do you mean, Jack?” she asked.

If there was not love and caress in her tones then I could not detect the counterfeit. I reiterate, if I should live a thousand years I should know nothing of women, nothing. We men are but toys with them.

Had I been left to my judgment to pronounce I should have called her emotion now a genuine one. Mocking, cynical, contemptuous she might have been, and it would have suited my own mood. But what was it now on the face of Grace Sheraton, girl of a proud family, woman I once had kissed here at this very place until she blushed—kissed until she warmed, until she—

But now I know she changed once again, and I know that this time I read her look aright. It was pathos on her face, and terror. Her eye was that of the stricken antelope in dread of the pursuer.

“Jack,” she whispered, “don’t leave me. Jack, I shall need you!”

Before I could resolve any questions in my mind I heard behind us the sound of approaching hoofs and there rode up to the gate her brother, Harry Sheraton, who dismounted and hitched his horse near mine, saluting me as he pushed open the great gate. It was the first time I had seen him since my return.

“Am I intruding?” he asked. “I’m awfully glad to see you, Cowles. I heard below you were home. You’ve had a long journey.”

“Yes,” I answered, “longer than I had planned by many weeks. And now I am glad to be back once more. No,” in answer to his turning toward his horse as though he would leave us. “You are looking well, Harry. Indeed, everything in old Virginia is good to see again.”

“Wish I could be as polite with you. Have you been sick? And, I say, you did meet the savages, didn’t you?”

I knew he meant the scar on the side of my neck, which still was rather evident, but I did not care to repeat the old story again. “Yes,” I answered a bit shortly, “rather a near thing of it. I presume Captain Orme told you?”

I turned to Miss Grace, who then admitted that she had heard something of the surgery which had thus left its mark. Harry seemed puzzled, so I saw it was news to him. Miss Grace relieved the situation somewhat by turning toward the house.

“I am sure you will want to talk with Jack,” she said to him. “And listen, Harry; you must have him and Mrs. Cowles over here this very evening. We cannot think of her living alone at the old place.”

I was still an engaged man. Evidently nothing otherwise had been discussed in the Sheraton family councils, if any such had been held. If never sutor in Old Virginia rode up in sorrier case than mine that morning as I came to call upon my fiancée certainly did never one depart in more uncertain frame of mind than mine at this very moment. I presume that young Sheraton felt something of this, for he began awkwardly to speak of matters related thereto.

“It’s awfully hard,” he began, “to see strangers there in your own house. I know it must be hard. But I say, your father must have plunged heavily on those lands over west in the mountains. I’ve heard they’re very rich in coal and that all that was necessary was simply cash or credit enough to tide the deal over till next year’s crops.”

“My father always said there was a great fortune in the lands,” I replied. “Yes, I think another year would have seen him through, but that year was not to come for him.”

“But couldn’t funds be raised somehow, even yet?” I shook my head.

“Well, I’m not so sure,” he went on, embarrassed. “My father and I have been talking over these matters, and we concluded to ask you if we might not take a hand in this. At least, we have agreed all along that—in this case you know—and my sister—we have planned definitely that you should live in your old place. We’re going to take that over. The redemption time has plenty of margin, and we can’t allow those people to come in here and steal one of the old Virginia places in that way. We are going to arrange to hold that for you and my sister, and we thought that perhaps in time something could be worked out of the rest of the property in the same way. That is, unless Colonel Meriwether, your father’s partner, shall offer some better solution. I suppose you talked it over with him?”

“I did not talk with him about it at all,” said I dully. For many reasons I did not care to repeat all of my story to him. “None the less, it seems very generous of you and your father to take this interest in me. It would be very cheerful of me if I did not appreciate it. But I trust nothing has been done as yet.”

“You trust not? Why, Cowles, you speak as though you did not want us to do it.”

“I do not,” said I.

“Oh, then—”

“You know our family well enough.”

“That’s true. But you won’t be offended if I suggest to you that there are two sides to this, and two prides. All the country knows of your engagement, and now that you have returned it will be expected that my sister will set the day before long. Of course, we shouldn’t want my sister to begin too far down—oh, dash it,

Cowles, you know what I mean.”

“I presume so,” said I to him slowly. “But suppose that your sister should offer to her friends the explanation that the change in my fortunes no longer leaves desirable this alliance with my family?”

“Do you suggest that?”

“I have not done so.”

“Has she suggested it?”

“We have not talked of it, yet it might be hard for your sister to share a lot so humble, and so uncertain.”

“That I presume will be for her to decide,” he said slowly.

“By Jove!” he broke out at length, flushing as he turned to me. “It is hard for a fellow to tell sometimes what’s right, isn’t it? Jack, you remember Jennie Williams, across under Catactin?”

“I thought you were going to make a match of it some time,” I said.

“Prettiest girl in the valley,” he assented, “but her family is hardly what we would call the best, you know.”

“Then why did you go there so often all last year?” I asked him.

“Jack,” he said, “it’s all through. I want to ask you. I ought to marry Jennie Williams, but—”

Now I looked at him full and hard and guessed. Perhaps my face was grave. I was beginning to wonder whether there was one clean thing in all the world.

“Oh, she can marry,” went on Harry. “No difficulty about that. She has another beau who loves her to distraction and who doesn’t in the least suspect—a decent sort of a fellow, a young farmer of her own class.”

“And in your belief that wedding should go on?”

He shifted uneasily.

“When is this wedding to be?” I asked.

“Oh, naturally, very soon,” he answered. “I am doing as handsome a thing as I know how by her. Sometimes it’s mighty hard to do the handsome thing, even mighty hard to know what is the handsome thing itself.”

“Yes,” said I. But who was I that I should judge him?

“If you were just where I am,” asked Harry Sheraton slowly, “what would you do? I’d like to do what is right, you know.”

“Oh, no, you don’t, Harry,” I broke out. “You want to do what is easiest. If you wanted to do what is right you’d never ask me nor any one else. Don’t ask me, because I don’t know. Suppose you were in the case of that other young man who loves her? Suppose he did not know, or suppose he did know. What would be right for him?”

“Heavy end of the log for him,” admitted he grimly. “That’s true, sure as you’re born.”

“When one does not love a girl and sees no happiness in the thought of living with her all his life, what squares that, Harry, in your opinion?”

“I’ve just asked you,” he rejoined.

“Why do you ask me? You say one ought to know what is right in his own case without any such asking, and I say that isn’t always true. Oh, dash it all, anyway. Why are we made the way we are?”

“If only the girl in each case would be content by having the handsome thing done by her!” said I bitterly.

(To Be Continued.)

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