

THE PROPOSAL

Unraveling a Leap Year Tangle

By LOUISE WINTER.



WELL, NOW that I've brought you out here," said Cynthia; "I want you to listen to my proposal." Her voice sounded sane; but Ferris looked around in alarm, and wondered whether he could call for help if she grew violent. "You've known me all my life," she continued.

So he had, but he had never suspected anything like this. "I admit it," he said, cheerfully.

"And you know my character. When I make up my mind to do a thing, I accomplish my object."

He knew that also from past experience, so he groaned.

"What's the matter? Are you ill?" And she frowned.

"No," he lied, "just happy."

"Doesn't sound like it, but perhaps I'm not well acquainted with the outward signs of a man's happiness. I've never bothered much with your sex, you know."

"Then why begin now?" He took courage. "Men are dreadful creatures; you can never depend upon them."

"Don't I know that? But there are certain circumstances in which we have to consider man."

What could she mean? Was it possible that she had fallen in love with him? Surely he had never given her any real encouragement. He groaned again.

"Still happy?"

"Perfectly." One might as well be a martyr with a grin.

"Then, let's get down to business. As I said before—"

"I heard you the first time." He wondered if she would ask him if she were the first girl he'd ever loved.

"I've thought it all out. Your estate and mine dovetail; your property has all the qualifications that mine lacks. I have the water front, you have the farm lands; separately they amount to nothing, together they would become valuable."

So she wanted to marry him for the sake of his estate. Perhaps she'd take it and let him off. It was worth trying. "My dear girl, if it's the property you covet, let me give it or sell it to you reasonably, and forget about the proposal."

"I could n't accept it as a gift. I'm not womanish enough to take something for nothing. What I offer in exchange is a fair proposition."

Was ever man wooed like this before? "You offer too much," he murmured.

"Don't be silly. I know what I'm about, and I flatter myself, Frank, that I'm a better business person than you are."

"There is no doubt of that." He was gallant; perhaps she might succumb to subtlety.

"Well then, what do you say? Does my proposal strike you favorably? Think it over; you'd be relieved of all the worry incumbent upon the management of your place."

"I begin to feel I have exaggerated my former worries."

"Better have done with them once for all. You see, it's time I settled down, and you must admit you've been wasting your life so far. Give up frivolling and marry; a wife will steady you."

SUCH a wife! "There's no doubt of it; but perhaps she might sink the ship. I'm not equal to carrying too much ballast."

"You can't tell me anything about yourself that I don't know. I've looked at you from all sides, and I've come to the conclusion that you display your best side to women,—that is, to other women; you've never pulled the wool over my eyes. Still, you have likeable qualities, and we can't ask too much. When we have the franchise we can demand mental, moral and physical equality from our mates; till then, we have to put up with what we can get."

"You put it charmingly." He was five feet eleven, and he weighed a hundred and sixty pounds. He knew girls that considered him good looking, and they had never found fault with his mentality; but of course, this was different.

"I never care to mince matters, and believe me, I have your best interests at heart. What do you say, is it a bargain?"

HE made his last stand. "No, I consider one of us is being sold too cheap."

"You think I'm taking advantage of you?"

"Not at all. I admit that your offer is fair enough."

"Then why do you hesitate about giving me a straightforward answer?"

"You have me in a corner, and I can't say 'No,' to a lady."

"I'm asking you to say yes."

"Cynthia, give me time, this is so sudden."

"You talk like a girl with her first proposal."

"It's leap year, I know; but I'm a man, and it's my first."

"What?"

"It's my first," he repeated helplessly. "Do you wonder that I am shy?"

She was almost as tall as he; she weighed quite as much; she had blue-black eyes, heavy eyebrows, and a square chin. There was nothing of the ultra-feminine in her face, nor in her manner. Now, as she took a step nearer, he quailed. Would she take him in her arms, willing or unwilling?

"What on earth are you talking about?" she demanded, a trifle thickly.

"Your proposal." His voice faltered.

"To take your estate under my management, and to share the profit I make out of the two places."

"Cynthia!" His relief was so great, that his voice shook with emotion. "I have n't deserved this of you."

A HUMOROUS light crept into her keen eyes. "Bless the man! I do believe he thought I was proposing for him, instead of his property."

Knowing what he had thought, he rose gallantly to the occasion. "If it only had been that," he murmured.

"You would have said yes?"

"Can you doubt it?"

"Humph!" said Cynthia, and then more kindly: "Marry, my dear boy, marry at once; make your choice tonight, otherwise you'll have it made for you. Really, it's not safe for a man like you to venture abroad in leap year."

"Will you marry me, Cynthia?" His feelings had undergone a sudden change.

"Decidedly no." She spoke sharply. "But it's rather nice of you to ask me."

He sighed.

"Is that another sign of happiness?" she asked.

"No, it's—it's one of disappointment." And strange to say, the mere man really thought he meant it.

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