

The LOVE LETTER of HIS LIFE *By* HELEN ROWLAND

IT COST HIM MANY AN ANXIOUS HOUR BEFORE HE HEARD THE LAST OF IT.

BOBBY DALE sat on the veranda of the Princess Anne, writing letters. Bobby Dale was young and blond and good to look upon. His straw hat rested on a lot of yellow hair and his blue serge coat outlined a fine pair of shoulders.

Bobby's mouth was set in firm, hard lines, and his eyes looked hollow and tired, as though he had not slept much the night before. He was writing on a sheet of hotel paper with a gold tipped fountain pen. You would never have imagined he was writing a love letter; but he was—the love letter of his life. With hurried scrawls and spasmodic scratches he was pouring out his soul—in ink.

It is needless to mention that Bobby had been refused—twice—by the girl to whom he was writing. No man nowadays ever reaches such a frenzy of devotion and passion as he was in, or fancied he was in—at the moment; no man in this era of common sense ever commits himself so unreservedly and fervently to paper except in pursuit of the unattainable.

Mr. Dale finished his letter and signed it, cogitated a moment with the handle of his pen in his mouth, and finally, with desperate determination, added these words: "I am going to give you just three weeks to answer this question—for the last time. If, at the end of three weeks, I do not hear from you definitely—and affirmatively—I am going to marry a little girl up in York state."

Bobby read this postscript through carefully, and with a feeling of satisfaction and a sigh of relief placed the letter in one of his own business envelopes, addressed it, and dropped it into the mail box at the corner of the veranda. Then, like a man who has got something weighty off his soul, he strolled off the piazza, where a dozen girls in fluffy frocks were chattering maddeningly, made his way to the beach, where a lot of stiffly dressed hotel children were toddling and dancing in the morning sun, and was soon cheerfully smoking a cigar.

A month later he walked up the aisle of a village church with the little girl from York state, and six weeks thereafter—such is the inconsistency of man—he sat contentedly on the small veranda of his own suburban cottage, reading the morning paper and puffing idly at a comfortable pipe.

But in spite of this apparent content there was a cloud on Bobby's life. You might have noted it in his restless eye and in the furtive way in which he glanced eagerly up and down the tree lined village street, where nothing more alarming than the dancing leaf shadows, the gold and red of blowing autumn leaves, and the shuffling figure of an occasional boy truant met his vision. The day after his marriage he had heard inadvertently that "the other girl" had sailed for Europe quite suddenly a month before. Might she not have missed his note and might not her answer, at any moment— He always shuddered and shut his eyes when he reached this point.

Bobby had been at first incredulous, then astounded, then charmed at the happiness he managed to derive from his marriage, in spite of his blighted passion. And the way in which that passion had faded made him blink with wonder. But there still remained the unanswered letter—the love letter of his life—with its telltale postscript, following a girl around Europe. Bobby could merely sit and torture himself with pictures of the consequences if some morning his wife should find a little blue scented note in his mail. It isn't exactly conducive to matrimonial felic-

ity for a woman to discover that she has been married "for spite." That was the cloud over Bobby's life.

"Bobby," called little Mrs. Dale from inside the tiny French window, "how do you spell indigestion? I'm telling Aunt Agatha all about that terrible attack you—"

"I-n-d-i-g-e-s-t-i-o-n," spelled Bobby carefully. He always had to spell for his wife.

his way—just as if there was no such thing as human hope and fear. Bobby, gazing after him with suppressed contempt for his callousness, breathed freely once more, kissed his wife, jammed his hat down over his eyes, and rushed for a car.

But as day after day passed and the dreaded letter failed each morning to arrive, Bobby got worse. The great trouble was that he was falling in love with his wife, and the horror of what that letter might do to blast his happiness was wearing on him. He would lie awake nights conjuring up the words with which that other girl should, would, or could answer his unfortunate mis-

And then she thought Bobby heartless because he laughed in such a foolish fashion.

It was early on a warm October morning that the climax came at last; and, like all things long expected, it came just as Bobby had ceased to look for it—almost. The Dales were returning from a short stroll. As they turned back into their street they could see the gray coated postman standing on their small piazza and jerking the doorbell with angry and insistent vehemence. It is a characteristic of people who make you wait that they never can bear to be kept waiting.

