

**The Right Touch**

Short Story by Nina Kaye

Seated at his mahogany desk in the private office of the bank he had founded, Benjamin Hertzog realized that he was in love.

Benjamin Hertzog was a clever man. He was inclined to put it modestly and say he did not think with the mob. To this he owed his success in life, the fact that he had weathered 1929 and that he had been for twenty years a widower with a motherless boy and had avoided all entangling alliances.

And now he was in love. A finger sought the mother of pearl buzzer at his right, the door opened and a slim young girl with blue eyes and an aura of golden hair about her young face came into the room, her note book open. She smiled and slipped into the chair beside the desk, head bent over the notebook, her pencil poised.

For a breathless moment Benjamin watched the tendrils of fair hair at the nape of her neck. How he longed to take her in his arms and tell her he loved her! How he would like to replace the pale green dress she wore with a white, hand knitted sport suit, with tiny touches of pink to emphasize her fragile beauty! There were diamonds and pearls in the safe behind his head waiting to be reset and restrung for her adornment.

But Benjamin was a clever man. He wasn't going to do what other men would do, he didn't think with the mob. Another man would have taken her to lunch, sent her flowers, taken her to dinner, the theatre, a

night club. That is, if she were the undrivable kind of girl who would have gone with him. If she were the kind of girl Betty Milman was, she would have stared at him with terrified eyes, shaken her head and disappeared into the great unknown city where he would never be able to find her. No, another man's way was not the way for him.

He puffed reflectively at his cigarette. Miss Milman raised her head inquiringly and Benjamin found himself gazing into her liquid blue eyes that still had in them the laughter of childhood. They made him remember he was forty-five and she little more than twenty.

But what was forty-five today? He felt as young as he ever did, he was lean and lithe and athletic. He didn't want to grow old, he'd never be old. Didn't Danny say he was the best pal, ever a son could have? Being

Danny's pal, playing with Danny's collegiate crowd had kept him young. He would stay young by always having youth about him. Danny was through with college, he would marry some day and go off. But Benjamin wouldn't be left alone, warming aged limbs by the fire. Married to Betty, he would always have youth near him.

Miss Milman was waiting for him to dictate. Instead, he ground out his cigarette and leaned forward in his chair. "Decided on a place to spend your vacation yet, Miss Milman?"

She shook her head. "No country for me this year, Mr. Hertzog. I've promised myself a visit to the aquarium and Luna Park and Jones Beach." A shadow passed over his face. "Oh, don't pity me," she said. "I'm going to have loads of fun. I never get a chance to do those things. And I really like it."

Looking at her laughing face, Benjamin could almost believe her. "Save those things for when you're older and want to find your youth again," he said sternly. "My sister has ordered me to bring you down to our place for a week or so. You know how big the place is and there's

no one there but Martha and Danny and whatever friends he's got on his list for this week. Can you be packed by eight this evening? I'm driving down. Or, better, you can come down on the noon train tomorrow. Don't worry about clothes. We all live in our bathing suits."

Betty opened her mouth to speak, but he shook his head. "No 'nos,' young lady. I've promised Martha I'd bring you down and deliver you I shall."

When she had left the room, walking as if the floor had become a great balloon, Benjamin called his sister "I'll be down tonight, Martha," he said shortly. "Get the blue bedroom on the second floor ready for my secretary, Miss Milman. She's coming down tomorrow. I don't care who's in there now," he snapped. "Throw him out!"

Starved little thing, that's what she was. Only it was good times she was starved for instead of food. Out on the vine-hung veranda, smoking his after dinner cigar, Benjamin listened to Betty's laughter floating out through the casement windows. Tipping his chair back, he could see her, slim and young in a white dress that sheathed her like an inverted lily. Her back against the radio, her hands were flung out, her head thrown back, her eyes closed as she swayed to the music. Gathered near her, held by the silken net of her joyous laughter, were Danny and his friend Alf and Cressida Williams, with her flame-colored hair and her too-so, sophisticated air.

