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Letters Do Incriminate

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MAY

Letters Do Incriminate

By Irving Caspe

... and father remembers

EVEN the long leg protruding from beneath the shiny, almost new, car seemed happy. In fact, it glowed. Lennie Roberts, attached to the invisible end of the leg, was completely at peace with the world. There was, of course, a small fly in his ointment. The leg twitched uneasily. Almost any minute now there'd come the deep bass voice of Leonard Q. Roberts, Sr., requesting the immediate presence of Leonard Q. Roberts, Jr., for reasons known to both. The twitching ceased and the leg lay still. Mary Ellen was with him, in fancy at least, as she had often been for the past month or so. Month or so But why speak in generalities? Lennie's left hand, grasping the greasy differential, was directly above his upturned face. His wrist watch, thus facing him, indicated 2:57 P. M. Lennie's eyes closed momentarily. He was think-

ing. Well, he had met Mary Ellen exactly twenty-nine days ago, lacking eight hours and forty-eight minutes. He knew to the minute, for Mary Ellen's first words to him after the usual introductory remarks were, "Is it midnight yet?" Lennie thought this was a "swell" time, as well as 11:45. Since then, there had been more pertinent subjects which merited their conversation.

Elizabeth had been nice about it. When a man fell in love as suddenly and overpoweringly as Lennie had with Mary Ellen, there really was nothing your former sweetheart could do. Elizabeth had said, very sweetly, "Nice to have known you!" Not dad, though. He wouldn't be so easily sold. Mother had undoubtedly told him by this time.

"Leonard!" came the voice from the house. "Come in here."

L **LENNIE'S** leg, once happy, had begun twitching again while he was thinking of his father. That voice was insulting. A man who was old enough to pick his wife, should have been spoken to more respectfully. He moved toward the house slowly. He'd overlook the voice. He'd listen to what Roberts, Sr., had to say before he showed his trump card which now lay safely in his hip pocket. Lennie glanced back at his car. The lights were still burning. Pleased for the delay, he returned, even more slowly, extinguished the lights, and again began his reluctant approach to the house.

How glad he was that he had found that letter. It had happened quite by accident, too, for he had not had occasion to explore the attic for years until last week. Lucky for him he needed those boots. . . . and poor, good, steady Elizabeth. She would make someone a good wife. The thought brought a faint smile to Lennie's rather serious countenance. His father would probably use that identical expression when giving his father-to-son talk. Lennie didn't really blame Leonard Q. Roberts, Sr., for the attitude he would take. It did seem rather as though Lennie's heart had changed too suddenly for permanence. But that change! It had been like leaving a stuffy room to come into clear, cool air. And Mary Ellen was like that—clear, cool, and exhilarating—not to mention

the fact that he loved her. And if this love were sudden, couldn't that have been caused by the fact that he had met her so late in life? It was just a shame that he had not known Mary Ellen as long as he had known Elizabeth.

IMAGINE marrying a girl whose only reaction to what was, after all, an unexpected jilting could be summed up in her own words, "Nice to have known you!" She had spunk! Funny he hadn't noticed it before. She couldn't have been in love with him, though. Yes, he was sure, for she was noticeably relieved. Could she have had the same thing in mind as he? Lennie's vanity said, "No!" but the facts spoke for themselves. Of course, that was it. Now his problem was to convince his father that everything was turning out for the best, contrary to appearances.

Shades of Elizabeth! He knew a way to overcome his father's resistance. First, he must listen respectfully. (Yes father; no, father!) Second, he would present the letter with judicious ceremony and watch the effect. Then, if the effect were favorable, he would arrange a meeting between Mary Ellen and his parents. No one of any discernment could know Mary Ellen without loving her. Yes, that was the program he would follow. He counted once again, on his fingers, the steps he would take: One, two, and three!

Lennie entered the house. Of course, his father would be in his study among his bottles and test tubes. Dr. Leonard Quincy Roberts, Sr., M. D., when at home, could almost invariably be found in his study. And all matters of any importance were discussed in the study, and certainly his marriage, even if only potential, was of some importance. The die was cast.

"Father—" he began, and stopped, for the study was empty. He retraced his steps through the living room toward the solarium. This was indeed an insult to his manhood. Not an important matter, eh? He'd show him.

But in the solarium, the heavy atmosphere somehow appeased him. All the bravado nursed into being during his walk from the garage to the house suddenly deserted him. He

had never seen his father look as angry as he did at this moment. Well, Mary Ellen was worth this and more. Hadn't he said he would fight dragons, or something to that effect, for her? Mark Antony had given up an empire. Romeo had given up life itself. And what of Tristran?

