

THE SURRENDER BY OSCAR GRAVE

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She felt his scrutiny, but she thought he stood there by accident.

SOPHIE WENDEL stood on the ferryboat's rear deck of evenings, after her long-closed day's work, eager for the air fresh from the sea. And it was here that for the first time in her life a man noticed her. He stood close beside her the first night she was aware of his presence, occasionally glancing down at her as she leaned on the rail looking up and down the bay spangled with a million lights. She felt his scrutiny, but she thought he stood there by accident. After that, however, she noticed that he sought her out to stand beside her. At first, she was frightened, she tried to avoid him, but later she admitted to herself, reluctantly, that she had come to look for and expect him. On nights when he did not come, she wondered, a little vaguely, if he were ill, if anything had happened.

Then came the night he spoke to her, merely saying, "Nice evening," or something of the sort which Sophie did not hear. With flaming cheeks she quickly moved away. The next morning he came to her again and seemed about to speak, and again, elbowing her way through a gap in the crowd, she evaded him.

She hurried across the Battery and up along Greenwich Street to the place where she worked—a small wholesale hardware house. All the way she wondered if she were glad she had escaped him, if it would not have been better to have allowed him to speak to her, not once but many times—to be her friend if he wished, she had so few.

She nodded good-morning to her office companions, a gray bookkeeper and the "boss," and took her seat at the desk ready to begin her work writing bills, checking costs and figuring up profits. For five years she had been seated at this desk, six days a week, eight hours each day, doing the same dead clerical work, grown as familiar and uninteresting as the enameled cloth surface of the flat desk before her. Many times, shrinkingly, she counted up the number of months, of days, even of minutes, that she had spent there earning just enough to keep herself and her small brother.

This morning the work was piled high awaiting her letters, bills, memorandums, but she could not seem to get started. She glanced out of the window. It was raining softly, but she did not notice; she was thinking of the man, wondering, hoping.

All day long the thought of him was with her. And, suddenly, a resolution, which at first had shown but a timid hand, stood upright and proclaimed its strength. It was this:

She would speak to the man; she was lonely, and she would try to make him her friend; she would dare to step out on dangerous ground, seeking that which all her life had been denied her, seeking for—she knew not what!

When it came time to go home the rain had ceased and it had turned cold. It was bitter on the outside deck of the ferryboat. Few people braved it, preferring the warm, stuffy cabins. Sophie watched for the figure she knew so well. Her mittened hand held her heavy, but not over warm, coat close around her. How well, indeed, she knew his figure! She could close her eyes and see him clearly in every detail. Why even his hands, his large capable hands—she knew how the black hair lay against the brown skin; she could remember how the heavy thumb, probably injured in some forgotten accident, bent in grotesque, where each vein rose. A long breath escaped her, he had come out upon the men's deck opposite. He was smoking, but when the cigar was finished he tossed it over the side, its spark marking a thin, fiery line until it fell into the water behind them. He was crossing over toward her.

Sophie's throat filled so that it hurt her; he stood close beside her now. She wanted to speak, but she could not; she had the will but not the power. She was relieved of the necessity abruptly, for he put his hand over hers as it lay on the rail.

"I'll soon be too cold for you to stand out here," he said. His voice was heavy and masculine.

Sophie hesitated so long she was afraid he would think she was not going to reply; she had withdrawn her hand from beneath his. Finally the word "Yes," was all she could manage.

The man laughed easily, and there was satisfaction in the laugh. He placed one hand on her thin arm; she shrank a little away from his touch. "I want to be your friend," he said. "I want to know you better."

Sophie looked full into his eyes for the first time. "Oh, I need a friend," she said. "Then, can I call on you?" She hesitated, but after a moment, answered in a low voice, "Yes. It's forty-five Narrows Street. Ask for Miss Wendel." The boat lurched into the slip and he took her arm and they followed the stragglers—they were the last to leave. It was not far from the ferry to Sophie's home. On wet nights she rode, but usually she walked to save car-fare. To-night the man walked with her, but until he left her at the head of her street neither spoke again.

"My name is Conors, Jim Conors," he said then, "and I'm Jim to you as soon as you want. I'll be around to-night." And then he added, "We've taken long enough to get acquainted; we don't want to lose any time now."

Sophie looked up at him with wide eyes; a certain sense of fear came to her. Finally, she smiled in answer to his inquiring look, but she thought there was something in what he said that she would rather he had not said. Just what it was she did not know.

The rest of that night was strange to Sophie. It made the day stand out from the rest of her pale, commonplace days as one marked with gold and crossed with scarlet. She was desperately afraid of the consequences of her step—and yet she was glad she had taken it. Sophie had boarded in the same place ever since her mother died, leaving to her care the new baby. That was not long after her father's death, and his wife was not strong enough to live through the second suffering.

