

# THE HERO

BY JAMES HAY, JR.

THE Englishman's laughter was incessant. It ran like a refrain through the chorus of merriment at the Nielson ball. In the two big rooms, with their sliding doors rolled back, there were the flames of many candles, the whisper of silks and lace across the polished floors, the fluttering of fans and music of violins. Outside the summer moon silvered the earth and, falling on the trees about the house, embroidered the lawn with tremulous shadows. The air was heavy with the fragrance of lightly swaying jacquemot roses, and stray couples, promenading the long porch, heard a mockingbird riotous in song in the thicket on the hillside. To those who loved and flirted, under the candles or under the moon, the world was nothing but the comedy of music and glowing color.

The Englishman's laughter was all the more dominant because men and women laughed with him. It broke and sparkled like the foam that bubbles on the surface of deep, rushing waters. It was the kind of laughter that a man uses to cover diffidence. He employed it as an apology for his audacity in being witty and amusing. He entertained; and yet, the light, half embarrassed laugh coming from the roof of his mouth, sometimes hesitant, sometimes fast, gave the impression that he was surprised by his own popularity. His tall, graceful figure and his strong, ugly face, with its heightened color, would have made him stand out in the crowd even if he had not been a newcomer among all the other dancers. But the laugh, with the wit it seemed to deprecate, was the thing that endeared him to the whole assemblage.

It was only natural that the beauties of the ball were glad to give him the dances he asked. They listened to brilliant epigrams and reverent compliments while he guided them through the waltzes so that not even the swing of their skirts was touched by other couples. Even Miss Berry, the belle of the ball and the fiancée of George Nielson, was greatly pleased when he asked her for one dance.

The guests, according to the Virginia custom, had the run of all the lower floor of the house, and toward midnight the Englishman went into the library at the other end of the long, rambling building. He had struck a match and was lighting a cigarette as he stepped into the room. When he looked up, he was aware at once of the threat of tragedy before him.

MRS. NIELSON, the mother of George, stood at one end of the table, the anger on her face made emphatic by the light of the student's lamp in front of her. Her bearing indicated finality and arrogant confidence of victory. She was a handsome, white-haired old lady, high-bred looking in all her clear cut, high standing features. But her mouth was cruel, and the lips were set to a hard, thin line. Across the table, at the window, was Miss Berry, her hands behind her, her big black eyes heavy with fright. Now and then her fingers entwined themselves in the lace curtains, causing little ripples to stir them to the top. Although she stood straight, something about her gave the impression that the slender form drooped with weariness.

The Englishman stopped dead. From the other end of the house came the wail of violins, and through the open window could be heard the loud laughter of negro drivers in the barnyard. In the room the only sound was that of Mrs. Nielson's fingernails tapping the top of the table imperiously.

Miss Berry was first to see the Englishman. "Ask Mr. John Harleigh," she said wearily. "He knows."

Mrs. Nielson was stout and accustomed to dominate. When she turned toward the door and saw the Englishman, it was with difficulty that she smiled. "I fail to see," she said shortly, "why Mr. Harleigh should be drawn into this."

"He knows," repeated Miss Berry. She entreated him with her eyes.

"What do I know?" asked Harleigh.

He walked farther into the room and stood beside the table, almost between the two women.



"We're Making a Tragedy Out of Nothing!" He Exclaimed.

"About Detonade," answered Miss Berry, her voice low and heavy, as if she despaired.

"Oh," he said. "Detonade? Why, yes."

"You were in Detonade when she was there?" asked Mrs. Nielson, incredulity and surprise in her tone.

"Yes, I was there," he said simply. The laughter had gone out of his throat. Miss Berry compelled his pity.

"Ask him!" reiterated the girl. She turned her back on the two and stood looking out of the window, leaving the outcome to the stranger.

"It seems queer to drag you into this," apologized Mrs. Nielson, indignation still strong in her words. "But, if you were there, it is only fair to Miss Berry and my son. I heard this afternoon that she had been involved in a scandal in that mining camp in Nevada. If she was, she cannot marry my son. The Nielsons could never be allied to anyone who—who—"

"Who had ever done anything wrong," interrupted Miss Berry, not turning her face to them.

