

Short Story Thursdays Presents...

Those Who Wait

(1917)

By

Ethel M. Dell

A faint draught from the hills found its way through the wide-flung door as the sun went down. It fluttered the papers on the table, and stirred a cartoon upon the wall with a dry rustling as of wind in corn.

The man who sat at the table turned his face as it were mechanically towards that blessed breath from the snows. His chin was propped on his hand. He seemed to be waiting.

The light failed very quickly, and he presently reached out and drew a reading-lamp towards him. The flame he kindled flickered upward, throwing weird shadows upon his lean, brown face, making the sunken hollows of his eyes look cavernous.

He turned the light away so that it streamed upon the open doorway. Then he resumed his former position of sphinx-like waiting, his chin upon his hand.

Half an hour passed. The day was dead. Beyond the radius of the lamp there hung a pall of thick darkness--a fearful, clinging darkness that seemed to wrap the whole earth. The heat was intense, unstirred by any breeze. Only now and then the cartoon on the wall moved as if at the touch of ghostly fingers, and each time there came that mocking whisper that was like wind in corn.

At length there sounded through the night the dull throbbing of a horse's feet, and the man who sat waiting raised his head. A gleam of expectancy shone in his sombre eyes. Some of the rigidity went out of his attitude.

Nearer came the hoofs and nearer yet, and with them, mingling rhythmically, a tenor voice that sang.

As it reached him the man at the table pulled out a drawer with a sharp jerk. His hand sought something within it, but his eyes never left the curtain of darkness that the open doorway framed.

Slowly, very slowly at last, he withdrew his hand empty; but he only partially closed the drawer.

The voice without was nearer now, was close at hand. The horse's hoofs had ceased to sound. There came the ring of spurred heels without, a man's hand tapped upon the doorpost, a man's figure showed suddenly against the darkness.

"Hallo, Conyers! Still in the land of the living? Ye gods, what a fiendish night! Many thanks for the beacon! It's kept me straight for more than half the way."

He entered carelessly, the lamplight full upon him--a handsome, straight-limbed young Hercules--tossed down his riding-whip, and looked round for a drink.

"Here you are!" said Conyers, turning the rays of the lamp full upon some glasses on the table.

"Ah, good! I'm as dry as a smoked herring. You must drink too, though. Yes, I insist. I have a toast to propose, so be sociable for once. What have you got in that drawer?"

Conyers locked the drawer abruptly, and jerked out the key.

"What do you want to know for?"

His visitor grinned boyishly.

"Don't be bashful, old chap! I always guessed you kept her there. We'll drink her health, too, in a minute. But first of all"--he was splashing soda-water impetuously out of a syphon as he spoke--"first of all--quite ready, I say? It's a grand occasion--here's to the best of good fellows, that genius, that inventor of guns, John Conyers! Old chap, your fortune's made. Here's to it! Hip--hip--hooray!"

His shout was like the blare of a bull. Conyers rose, crossed to the door, and closed it.

Returning, he halted by his visitor's side, and shook him by the shoulder.

"Stop rotting, Palliser!" he said rather shortly.

Young Palliser wheeled with a gigantic laugh, and seized him by the arms.

"You old fool, Jack! Can't you see I'm in earnest? Drink, man, drink, and I'll tell you all about it. That gun of yours is going to be an enormous success--stupendous--greater even than I hoped. It's true, by the powers! Don't look so dazed. All comes to those who wait, don't you know. I always told you so."

"To be sure, so you did." The man's words came jerkily. They had an odd, detached sound, almost as though he were speaking in his sleep. He turned away from Palliser, and took up his untouched glass.

But the next instant it slipped through his fingers, and crashed upon the table edge. The spilt liquid streamed across the floor.

Palliser stared for an instant, then thrust forward his own glass.

"Steady does it, old boy! Try both hands for a change. It's this infernal heat."

He turned with the words, and picked up a paper from the table, frowning over it absently, and whistling below his breath.

When he finally looked round again his face cleared.

"Ah, that's better! Sit down, and we'll talk. By Jove, isn't it colossal? They told me over at the fort that I was a fool to come across to-night. But I simply couldn't keep you waiting another night. Besides, I knew you would expect me."

Conyers' grim face softened a little. He could scarcely have said how he had ever come to be the chosen friend of young Hugh Palliser. The intimacy had been none of his seeking.

