

# The Storyteller

## A CHRISTMAS PROPOSAL

I first met Miss Agatha Jocelyn in rather a singular way. It was on a cold November morning—one of those cloudy, sharp, unpleasant days which remind one of a man with a disagreeable temper; so uncertain, so disconcerting, so apt to blow into one's face, or trip up his heels when he least expects it.

The streets were covered with a thin, smooth sheet of ice, the result of a rain and freeze the night before, which made walking, to say the least, dangerous. But I ran recklessly down the steps and started up the street, with the luck of fools, safely. And all went well until I came to the second corner. That corner, you must know, is a trap especially laid by the fiend to supply him amusement in winter when business may chance to be dull. It slopes, an insinuating slope, clear down to the gutter, and once upon it on a slippery day there is no salvation—you must go down. On any other morning when I was in my sane mind I would have taken the street, but that day I must needs essay the walk, and I received my deserts.

Have you ever experienced the hopeless, helpless sensation of walking on a slippery slide? The frantic struggles, inevitably tending towards defeat, the odd gyrations which bring the sweat of fear to your forehead, but make the onlooker roar with laughter? All this I felt for what seemed an age as I wriggled on that insidious slope. But, horror! how were my anxious griefs redoubled when I saw coming around the corner, on the duplicate of my tormentor—for both streets sloped equally towards the crossing—a charming young lady who was in precisely the same predicament as I, performing the same swift and hopeless gyrations, and tending to the same inevitable goal—the slushy gutter of the street. For an instant the chivalrous idea darted through my mind of casting myself at length upon the sidewalk, and so eluding the fair one; but the picture of my sprawling and ignominious discomfiture arose before my mind's eye and deterred me. So with a hopeless hope we slid swiftly forward, and, though we had never met, fell instinctively into each other's arms! Then I stepped gracefully into the slush, gained a firmer footing, helped her past the deadly space to safer ground, and with a few blushing apologies hurried away.

This trifling incident, which should have vanished at once from my thoughts, did not, but lingered there and worried me. All that day I saw the blushing face of my fair comrade in misfortune and the picture of the awkward part that I had played on that blessed slope.

That afternoon my friend Billy Jocelyn, who is as sociable as I am retiring, and who can talk pleasant inconsequences to a girl by the hour, when I would grow sleepy and stupid, and think longingly of my study-table and its comfortable lamp—my friend Billy, I say, bustled into my office and said: 'Confound you, you old sleepy head, why don't you ever come around and see us?' My cousin, Miss Agatha Jocelyn, a charming girl from New York, has just arrived to pay us a visit. If I don't see you around at the house to-morrow night I'll come and break your infernal old study to pieces, lamp and all.' And the energetic Billy disappeared as suddenly as he had come.

Although a book and a quiet smoke had indefinitely more attractions for me than Miss Agatha Jocelyn, and indeed the whole Jocelyn galaxy, still I was always a martyr to duty and to friendship. Therefore on the ensuing night I clad myself in the sombre garb of ceremony, buttoned my ulster close around my ears, cast a sad, longing glance at the little lamp in the study, and fared forth into the biting wind towards Billy's. Whew, but it was cold! I remember yet with what tingling cheeks and chilly fingers I entered the warm and pleasant atmosphere of the Jocelyn dwelling. But, ye gods, how uncomfortably hot I suddenly grew as Billy led me into the parlor and said: 'Cousin Agatha, my friend, Mr Matthew Reade'—for Billy's Cousin Agatha was my partner in misfortune of the day before. 'I think,' she said, her eyes sparkling charmingly, 'that Mr Reade and I have met before'; and she proceeded to tell the story of our encounter. Very prettily, too, and giving me far more credit than I deserved for the 'dexterity and courtesy with which I delivered her from that dragon of a slide'. Actually, as I listened I began to believe that I had played quite a heroic part, and when she finished by thanking me I blushed with pride—I who had always esteemed myself so far superior to flattery! But alas! How is a man to distinguish oftentimes between flattery and a just