"Sit down. I want to talk with you."

WITH his eyes on his irate father, Lennie occupied the first convenient chair which faced his judge and jury. A low table separated them, for which he was thankful. With an effort, Roberts, Sr., controlled his temper. Lennie knew his father well enough to sense that.

"Your mother has told me about your rift with Elizabeth and about your present affair." The doctor had now fully regained his composure and was his clear, cool, deliberate self. "I don't want you to feel that I am running your life, but I feel that you are making a great mistake—a mistake for which you will be sorry someday unless you see the light now. I've gone through all this once myself and you can profit by my experience." Senior's eyes flashed as he became wound up.

"But, dad——!"

The attempted interruption went unnoticed.

"Elizabeth is a fine girl and would make you a fine wife."

Lennie, with difficulty, subdued a smile as he recalled his prediction while enroute to the house. His father continued without hesitation.

"Why, I've known old Judge Moorhead for years. He and I have been watching you two grow up together and have seen your affection for one another grow until we were sure that we would have the pleasure of attending your wedding. And now comes this—what's her name?—to come between you and Elizabeth and ruin our plans and probably your entire life."

Lennie leaped to his feet. Father or no father, he had no right to refer to Mary Ellen as "this—what's her name—".

"Sit down, son. I'm not through yet."

THIS command, though given calmly, had its effect. Some vestige of Lennie's departed childhood steered his hand, voluntarily, to regions of his anatomy once familiar with

parental punishment. His fingers touched the letter in his hip pocket. The rustling of the paper, thus agitated, bolstered his vanishing morale. He had almost forgotten about it. Well, he would let his father have his say.

Lennie sat down.

"Do you realize what an important decision you are now making?" Lennie knew that his father didn't expect an answer to this question. "Marriage is very serious, and the selection of your wife should be made with the utmost care. Your method is wrong, absolutely. Successful marriages are not had that way. One should know his future wife for years before the actual ceremony—get to know her people, her background, her environment, likes and dislikes. Under no circumstance should you enter into this thing blindly.

"Elizabeth really shouldn't have anything further to do with you now, but I think she can be persuaded to take you back. After all, she's a pretty practical girl."

As this point seemed to be the end of at least one section of his father's talk, Lennie took his chance to insert a few words and turn this monologue into a conversation. If Dad would only continue his talk along his present theme, he would have no trouble with him when he finally decided to produce the letter.

"Dad, tell me. How long should a man keep company with a girl before they marry?"

DR. ROBERTS struck a pose typical of himself. He was pleased that his son had asked this question. Perhaps his talk had done some good after all.

"Well, son, that depends a great deal upon the individuals, but they should keep company for at least three years. I can't conceive of a happy union resulting from a courtship which takes place during as short a time as yours has taken."

"Another thing, dad," Lennie had his program well in mind now, "how long did you and mother know each other before you decided to marry?"

"Why—a—offhand, I—er—a—," Senior was having trouble. Lennie did not wait for an answer.

"Who was Grace Daniels?"

Dr. Roberts' face changed from its natural shade to crimson and then to a deep purple. Lennie removed the letter from his pocket, withdrew the manuscript from the envelope, and laid the written material on the table directly before his father's eyes.

"I stumbled upon this in the attic last week while hunting for my boots."

The older man stood, staring unbelievably at this relic of the past. A letter in his own handwriting to Lennie's mother. One unsteady hand grasped the tell-tale note and he began reading, silently. His son watched as his expression slowly changed from bewilderment to pensive remembrance.

"Dearest Martha,

Since writing you last, there have been further complications. Dad is resolved that I marry Grace Daniels or else—. He feels that I have a debt of gratitude to her. You see he's a product of the old school and still retains many mid-Victorian conceptions of what is right and wrong. I told him that she no more wants to marry me than I want to marry her. But he won't believe that. Says it's all in her mind. Also, he says that I haven't known you long enough to be sure. But we know better."

Dr. Leonard Q. Roberts, Sr., M. D., became more and more wistful as he recalled his courtship and ultimate elopement. At last he smiled. His reading continued.

"Martha, dear, I'm coming to get you Saturday night and we're going to be married. I won't take no for an answer. Opposition be hanged. We've decided that we want to marry and must take the initiative now or never.

I'll be around at the regular time.

Love,
Lennie."

Dr. Roberts looked at his son.

"All right, son. You win. Your mother and I have been very happy. Invite this girl up for a weekend so we can get to know our future daughter-in-law."