Bobby caught his wife's arm nervously and hurried her along until they reached the garden gate, where they met the irate government official coming out. In his hand that indignant personage held two letters. One was a business envelope, the other a tiny square of blue. The moment Bobby laid eyes on the address on that envelope he recognized the handwriting. His heart leaped to his throat.

It had come! At that moment of all moments!

"O," cried Mrs. Dale, "it's a note from Cousin Dorothy. I've been waiting so long for that letter, too."

"Edith," said Bobby, and his voice sounded like the voice of an avenging angel, "don't touch that letter!"

Edith gazed up at him in blank astonishment.

"I—I think," went on Bobby weakly, startled by his own tragic tones, "that that letter is for—me. Let—me—er—see."

But Mrs. Dale was by no means to be treated like an outsider.

"Nonsense, Bobby!" she said, taking the blue envelope out of the postman's hand before her husband could snatch it. "I'll open it for you." And forthwith, while Bobby went white to the lips, she calmly drew a wire hairpin from the coil at her neck and slit the paper. Then she turned the envelope over, looked wonderingly at the feminine handwriting, and gently handed it to her husband.

Bobby took it mechanically and began to read. He had to go over the words twice before they had any meaning for him. Then a great light broke over him, and without a word he handed it back to his wife. She took it from him curiously, and this is what she read:

"Dear Mr. Dale: What an excellent actor you were! Let me congratulate you on your marriage and wish you all sorts of happiness. The lady, I know, will never be bored, if she likes amateur theatricals. Cordially yours,

"MARIAN WESTLAKE."

As he turned toward the house he happened to glance casually down at the business letter, which he had taken without ceremony from the postman. It had his own address printed in the corner, to be sure, but the address on the envelope below was, "Miss Marian Westlake, Kansas City, Ark.," and across it there was stamped in clear red letters, "Returned for better direction."

He stuffed the missive into his pocket, gulped hard, and went over to where, his wife sat reading the blue note, and kissed her.

"But who is this Miss Westlake?" asked Edith. "And why does she talk about amateur theatricals?"

Bobby laughed.

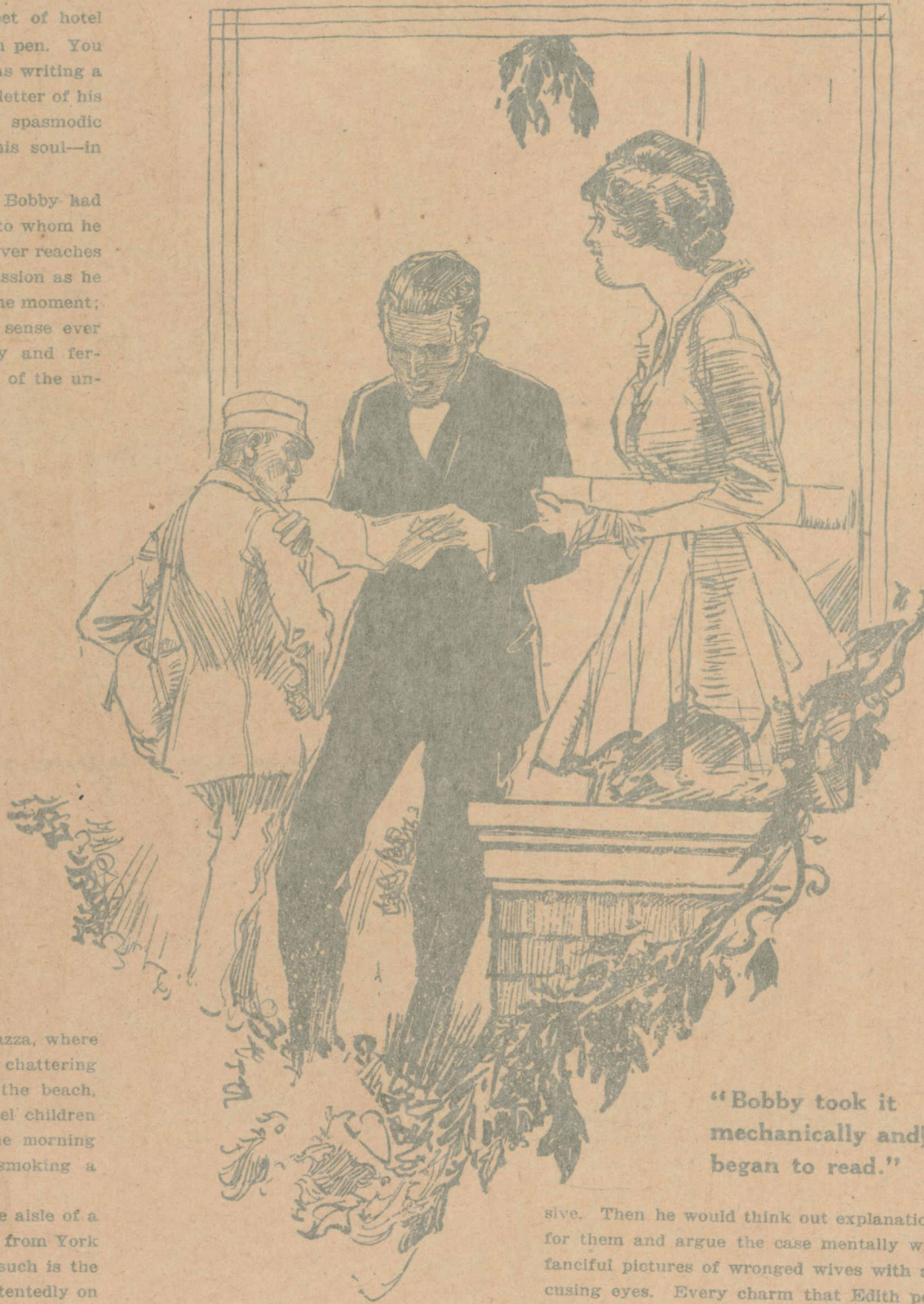
"O, she's a girl I used to know—let me see—where did I meet her? O, yes, at Virginia Beach. I suppose I must have flirted with her—and she fancied I was in earnest. Foolish girl, to take a seaside flirtation seriously. Why, I knew you at the time, darling!"