They had met at the club on the occasion of one of his rare appearances there, and the younger man, whose sociable habit it was to know everyone, had scraped acquaintance with him.

No one knew much about Conyers. He was not fond of society, and, as a natural consequence, society was not fond of him. He occupied the humble position of a subordinate clerk in an engineer's office. The work was hard, but it did not bring him prosperity. He was one of those men who go silently on week after week, year after year, till their very existence comes almost to be overlooked by those about them. He never seemed to suffer as other men suffered from the scorching heat of that tropical corner of the Indian Empire. He was always there, whatever happened to the rest of the world; but he never pushed himself forward. He seemed to lack ambition. There were even some who said he lacked brains as well.

But Palliser was not of these. His quick eyes had detected at a glance something that others had never taken the trouble to discover. From the very beginning he had been aware of a force that contained itself in this silent man. He had become interested, scarcely knowing why; and, having at length overcome the prickly hedge of reserve which was at first opposed to his advances, he had entered the private place which it defended, and found within--what he certainly had not expected to find--a genius.

It was nearly three months now since Conyers, in a moment of unusual expansion, had laid before him the invention at which he had been working for so many silent years. The thing even then, though complete in all essentials, had lacked finish, and this final touch young Palliser, himself a gunner with a positive passion for guns, had been able to supply. He had seen the value of the invention and had given it his ardent support. He had, moreover, friends in high places, and could obtain a fair and thorough investigation of the idea.

This he had accomplished, with a result that had transcended his high hopes, on his friend's behalf; and he now proceeded to pour out his information with an accompanying stream of congratulation, to which Conyers sat and listened with scarcely the movement of an eyelid.

Hugh Palliser found his impassivity by no means disappointing. He was used to it. He had even expected it. That momentary unsteadiness on Conyers' part had astonished him far more.

Concluding his narration he laid the official correspondence before him, and got up to open the door. The night was black and terrible, the heat came in overwhelming puffs, as though blown from a blast furnace. He leaned against the doorpost and wiped his forehead. The oppression of the atmosphere was like a tangible, crushing weight. Behind him the paper on the wall rustled vaguely, but there was no other sound. After several minutes he turned briskly back again into the room, whistling a sentimental ditty below his breath.

"Well, old chap, it was worth waiting for, eh? And now, I suppose, you'll be making a bee-line for home, you lucky beggar. I shan't be long after you, that's one comfort. Pity we can't go together. I suppose you can't wait till the winter."

"No, my boy. I'm afraid I can't." Conyers spoke with a faint smile, his eyes still fixed upon the blue official paper that held his destiny. "I'm going home forthwith, and be damned to everything and everybody--except you. It's an understood thing, you know, Palliser, that we are partners in this deal."

"Oh, rot!" exclaimed Palliser impetuously. "I don't agree to that. I did nothing but polish the thing up. You'd have done it yourself if I hadn't."

"In the course of a few more years," put in Conyers drily.

"Rot!" said Palliser again. "Besides, I don't want any pelf. I've quite as much as is good for me, more than I want. That's why I'm going to get married. You'll be going the same way yourself now, I suppose?"

"You have no reason whatever for thinking so," responded Conyers.

Palliser laughed lightheartedly and sat down on the table. "Oh, haven't I? What about that mysterious locked drawer of yours? Don't be shy, I say! You had it open when I came in. Show her to me like a good chap! I won't tell a soul."

"That's not where I keep my love-tokens," said Conyers, with a grim twist of the mouth that was not a smile.

"What then?" asked Palliser eagerly. "Not another invention?"

"No." Conyers inserted the key in the lock again, turned it, and pulled open the drawer. "See for yourself as you are so anxious."

Palliser leaned across the table and looked. The next instant his glance flashed upwards, and their eyes met.

There was a sharply-defined pause. Then, "You'd never be fool enough for that, Jack!" ejaculated Palliser, with vehemence.

"I'm fool enough for anything," said Conyers, with his cynical smile.

"But you wouldn't," the other protested almost incoherently. "A fellow like you-- I don't believe it!"

"It's loaded," observed Conyers quietly. "No, leave it alone, Hugh! It can remain so for the present. There is not the smallest danger of its going off--or I shouldn't have shown it to you."

He closed the drawer again, looking steadily into Hugh Palliser's face.

"I've had it by me for years," he said, "just in case the Fates should have one more trick in store for me. But apparently they haven't, though it's never safe to assume anything."