She wondered that night if Mrs. Sellers and her boarders, even if little Bobby saw anything unusual in her expression. The same thoughts were so continually in her mind it almost seemed strange people could not read them. After arising from the supper table she stopped to speak to Mrs. Sellers. She had waited purposely until the four other boarders had gone upstairs.

"Oh, I expect company to-night, Mrs. Sellers," she said, trying with poor success to look indifferent.

"Shall I send her up to your room?" asked the landlady.

"It's a gentleman."

Mrs. Sellers disguised her astonishment with a smile and a shake of her head that sent the small cluster of false curls bobbing. "Now what do you know about that, Bobby?" she said, shaking her finger at the boy.

Bobby did not care to be interviewed on the subject, and half hiding behind Sophie's skirt clung close to her.

"Then, I'll show him into the parlor, of course," said Mrs. Sellers. She seemed to look for further information, but Sophie, with a "Thanks," slipped upstairs with Bobby before her.

The two had a large room on the top floor. Seven of the twelve dollars Sophie made each week went for their board, and, indeed, she knew Mrs. Sellers would have been justified in asking more from her. She had put Bobby to bed when the bell rang, followed by Mrs. Sellers's evening voice calling her down to the front parlor.

Mr. Conors was sitting in the larger plush armchair. Sophie entered hesitatingly; she was greatly embarrassed, which he noticed with some attention.

she knew how she had come to meet this man. She was wondering what he thought of her. She was even wondering if she understood herself. It seemed so incredible, so amazing, and yet. . . . She looked across at him and smiled. He was leaning back in the chair, one leg over the other, a short, black cigar in the corner of his mouth, as he talked, his right hand conspicuous with a great diamond on one finger. And, in his way, he was very good indeed to look at.

He told her a great deal about himself. He seemed to take great delight in doing so. And Sophie was a good listener. She sat with her vivid red lips slightly parted, a flush had come to her cheeks; she hardly withdrew her eyes from him all evening. Her admiration was so obvious and so obviously sincere, he would have been a strange man who did not enjoy being its object.

"I'm something of a politician, you know," he said. "Down in the Fourth District every man knows who Jim Conors is." She remembered that.

Before he went, after announcing his intention to do so, he came over and took a chair close beside her. "Oh, don't be so frosty," he said, taking one of her hands in his. As she attempted to withdraw it, he seized both, and leaning over, kissed her full on the lips. A startled cry broke from her, and, bending over, she hid her face in her hands.

He arose with a somewhat doubtful expression, perhaps rather a contrite one, and patted her gently on the shoulder. "There, there, kid," he said. "Perhaps I did go a little rapid. Well, good-night." He waited for her to speak, but she did not look up, so he went out into the hall and let himself out of the front door.

Even after it had slammed behind him, Sophie still sat in the same position, quivering and ashamed. After a little while she turned out the gas and went up the stairs to her room, slowly and with one hand on the banisters to steady herself.

Nevertheless, after that first evening, which in some ways had been so humiliating, Sophie felt that a new and wonderful interest had entered into her colorless life. She changed gradually in appearance. The pink flushed her cheeks more easily; she learned to dress her hair in a becoming psyche, such as she had seen on a hair-dresser's model in a shop-window on Fulton Street; she carried herself in a manner that counteracted some of the effect of her cheap clothing. Often in front of her mirror she gazed with startled, somewhat surprised eyes at the girl she saw there with lips slightly parted and the even teeth showing white in the glass.

There was no doubt that Conors admired her. He took her to the theatre; and if they were not exactly the ones she would herself have chosen, they were, at least, delightfully entertaining and even more than that—for he was beside her. He met her on the ferryboat of evenings and walked home with her. But while he had always treated her with respect and had never again been as familiar as on that first evening, there was at times a certain glance in his eyes and on his lips, a certain glance which seemed to question and consider, that sent her home from an evening excursion trembling and apprehensive.

Presently came the time when he offered to give her some clothes. And after some persuasion, the principal argument of which was that he wished her to look nice when she went out with him, she accepted. Poor Sophie did not know the lure was as old as the ages.

"It's all right," he explained, with a wave of the hand. "I'm in the business, so that makes it different."

"Why, I thought you were a politician!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, well," he said easily, "I'm that too."

One evening she put on a little dress for which he had given her the goods some days previously. It was a simple dress, which she and Mrs. Sellers had fashioned between them, but it made her look younger and prettier. She turned from the mirror to Bobby, who was sitting on the floor occupied with a new

toy presented to him by Mr. Conors. "How do I look, Bobby?" she asked.

Bobby was altogether too busy to bother with anything as uninteresting as clothes. "All right," he said absently.

Sophie ran downstairs to see Mrs. Sellers. On the way down she looked into the parlor. "Just a minute, Jim," she said.