And that, of course, settled it.

"That postman," remarked Edith irrelevantly, "is a cross old idiot."

"Sometimes," said Bobby, "God loves an idiot." Then he went inside, crossed over to the library grate, where a fire burned brightly, and took out of his pocket his own returned letter. As he tore it viciously to bits and saw it wither away in the flames, he had the satisfaction of knowing that only one person on earth, and that person himself, had ever read the love letter of his life.

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"Why do you suppose, Edith," he went on bitterly, "that we ever decided to live in a place where the postman takes his morning nap between houses?"

The scratch of little Mrs. Dale's pearl and gold pen stopped suddenly. A blue dress fluttered through the French window, and a faint vision of village girlhood stepped out upon the veranda.

"Why, if it's only the postman you are waiting for, Bobby," she said sweetly, "do go now and let me bring the mail down to you the moment it comes. You should have been at your office half an hour ago."

"Nonsense!" remarked Bobby ungratefully. "Wouldn't think of troubling you. What's half an hour, anyway?"

Between the fine brows of Mrs. Dale there appeared a little pucker. She had begun to suspect that Bobby did not trust her. For two weeks now, ever since they had returned from their honeymoon trip, there had been every morning this same soul wearing drama. Of course, Bobby always allowed her to see all his mail—to open it if she liked—but—

Just then the postman appeared around the bend, handed Bobby a package of business letters, turned over to Mrs. Dale a few white envelopes ("the other girl" always used blue note paper), and went whistling on

sive. Then he would think out explanations for them and argue the case mentally with fanciful pictures of wronged wives with accusing eyes. Every charm that Edith possessed was magnified at the thought of losing her.

His wife's cousin used blue note paper, too; and whenever the postman handed over a tinted note he would set his teeth and the blood would rush to his head in a flood. The moment she began to read it and he discovered that he was still undiscovered a real physical pain of reaction would tug at his heart. It was not conscience, but consequence that was troubling Bobby.

One day little Mrs. Dale came rushing down to his office with a blue envelope in her hand, and he, seeing her enter, grew as white as a sheet. But it proved a false alarm. The cousin was ill and Mrs. Dale wanted to go to her at once. Bobby gave his consent so heartily that his wife was almost hurt at his apparent willingness to part with her for two whole days. Another time Bobby, on his return from his office, found Edith sobbing quietly over a sheet of blue note paper. He shuddered and gritted his teeth as he went up to kiss her.

"O, Bobby, Bobby!" she cried, and his heart stood still.

"What is it, dear?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"She's dead!" sobbed little Mrs. Dale. "Father's old mare that I've driven ever since I was a tiny girl! They h-h-had to shoot her!"