

# The Order of Release

By **GEORGE HOWARD**

**P**ROCRASTINATION is more often an evidence of cleverness than cowardice. Some men delay the moment of battle that they may more carefully study the enemy's plans and their own and discover in each the weaknesses. Richard Dudley was one of these men. That is why he paced before the Ralston home for half an hour after his cab had deposited him at the door.

At last, however, he threw away his cigar and, walking up the steps, rang the bell. The butler opened the door. With the deferential air of the well trained servant he bowed, took the visitor's hat and coat, and motioned him toward the library. "You will find Mr. Ralston 'there, sir,'" he said. Dudley crossed the hall and entered the dimly lighted room. Ralston was sitting staring at the brightly burning log fire with somber eyes. Apparently he was deep in thought, for he did not notice that anyone had entered. That instant gave Dudley an opportunity to look at him closely. He had grown visibly older in the last six months, and his face was even more gray and grim than usual. Dudley saw no more, for the other became aware of his presence and turned.

As he recognized who the new comer was, he rose, and upon his face there came a smile—one rarely seen there. "Dick!" he said, advancing with outstretched hand.

"Yes," replied the other. "I'm glad to see you," said Ralston cordially. "And I'm glad to see you," returned Dudley, and paused rather awkwardly.

The other observed his momentary embarrassment and quickly covered it. "Come," he said heartily, "sit down by the fire and have a chat. You have neglected us shamefully, Dick, you know."

"I have been busy," returned Dudley as he seated himself in a chair, "and have gone out little."

"You must have been," returned Ralston. "Why, it is at least six months since you have been here."

"Yes," replied Dudley, "it has been at least that." Ralston looked at him curiously. Dudley was not usually of such few words. For a time there was silence. Then Dudley spoke again.

"It is about your sister that I have come to speak," he said slowly. "You are her guardian, and I want to make her my wife. She has told me that she loves me," he added; "so it is your consent alone that is necessary."

He said no more. He did not urge his fitness or his wealth. He did not even look at Ralston as he spoke, but gazed steadily into the fire, nor did he shift that gaze when he was done. There was something strangely impassive in his manner.

Ralston looked at him for a moment, and then he too looked into the fire. The room was strangely still and silent. At last Ralston spoke.

"You must pardon me, Dick," he said with an odd constraint in his voice, "that I do not at once give my consent. Well as I know you, I cannot do that until you have told me some things about yourself which only you can tell me. I rely on your honor to answer my questions truthfully."

"I promise to do that," returned Dudley, "if I can."

"If you cannot," said Ralston quickly, "you can never gain my consent!" For the first time since he had seated himself Dudley turned and faced Ralston. It seemed almost as if he knew what the question would be and feared it. The other met his questioning gaze with a smile.

"You see, Dick," he said with a note almost of embarrassment in his voice, "I love my sister dearly and want her to be happy. Few women are that," he continued; "very few. They are for the most part what we men make them, and we make them sad. Now, I know that you are better than most men; but still you are a man, and so I am going to ask you to tell me if you have done what other men have done—the thing whose shadow wrecks so many women's lives."

"I am afraid I do not understand just what you mean," said Dudley.

"I mean another woman," he answered.

Dudley's face went white. This, then, was what he had looked for and feared. Despite this, his voice was steady as he asked, "What about another woman?"

"I mean to ask if there is one," replied Ralston. "Oh," he went on quickly, "I mean is there a woman whom you have loved and who has loved you—who perhaps still loves

you—a woman whose unhappiness at your desertion might cast a shadow on my sister's life?"

He had asked the question easily enough, and yet it was plain that he awaited the answer almost in fear. It seemed that something even beyond his sister's welfare lay hidden in it. But Dudley, absorbed in his own thoughts, did not see this.

"That is a strange question," he said, and turned once more and looked at the fire.

"It is upon your answer to it that my consent depends," returned Ralston.

There was a long pause. Presently Dudley cleared his throat.

"I fear my answer can only be an ambiguous one," he said. "It is yes and no. There has been another woman in my life—a woman who was unhappy. Her unhappiness awakened all my pity—she was young and beautiful, and it was not easy to see her suffer. At last in a moment of madness I told her that I loved her, and she—she let me hold her in my arms and kiss her. It was that kiss, I think, that brought me to my senses. I have never seen her since."