"No hurry, kid," he replied cheerfully. He was always cheerful.

stepped softly out, went over to the window and knelt there, choking back the sobs so that the child would not hear.

Through the whole of the next day it was in vain that Sophie told herself Jim had given her no right to be jealous of him. Her humility, the sense of her own insignificance, vanished before the forked flame that shot through her. It was in vain that she told herself that even if she did have the right to

be jealous, there was probably no cause. But to that came the doubt: "He lied to me!"

That night when he came, Conors immediately felt that something was wrong. They stayed home that evening in Mrs. Sellers's dull little front parlor. It was not until about ten o'clock, however, that the climax, which both felt impending, came.

Then Sophie plucked at the skirt of her dress, and not looking at Conors said, "Jim, you didn't go out to town."

His glance searched her face. She had turned to meet his gaze. "What do you mean, Sophie?" he asked.

"I saw you come out of that restaurant on Fulton Street with a woman."

"Well, what if you did?"

"Who is she?"

"That's none of your business." His tone showed that he did not care to be questioned.

"You've got to tell me who she is, Jim."

"You got no claim on me, Sophie. Don't act this way."

"Why did you lie to me?"

He arose and went over to the mantel. "I'll be damned if you can talk to me this way," he exclaimed. "You ain't got no right to, you know."

"Who is she?"

He waited a moment, and then he swung around, his shoulders hunched back with his elbows on the mantel. "Well, if you must know," he said, "it's the woman I'm going to marry."

Sophie's hand flew to shield her eyes; she breathed deeply once or twice. "Then, it's all over between us, Jim," she said, after a little while.

"No, this doesn't make no difference between us, Sophie. I have to marry this lady. It means a lot to me in some ways. But we two can go on just the same."

"Why—what can you want of me now?" she asked, open-eyed.

He did not answer, and as she continued to gaze at him, the expression that she hated and loathed came into his eyes. "So the truth came to her. After some time she said, 'Sophie, this is what you want me to be.' At that, they were silent, flushed, each breathing to the other. 'Are you mad at me?' he asked presently.

"Where's the man?" Bobby asked.

"He's gone," she answered, with tight lips. "Ain't he never coming back?" said Bobby. Conors had been very kind to the child.

"No, never," his sister answered.

Mrs. Sellers was not so easily satisfied. "It seems to me you was foolish, Sophie," she nodded sagaciously. "He was a free spender and had lots of money. I wouldn't have let him go so easy."

"Please don't, Mrs. Sellers," Sophie entreated. "Please don't ever talk to me about him."

Mrs. Sellers persisted, however, in reviving the subject, with similar adjurations and advice. She spent much time devising schemes which would bring him back, and was amazed Sophie would consider none of them.

But it was with herself that Sophie struggled hardest. She had told him she could not be "mad" at him, and it was true. She loved him still. That was her tragedy! There were times when if he had come for her, she knew she would have followed him, to do as he bid, to work for him, slave for him without condition or restriction, merely to be near him, to be able to touch his hand, feel his eyes upon her. There were even times when she prayed he would come. But afterwards, when these intervals had passed, she would be thankful and grateful to him for not coming. And so, she lived through the passing days.

One Sunday morning she sat at her window sewing on some old garments. She had put all the things he had given her away from her where she could not see or touch them.

She looked down into the street and saw Mr. Conors walking across in the direction of her door.

"Bobby, go down and tell Mrs. Sellers that I don't want to see Mr. Conors," she said to the child sitting at her feet, who was engaged with a picture book.

But Mrs. Sellers had already admitted him, and she called Sophie. Then the child could hear his deep voice as he talked to Mrs. Sellers. It transformed her!

Bobby was at the door on his way to deliver her message, but she rushed after him and pulled him back. "Never mind, Bobby," she said, "I'll go."

All the old wants were clamoring again with a hundred new tongues of passion and tenderness. All the old seeking desires, seeking in a half-blind way for she hardly knew what, were aroused within her. The surge to go to him was as insistent, as irresistible, as that first impulse to speak to him months ago. He had come and she was conquered. She surrendered utterly. If he had known how pitifully weak the defenses were, she asked, would he have cared as much?

"I've come back," he answered, and his gaze was steady and clear—and wonderfully sweet—full into her eyes.

"Well?" she repeated.

"I've come back because I had to," he said simply. "Because you're the only one, the only—." Then he choked and stopped.

Then she knew that it was he who had surrendered; and that hers was the victory. And yet, in that passionate moment in which she learned what his love really meant to her, she wondered if it mattered.

"Let's go out and talk it over, Jim," she said presently. "Unnoticed by him, as she passed, she brushed her lips against his sleeve."

She put on her hat and coat, and so, together, they went out into the bright, early morning sunlight.

At home it was harder.



"That's none of your business"



She did not look up, as he went into the hall



"I've come back," he answered