"She'll never want to go back now," Benjamin confided to his cigar. "This week has meant too much to her. No wonder she's tried to gobble it all in, like a waf at a charity dinner. Whew, she has been going some! I couldn't keep up with her. Dancing until dawn and off with Dan. Course, when she realizes she won't have to give it all up and go back to the office, she won't have to cram every minute full of excitement. Per-

haps she's already slowing down. Tonight, when I suggested staying home, she seemed willing enough." He sniffed the delicate odor of the wistaria. "I can't expect her to love me," he murmured, "not at first. But if she were out here with me now, I'd — I'd ask her."

As if in answer to his thoughts, he saw Betty disengage herself from the kitchen and come to the open window. "Out there all alone, Mr. Hertzog?" she called, her voice soft as a caress.

"Enjoying the evening, Betty," he said. "Come out and enjoy it with me."

She came readily, turning to wave to those in the room. Like a nestling kitten, waiting for someone to pet it, she curled up on a hassock beside his chair.

"I wasn't telling the truth, Betty," he spoke when she had settled herself. "I wasn't paying the least attention to the evening. I was sitting here, watching you in there and thinking how lovely, how very lovely you were."

"Don't make me blush, Mr. Hertzog."

"I really was. And I was thinking how much fonder I'd grown of you. Don't you think people learn to like each other more quickly in the country?"

"Yes, I do," she said, her words a little rush like a whisper of breeze. "It's terribly hard not fall in love in the country."

A great mound of confidence well within Benjamin. He had been right. All that was needed now was the right word, the right touch.

"Watching you in there," he said. "I realized how much I'd missed by not having a daughter. You know —"

He would have gone on, but a rippling laugh interrupted him. A soft hand was laid over his on the chair arm.

"I'm so glad you feel that way, Mr. Hertzog she whispered joyously. "I am your daughter. Danny and I were married this morning."

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paternal, "if you were a Jewish girl and I had an unmarried son I would do my utmost to get you as a daughter in law. In fact, if you were a Jewish girl I'd marry you myself. But of course, in view of my position in the community....."

Nathan stopping talking and indulged in silent regrets. Miss O'Leary found the moment appropriate for an examination of his eyes. Blissfully Nathan closed his eyes. It may be just as well that he didn't see Miss O'Leary's expression — concussion cases must be protected from unpleasant shocks. But he did hear a soft murmur telling him that the lady's maternal grandmother had been nee Becky Levy.

When, several days later, Nathan was permitted to receive his first visitors — his son and two daughters — he introduced Miss O'Leary with a definitely proprietary air.

"This is Agnes," he said, beaming upon his children, "the sweetest girl that ever brought a dying man back to life. Get acquainted with her and you'll be seeing a lot of her. I hope."

To his son Nathan whispered confidentially: "I've asked her to marry me, but she's hesitating because she doesn't want to give up her profession. A very sweet girl, Sam — we can all consider ourselves lucky if she takes me. It's all kosher, too, for her mother was half Jewish, and she's willing to enter the Jewish faith."

A sidelong glance at Miss O'Leary made Sam's eyebrows rise in an ironic twist. But he said nothing. It would have been dangerous to upset father.

Nathan continued to improve. Soon he was sitting up for several hours each day. His heart expanded as, leaning his still tender head against a pillow he listened to the light novel Miss O'Leary read to him. Gertrude — to her, to live, even to that imperturbable cow — filled his soul. He'd have to do something to keep this little girl beside him forever.

One bright afternoon, while the room still reeked sweetly of the Florida water with which Miss O'Leary had sponged his forehead, Nathan varied the regular procedure — it was the hour for his daily proposal of marriage — by asking her to see whether his checkbook still rapped in the inside pocket of his wrecked coat. With her customary efficiency Miss O'Leary produced the checkbook.

For a moment Nathan studied his stubs, then he borrowed Miss O'Leary's pen, scribbled something that wound up with a flourishing signature, tore out a watermarked oblong and tendered it to his Agnes.

She took it with considerable show of hesitation, and after a glance let

it flutter to the floor. Her gaze too fell floorward.

"Oh, Mr. Mark, you mustn't!" she cried softly. "I couldn't accept it. It's terribly kind of you — but I couldn't."