"Oh, don't talk like an idiot!" broke in Palliser heatedly. "I've no patience with that sort of thing. Do you expect me to believe that a fellow like you--a fellow who knows how to wait for his luck--would give way to a cowardly impulse and destroy himself all in a moment because things didn't go quite straight? Man alive! I know you better than that; or if I don't, I've never known you at all."

"Ah! Perhaps not!" said Conyers.

Once more he turned the key and withdrew it. He pushed back his chair so that his face was in shadow.

"You don't know everything, you know, Hugh," he said.

"Have a smoke," said Palliser, "and tell me what you are driving at."

He threw himself into a bamboo chair by the open door, the light streaming full upon him, revealing in every line of him the arrogant splendour of his youth. He looked like a young Greek god with the world at his feet.

Conyers surveyed him with his faint, cynical smile. "No," he said, "you certainly don't know everything, my son. You never have come a cropper in your life."

"Haven't I, though?" Hugh sat up, eager to refute this criticism. "That's all you know about it. I suppose you think you have had the monopoly of hard knocks. Most people do."

"I am not like most people," Conyers asserted deliberately. "But you needn't tell me that you have ever been right under, my boy. For you never have."

"Depends what you call going under," protested Palliser. "I've been down a good many times, Heaven knows. And I've had to wait--as you have--all the best years of my life."

"Your best years are to come," rejoined Conyers. "Mine are over."

"Oh, rot, man! Rot--rot--rot! Why, you are just coming into your own! Have another drink and give me the toast of your heart!" Hugh Palliser sprang impulsively to his feet. "Let me mix it! You can't--you shan't be melancholy to-night of all nights."

But Conyers stayed his hand.

"Only one more drink to-night, boy!" he said. "And that not yet. Sit down and smoke. I'm not melancholy, but I can't rejoice prematurely. It's not my way."

"Prematurely!" echoed Hugh, pointing to the official envelope.

"Yes, prematurely," Conyers repeated. "I may be as rich as Croesus, and yet not win my heart's desire."

"Oh, I know that," said Hugh quickly. "I've been through it myself. It's infernal to have everything else under the sun and yet to lack the one thing--the one essential--the one woman."

He sat down again, abruptly thoughtful. Conyers smoked silently, with his face in the shadow.

Suddenly Hugh looked across at him.

"You think I'm too much of an infant to understand," he said. "I'm nearly thirty, but that's a detail."

"I'm forty-five," said Conyers.

"Well, well!" Hugh frowned impatiently. "It's a detail, as I said before. Who cares for a year more or less?"

"Which means," observed Conyers, with his dry smile, "that the one woman is older than you are."

"She is," Palliser admitted recklessly. "She is five years older. But what of it? Who cares? We were made for each other. What earthly difference does it make?"

"It's no one's business but your own," remarked Conyers through a haze of smoke.

"Of course it isn't. It never has been." Hugh yet sounded in some fashion indignant. "There never was any other possibility for me after I met her. I waited for her six mortal years. I'd have waited all my life. But she gave in at last. I think she realized that it was sheer waste of time to go on."

"What was she waiting for?" The question came with a certain weariness of intonation, as though the speaker were somewhat bored; but Hugh Palliser was too engrossed to notice.

He stretched his arms wide with a swift and passionate gesture.

"She was waiting for a scamp," he declared.

"It is maddening to think of--the sweetest woman on earth, Conyers, wasting her spring and her summer over a myth, an illusion. It was an affair of fifteen years ago. The fellow came to grief and disappointed her. She told me all about it on the day she promised to marry me. I believe her heart was nearly broken at the time, but she has got over it--thank Heaven!--at last. Poor Damaris! My Damaris!"

He ceased to speak, and a dull roar of thunder came out of the night like the voice of a giant in anguish.

Hugh began to smoke, still busy with his thoughts.

"Yes," he said presently, "I believe she would actually have waited all her life for the fellow if he had asked it of her. Luckily he didn't go so far as that. He was utterly unworthy of her. I think she sees it now. His father was imprisoned for forgery, and no doubt he was in the know, though it couldn't be brought home to him. He was ruined, of course, and he disappeared, just dropped out, when the crash came. He had been on the verge of proposing to her immediately before. And she would have had him too. She cared."

He sent a cloud of smoke upwards with savage vigour.