"Why not?" Ralston's face was white.

"She was the wife of my friend," answered Dudley simply.

"And that was all?" queried Ralston, turning a piercing glance at him. "You will swear to me that that was all that ever passed between you?"

"Yes," said Dudley, "I will swear to it."

"But before you parted," Ralston asked, "did she confess her love for you?"

Dudley turned to him quickly. "I scarcely see—" he began; but Ralston interrupted him.

"You must answer," he declared.

Dudley was silent for a moment. "Yes," he said at length, "she did."

A spasm of pain crossed Ralston's face. "And you?" he inquired.

"I was sorry for her," said Dudley, "and was fond of her; but that was all."

"You have never seen her since that time, or heard

from her?" again questioned Ralston.

"No."

"How long ago was it?"

For the first time Dudley seemed suspicious of his interrogator. He turned and looked at him quickly. But the pale face gazing steadily into the fire told him nothing. "Sometime since," he said carelessly; "I scarcely know how long."

"Was it two years, or a year, or six months?" Again Dudley looked at him suspiciously. "Within a year," he said at length.

There was a pause. Ralston sat gazing steadily at the fire. It seemed almost as though he had forgotten Dudley, until the latter stirred uneasily in his chair.

"If you marry my sister, Dick," he said at last, "what is to become of the other woman?"

"I scarcely see what that can have to do with me," was the answer.

"Your kiss," said Ralston, "was a pledge which, even though you did not mean it, you are bound to keep. Your absence was only a tribute to her honor. Some day she may call upon you to fulfil that pledge. And if she calls to you after you are married to my sister, what can you do? Do you not see that you might break her heart and the other woman's too?"

"And that," said Dudley, rising and very white, "is your answer?"

"Yes," said Ralston quietly, "unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless the other woman should release you."

"I do not understand."

"If she should write you a letter saying that she had no claim upon you—" began Ralston.

"Yes?" interrupted Dudley eagerly.

"I will consent to your engagement with my sister; provided," he added, "you, in strictest confidence, show the letter to me."

"Good Heaven! No!" cried Dudley.

"You refuse?"

"Why, such a thing would be impossible!"

"I will give my consent upon no other terms," returned Ralston.

For an instant they stood staring at one another across the table. Then a slight rustle at the door caused them both to turn. A graciously beautiful woman of thirty had entered the room and was crossing over to where Ralston stood. She was tall and dark, and her pale face showed traces of suffering. She did not observe Dudley, who stood somewhat in the shadow.

"Well, John," she said to Ralston, "we are back again? Have you had a stupid evening?" In the tone of her voice there was no cadence of affection. Her words, gentle enough, came only from a sense of duty, and Ralston knew this—his face showed it.

"No," he answered her. "The fact is, Dick Dudley has been here with me."

At his name Dudley stepped into the light; but she did not at once turn toward him. Instead, for a moment she gazed at her husband with an expression in which hope and incredulity were mingled.

"Dick?" she said.

"Yes, Mrs. Ralston," Dudley put in. She turned as she heard his voice, and her face was quite white, but her hands were quickly stretched toward him.

"I'm glad," she said simply.

"Where is Grace?" said Ralston quickly. He did not apparently relish this meeting.

"She went directly to the music room," answered his wife, turning toward him. "There was something she heard at the concert that she wished to run over."

The words had scarcely left her mouth when there drifted into the room the faint sound of a piano.

"I am glad," said Ralston, "Dick and I have been having a serious talk, and I want you to hear it."

Again the color left her face as her glance went quickly from Dudley to Ralston, and then back to Dudley again, where it remained. "Very well," she said quietly, and sat down. "Tell me what it is about."

The men followed her example; but for a time no one spoke. Faintly, from a farther room came the soft, sad notes of Schumann's "Romance," that exquisite melody of love, grief, and parting, and to each person who sat there it seemed to convey a personal message. At length Ralston broke the silence.

"It is about Grace," he said.

A wave of color, of relief, swept over Mrs. Ralston's face. "What about her?" she asked.

"She and Dick," he said slowly while



His Proposal Astounded Her.