Nathan was distressed. "Please, Agnes," he protested. "It's just a little token of appreciation and affection. Call it an advance on what I'm giving you for your trousseau. A thousand dollars more or less won't make much difference to me, and I'll be happy in the thought that you're enjoying a shopping spree. After all, you're going to marry me when I'm on my feet again."

Followed the usual discussion — "I'm terribly fond of you, but my profession is my life," countered by: "You're going to marry me, my dear, and I'll give you everything you want." But this time the debate ended with victory for Nathan; Miss O'Leary conceded that marriage with him might be as thrilling as a nurse's life, and agreed to consider herself betrothed to him.

In the nurses' dining-room that evening Nathan Mark's check for a thousand dollars to the order of Agnes O'Leary was exhibited to some dozens of envious eyes, and the accompanying circumstances were explained in great detail. By midnight the lowliest orderly knew that Nurse O'Leary had landed that rich Mr. Mark in the Private Pavilion. In the morning the Superintendent of Nurses herself stopped in Nathan's room to verify the story, and emerged shaking her head and muttering an old saw about the supremacy of fools no longer young.

Well, nature took her course and Nathan grew better and better. Till there came the day when the eternal hovering and pulse-taking of Miss O'Leary irritated him, when the cloying sweetness of Florida Water disgusted him, when the unimaginative if wholesome hospital meals made him long for ready food. Nathan began to dream of golf and talk about going home. He grew lyrical on the subject of his cozy suite at the hotel and on the perfections of his one man servant.

"But of course we'll have to take a larger suite," cooed Miss O'Leary. "And we'll need one or two other servants. Or perhaps a nice, roomy house in the suburbs would be best. We'll have to do a great deal of entertaining, I imagine."

Nathan winced. He had forgotten that he was speaking to his fiancée; he had, indeed, forgotten that he was affianced to anybody. He would have to say something quickly. Something jocularly deprecatory of an old man like himself as the husband of a young girl, something gracefully appreciative of all she had done for him, perhaps a promise of another thousand dollar check. Then he

caught the steely glint in the eyes fixed on him, and began to realize that there was no doubt of such a promise being needed. He should have kept his dismay out of his face, he saw.

Pretty well rattled, Nathan blurted out: "Come, now, Agnes. You didn't really take that seriously, did you, my dear? I mean, I know a charming girl like you wouldn't want to be tied up for life to an old fellow like me."

Of course I'll give you another little gift just to express my gratitude for everything," Miss O'Leary didn't coo as she told Nathan, in forceful and unmistakable terms, that he would either marry her or give or considerably more than a thousand dollars. "Or else I'll sue you for breach of promise," was her parting shot as she flung out of the room.

A few minutes later Nathan's rueful meditation was interrupted by the floor nurse, who informed him that Miss O'Leary had fallen ill that her place would be taken by Miss Trent.

Miss Trent's first task was to summon Joe Blackstein, Nathan's lawyer. You don't need to be told the details of that conference. Nathan, mindful of his position as president of the Temple, as head of a popular grocery chain, as a representative of Southern chivalry, pleaded for an inexpensive way out. He wouldn't mind a thousand dollars, or even five — but a hundred thousand was too much.

"Is she a pretty girl?" Lawyer Blackstein wasn't very cheerful as he asked the question.

"Ye-es." "Pretty enough to impress a jury, and knows it, I gather. That means she can hold a suit over your head until you buy her written release from your promise. And what a scandal a suit would mean! It would be as bad as the case against Alex Henderson."

Nathan's almost-forgotten headache returned in full force as he remembered the recent Henderson breach of promise suit. "I must have been crazy," he groaned.

"Well, you did get a pretty bad bump on the head," Blackstein admitted. "And it was just tough luck that you happened to hit on a dyed in the wool gold-digger like your Agnes. But why did you have to give her a chance to announce it to everybody, and then, on top of everything else, accept people's congratulations? From what you've told me I've gathered every one in town knew about this except your family and friends."

Nathan found nothing to say. "Thus it was that one nameless cow brought Nathan Mark's expenses mounting well over a hundred thousand dollars. But he consoles himself with the thought that he still is president of his Temple, that his excellent reputation remains unimpaired, that he still represents the acme of re-

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