



# LIFE'S SHORT STORY CONTEST



(Each story printed under the above heading is a candidate for the \$1,000, \$500 and \$250 prizes offered by LIFE in answer to the question: How short can a short story be and still be a short story? The stories accepted are paid for upon acceptance at the rate of ten cents a word for every word up to 1,500 which the author does not write. See conditions on page 486 of this issue.)

## What the Vandals Leave

*By Herbert Riley Howe*

THE war was over, and he was back in his native city that had been retaken from the Vandals. He was walking rapidly through a dimly lit quarter. A woman touched his arm and accosted him in fuddled accents.

"Where are you going, M'sieu? With me, hein?"

He laughed. "No, not with you, old girl. I'm going to find my sweetheart."

He looked down at her. They were near a street lamp. She screamed. He seized her by the shoulders and dragged her closer to the light. His fingers dug her flesh, and his eyes gleamed.

"Joan!" he gasped.

laughing in his face. "You are my first and only brother, young man, and I warn you I shall make you live up to the part." One hand slipped from his shoulder and through his arm. He found himself walking beside her following the porter who carried her satchels, and listening mechanically to a flow of words which fortunately required no reply.

The affair was a hideous nightmare. Mistaking him for Chandler, whom she had never seen, this unsuspecting girl had kissed him before a hundred witnesses. Most appalling of all, an explanation seemed an unthinkable brutality. When once she knew, she could never look him in the face again. It was essential to keep her in ignorance of her blunder till he left her at Chandler's door.

Not till they were seated in a taxicab did she ask a direct question. This was fortunate, as Forbes had been incapable of an intelligent reply.

"How's the baby, Keith?"

"The baby—O, yes, the little thing has been slightly under the weather." As he repeated the information imparted by Chandler earlier in the day, Forbes blushed to his ears.

"Little darling!" murmured the girl.

"How many teeth has she?"

"Teeth! O—I—The usual number, I believe."

"I'm awfully ignorant, Keith. I ought to be ashamed to confess it, but I really don't know what is the usual number for a child of six months."

Vainly she waited for enlightenment. Forbes' answer was a tortured smile. His agonized prayer that she might change the subject was granted all too soon.

"How's Reggie?"

"I beg pardon." Forbes' jaw dropped. His Christian name was Reginald.

"Mr. Forbes. I prefer to call him Reggie. Do you admire him as extravagantly as Agnes does? Then I see I shall be forced to conceal my prejudice to keep peace in the family."

"Prejudice? You are prejudiced against him?"

"Of course. Such a bundle of perfection."

"O, no," Forbes spoke with generous earnestness. "He's not that at all. Just an ordinary good sort."

"Then you think I shall like him?"

The innocent question stabbed him. "No," Forbes said after a long pause. "You won't like him." In his heart he

## Food For Thought

*By Harriet Lummis Smith*

FORBES had bribed his way past the gate-man and stood on the station platform at the foot of the stairs, his manner drearily resigned. He had come to meet a girl and he did not fancy the job.

"Hang it, man," he had protested, when Keith Chandler, his partner, summoned to New York by a telegram, had deputed Forbes to meet the four o'clock train, and incidentally, his sister-in-law, "I shouldn't know the girl."

"I've never seen her myself," his friend reminded him. "She was in Japan when Agnes and I were married, studying decorative art. Cabled she'd come home for the wedding if we'd postpone it three months." Chandler indulged himself in a smile of reminiscent scorn.

"If Mrs. Chandler would accompany me," said Forbes, brightening. He really liked his partner's wife, partly because her devotion to her husband made unnecessary those defenses he was accustomed to erect about himself in the society of women under sixty. Chandler's answer shattered his hopes.

"If Agnes could leave the baby it wouldn't be necessary to trouble you. But the little thing's under the weather. Nothing serious, but you couldn't bribe Agnes out of the house till the child's herself again. And you won't have any

trouble picking Diantha out of the crowd. She looks like Agnes," Chandler ended complacently. "There won't be two of that kind on any one train, my boy."