estimation of his merits? After all, one may be too modest! So that I did not feel at all offended, but sat down and talked to Miss Agatha Jocelyn with an equanimity which soon grew to interest, which rapidly ripened into real pleasure; for she, with due respect be it said, was not an ordinary girl. She did not talk incessantly of persons, as some of the gentler sex will do, until one is so wearied of hearing of Willie this and Bobbie that and Grace the other, that one's mental faculties droop. She did not ask me if I knew a thousand inconsequent individuals, who were at best mere names to me and devoid of all manner of interest. She did not talk of fashion nor of the giddy swarm who swing in the mazes of the haut ton—the aristocracy of toady of our republican nation. She did not rave over actors or authors, or heroes—toys of the shifting conceits of the hour. She did not—but a truce to her negative virtues.

She made a display neither of ignorance nor affected erudition. She was extreme neither in wisdom nor in folly. She punctuated her speech—O rare and admirable accomplishment in woman!—with eloquent pauses.

After that evening Billy had no further cause to complain of my lack of sociability.

A month afterwards—you see that I omit, out of pure consideration, all the delightful events which intervened—I was—er—enchanted with Miss Agatha Jocelyn. In fact matters had gotten to such a pass that Billie grinned meaningly every time we met, and said, 'She's very well, thank you,' with a humorously labored air, which, to say the least, was tantalising. My study-lamp was so unused to being lit that it spluttered indignantly when I occasionally sat down for a night's comfortable writing or reading. Assuredly such enchantments as mine are decidedly prejudicial to solid productive work. My volume on 'The Causes of Decadence in Nations, Ancient and Modern' suffered woefully. I found myself wandering off into dissertations on the affections in the chapter on patriotism, and treating of platonic love under the head of 'Civic Virtues.' In short, I was getting into such a desperate state that I had to destroy reams of manuscript, and unconsciously scrawled 'Agatha Reade' over the margins of nearly every page that I wrote. And down at the office—for in the day-time, you must know, I am a lawyer of the gravest and most respectable sort—I actually came very near losing the business of one of my most valuable clients by delivering a lecture, when he disclosed his intention of suing for a divorce, on 'the necessity of mutual fitness in the marital relation.' In short, something had to be done, and done quickly, to restore my mental equilibrium.

But what? After going to see Miss Jocelyn on three successive nights, and spending four subsequent evenings in staring into my study fire, I resolved to propose. Having taken which resolution, I arose, covered the fire with ashes, as is my wont, and going to bed, slept soundly for the first time in four weeks.

The next morning as I walked down town I eyed the treacherous corner with affection and inwardly reproached myself for having presented a memorial to the street commissioner, which had elicited from that prudent man an immediate promise to raise the grade proportionately. For was it not because of that blessed slope that she had fallen, as it were, into my arms at our first encounter? Happy omen! I walked more busily at the very thought. But as I chucked inwardly, wondering at the acuteness with which I had slain all my difficulties at one fell stroke by resolving to propose to Miss Agatha Jocelyn, a thought occurred to me which made me wince and groan. From the lofty pedestal of superiority I had always, publicly and in private, sneered at the moony and humiliating character of lover. How I had derided the timid, sentimental role of him who proposes for a lady's hand. How I had jested, ah! how cruelly, I now realised, with certain good fellows of my acquaintance who had proposed, with, alas! no favorable consequences. In fact, shocking to think, my first real success in a literary way was a humorous essay which the editor of 'The Weekly Hades' had inadvertently accepted (in a moment of absent-mindedness, I was sure, because my former articles had resembled nothing so much as well-trained homing pigeons—they inevitably returned to their birth-place!), which had for its subject, I remembered it with remorse, 'How to Propose!'

In my desperation I ran over its various heads in memory. I recalled that I had commenced by treating of the methods of primitive man; the offering of the fruits of the chase, the fierce war to the death with rival braves, the final victory, the joy of the dusky bride at being the wife of such a warrior.

Utterly inappropriate, though, to our ultra-civilised, hopeless, conventional times! Then I had described the