"To anyone who had been so unconventional," concluded Mrs. Nielson; "and, when I say unconventional, I put it mildly."

"What is this story?" asked the Englishman.

"I have learned," explained Mrs. Nielson, "that five years ago Miss Berry and a man, to whom she was engaged to be married, eloped from the mining town—Detonade it was called—for the purpose of being married. They left the place together; but the following afternoon she returned alone, saying there had been no marriage. She has never explained where she was the night she was away, nor has she told anyone where the man was. Such an escapade in Virginia would mean social ostracism. If the story is true, she will be ostracized."

"Well?" prompted the Englishman.

At the window the girl's sigh was almost a sob.

Mrs. Nielson, arrested anew by her recital, merely glared at Harleigh.

"Do you believe the story?" he asked gently.

"I most certainly do!" she answered.

"It is absolutely untrue," he said softly.

Mrs. Nielson could not believe him. "You were there?" she asked.

"I was there when Miss Berry and her father reached there. I was there when they left," he said. "As a matter of fact, such an episode occurred in Detonade; but the woman was not Miss Berry."

The girl at the window turned at last.

"You are sure?" Mrs. Nielson was all doubt.

"On my honor," he assured her.

Mrs. Nielson tried to look pleased, and failed. She had never approved of her son's engagement. As the social dictator of one of those Virginia communities which, down to the present day, have preserved their ideals of pedigree and high descent, she had fought with all her strength a marriage between her son and this girl of twenty-five, who, with much money and no relatives, had spent that summer and the summer before in Postville. The report of the scandalous affair in Nevada had come to her as a sure escape from the alliance. The definite denial of it from a disinterested man put an end to her hopes of deliverance; for it satisfied even the provincial scruples of the community.

"I am glad to hear it," she told Harleigh. "It is fortunate that you arrived in Postville today." To Miss Berry she added, "You must forgive me, Elise; but I was thinking of George's happiness."

Miss Berry bowed. She was too near to tears to speak.

WHEN Mrs. Nielson had left the room, the girl sank wearily into the big leather chair beside her. "Thank you," she said brokenly to the Englishman.

He laughed hesitantly, as if embarrassed. While the laughter bubbled from the top of his throat, his eyes were serious, and he was looking at her with concern.

There fell a pause while he gazed at her. Her breathing stirred the laces at her breast. Her eyes were busy with the fan

in her lap. She did not resent his laughter. It was too evidently the scabbard of his deeper feelings.

"Does young Nielson know?" he asked gently, the hint of mirth about his words.

"No," she said reluctantly.

"But you are engaged to marry him?"

"Yes."

"And you mean to marry him?"

"Oh, yes, very soon." Her voice was weary-low.

"Then I'll tell you what you ought to do, Miss Berry," he counseled. "Tell him the whole story." He laughed, the surface merriment softening the hard advice.

"I can't. I just can't do it," she objected, defiance in her voice. She tapped the floor impatiently with the tip of her satin slipper.

"But, believe me, Miss Berry," he said lightly, "you can't hide the thing. No woman can afford to hide a minute of her life. It won't stay hidden, don't you know." He ran his hand across his straight blond hair and laughed lightly again. "That sounds trite," he added; "but it's true—awfully true."

"What shall I tell him?" she asked, looking up to him, her eyes heavy from grief.

"Tell him the story as I know it, as it is," he suggested, the undercurrent of his tone strong in insistence. "Tell it to him as you know it, as everybody in Detonade knew it."

All the time his laughter was a thread of apology knitting together his serious words. The merriment played like sunshine on what he said. It was like a rapier to protect her and himself from the melodramatic possibilities of the situation.

"Tell him," he continued, "that you thought you loved this man; that you rode with him fifty miles to the county seat; that, when the crucial moment came, you realized that what you felt for him was not such love as a woman feels for her intended husband; that