Forbes, immaculate in his grey business suit, frowningly scanned the crowd hurrying past, the rabble of men with suit-cases on ahead, the women following more deliberately. Heaven, what a swarm of women! Forbes saw himself addressing the wrong girl and snubbed for his pains.

Then all in a moment a figure took on distinction, a girl splendidly tall, who carried herself as if proud of every inch, who walked the station platform in a fashion suggesting that she could dance all night, and go horseback riding in the morning. Yes, she was like Mrs. Chandler, only larger, handsomer, more stunning in a word. Hat in hand he approached her.

"Miss Byrd, I believe."

The girl halted, facing him squarely. He had no time for explanations. A well-shaped, perfectly gloved hand rested lightly on either shoulder. He had a bewildering impression of a tall figure swaying toward him, of a fragrance too elusive to be called perfume, of grey eyes flecked with violet. Then her lips touched his.

"Miss Byrd, indeed!" She was

felt he was understating the case. She would regard him with abhorrence. Every moment this deception continued, even though practiced to spare her feelings, added to her righteous grievance. The pain in his voice as he spoke was a surprise to himself.

"He must be a singular person," mused the girl. "Agnes vows he is perfection. You reassure me by acknowledging him human, and yet you are certain I won't like him. Or is that because I am so unreasonable?"

"Really, Miss Byrd——"

He thought she was going to kiss him again, she leaned toward him so swiftly. His heart stood still though his mood could hardly be characterized as shrinking. But she confined herself to beating a tattoo against his arm, with a little clenched fist.

"I won't be Miss Byrd to my only brother, I *won't*! Say Diantha."

"Di-an-tha."

"You say it as if it were Keren-Happauch. Try it again."

He stammered out the three melodious syllables. He was thinking less of her name than of her eyes. There were golden mischievous lights swimming like motes in the blue, and her drooping lashes made black shadows. She turned her head and the curve of her neck was distracting.

"Why, he's stopping," Diantha cried. "Are we there?"

Incredible as it seemed, they were at Chandler's door. "Wait," Forbes said to the driver, his voice hoarse. He took Diantha's arm to assist her up the steps and she looked at him wonderingly.

"Aren't you coming in?"

"Not just now." Forbes forced a smile. It was possible that they would never meet again, and if they did, her friendliness would have been transformed into implacable enmity. He extended his hand. "Good-bye," he whispered.

"*Au revoir*." His agreeable doubt whether her ideals of sisterliness would lead her to something more affectionate than a handclasp was merged in disappointment. The door swung open and she disappeared. Forbes went back to the cab in a dejection only partially dissipated by Mrs. Chandler's note next day.

Dear Mr. Forbes:

Can't you dine with us Friday?  
We have all enjoyed a good laugh  
over Diantha's absurd mistake.

Cordially yours,  
AGNES BYRD CHANDLER.

Forbes' uncertainty as to how far Mrs. Chandler was in her sister's confidence was unenlightened three weeks later when he asked Diantha to marry him. He had waited three weeks, not from choice, but because he had been unable to induce that elusive young woman to listen to him earlier.

She looked past him, her changeful eyes sombre and sad like the sea under clouds. "I can't say yes," she murmured plaintively, "without owning up. And if I own up, you'll want me to say no."

"Diantha!" he faltered. Used as he was to feminine extravagance in speech, her words chilled him.

She turned her magic gaze on him. "I knew it was you all the time."

"I don't understand."

"That day at the train. Agnes had

sent me a kodak picture of Keith and yourself taken on a fishing trip and I recognized you instantly. I had a little prejudice against you to start with, Agnes praised you so preposterously, and then when I saw you looking so bored and superior—O, I know it was immodest and unwomanly and perfectly horrid, but I just had an intuition of the way you'd gone through life holding women at arm's length, and I made up my mind to give you something to think about."

The confession ended in a half sob. A tear clung for an instant to her curving lashes, then fell to her cheek. Forbes leaned closer, murmuring something neither an assurance of forgiveness, nor altogether entreaty, but a mixture of both. If it was further food for thought for which he pleaded, he did not ask in vain.