"It's damnable to think of her suffering for a worthless brute like that!" he exclaimed. "She had such faith in him too. Year after year she was expecting him to go back to her, and she kept me at arm's length, till at last she came to see that both our lives were being sacrificed to a miserable dream. Well, it's my innings now, anyway. And we are going to be superbly happy to make up for it."

Again he flung out his arms with a wide gesture, and again out of the night there came a long roll of thunder that was like the menace of a tortured thing. A flicker of lightning gleamed through the open door for a moment, and Conyers' dark face was made visible. He had ceased to smoke, and was staring with fixed, inscrutable eyes into the darkness. He did not flinch from the lightning; it was as if he did not see it.

"What would she do, I wonder, if the prodigal returned," he said quietly. "Would she be glad--or sorry?"

"He never will," returned Hugh quickly. "He never can--after fifteen years. Think of it! Besides--she wouldn't have him if he did."

"Women are proverbially faithful," remarked Conyers cynically.

"She will stick to me now," Hugh returned with confidence. "The other fellow is probably dead. In any case, he has no shadow of a right over her. He never even asked her to wait for him."

"Possibly he thought that she would wait without being asked," said Conyers, still cynical.

"Well, she has ceased to care for him now," asserted Hugh. "She told me so herself."

The man opposite shifted his position ever so slightly. "And you are satisfied with that?" he said.

"Of course I am. Why not?" There was almost a challenge in Hugh's voice.

"And if he came back?" persisted the other. "You would still be satisfied?"

Hugh sprang to his feet with a movement of fierce impatience. "I believe I should shoot him!" he said vindictively. He looked like a splendid wild animal suddenly awakened. "I tell you, Conyers," he declared passionately, "I could kill him with my hands if he came between us now."

Conyers, his chin on his hand, looked him up and down as though appraising his strength.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright and spoke--spoke briefly, sternly, harshly, as a man speaks in the presence of his enemy. At the same instant a frightful crash of thunder swept the words away as though they had never been uttered.

In the absolute pandemonium of sound that followed, Hugh Palliser, with a face gone suddenly white, went over to his friend and stood behind him, his hands upon his shoulders.

But Conyers sat quite motionless, staring forth at the leaping lightning, rigid, sphinx-like. He did not seem aware of the man behind him, till, as the uproar began to subside, Hugh bent and spoke.

"Do you know, old chap, I'm scared!" he said, with a faint, shamed laugh. "I feel as if there were devils abroad. Speak to me, will you, and tell me I'm a fool!"

"You are," said Conyers, without turning.

"That lightning is too much for my nerves," said Hugh uneasily. "It's almost red. What was it you said just now? I couldn't hear a word."

"It doesn't matter," said Conyers.

"But what was it? I want to know."

The gleam in the fixed eyes leaped to sudden terrible flame, shone hotly for a few seconds, then died utterly away. "I don't remember," said Conyers quietly. "It couldn't have been anything of importance. Have a drink! You will have to be getting back as soon as this is over."

Hugh helped himself with a hand that was not altogether steady. There had come a lull in the tempest. The cartoon on the wall was fluttering like a caged thing. He glanced at it, then looked at it closely. It was a reproduction of Dore's picture of Satan falling from heaven.

"It isn't meant for you surely!" he said.

Conyers laughed and got to his feet. "It isn't much like me, is it?"

Hugh looked at him uncertainly. "I never noticed it before. It might have been you years ago."

"Ah, perhaps," said Conyers. "Why don't you drink? I thought you were going to give me a toast."

Hugh's mood changed magically. He raised his glass high. "Here's to your eternal welfare, dear fellow! I drink to your heart's desire."

Conyers waited till Hugh had drained his glass before he lifted his own.

Then, "I drink to the one woman," he said, and emptied it at a draught.

The storm was over, and a horse's feet clattered away into the darkness, mingling rhythmically with a cheery tenor voice.

In the room with the open door a man's figure stood for a long while motionless.

When he moved at length it was to open the locked drawer of the writing-table. His right hand felt within it, closed upon something that lay there; and then he paused.

Several minutes crawled away.

From afar there came the long rumble of thunder. But it was not this that he heard as he stood wrestling with the fiercest temptation he had ever known.

Stiffly at last he stooped, peered into the drawer, finally closed it with an unflinching hand. The struggle was over.

"For your sake, Damaris!" he said aloud, and he spoke without cynicism. "I should know how to wait by now--even for death--which is all I have to wait for."

And with that he pulled the fluttering paper from the wall, crushed it in his hand, and went out heavily into the night.