

A Short Story Complete on This Page

JOHN ATHERTON, president of Atherton and Fuller, Publishers, Inc., was having a private conference with his firm's best-selling author at the season's noisiest cocktail party. People bumped into them, Filipino waiters, bearing trays of drinks and appetizers, forced their way between the two men, the host brought up other guests to be introduced and the din grew ever louder, but publisher and author went on yelling at one another.

"I tell you, Bill, what this country — and the publishing business — needs is a love story, a good, old-fashioned love story!"

Bill Matthews snorted. To make sure Atherton heard him, he snorted again. Then he twisted his handsome, middle-aged face into an awful grimace. "Romeo and Juliet stuff!" he shouted contemptuously.

"Exactly!" Atherton shouted back. "Young love! Moonlight! Roses! Cruel parents!"

"But no one falls in love any more!"

"Not in your books. . . That's just it, Bill. The country's starved for romance. It's been fed to the gills with history, with war, with social significance. But love? No one gives it love any more."

"Why should anyone? Love doesn't exist. Are you in love? Am I in love? Is anybody you know in love? Are any of these people—" Bill waved his hand at the room full of chattering men and women — "in love? Of course not! People are too intelligent these days."

"The papers are full of marriages every day."

"Sure. But not because of your namby-pamby love. Those marriages are for the sake of security or convenience or — or the libido. Listen to the younger generation talk and you'll find out."

"I agree with you. The kids do seem hard-boiled. But I still insist a good love story would go like wildfire. Now if a writer like you would write one —"

"Me?" Bill drew up six feet of affronted artistic integrity. "Me! I write what I believe in; I don't believe in love!"

All the way home Bill muttered disgustedly to himself, "Love! Love! Mush!" He was inside his apartment and had called "Helen!" before he remembered that his wife was still away visiting her mother. He went on into the bedroom and gazed angrily at its emptiness.

Turquoise carpet, heavy white silk draperies, matching bedspreads — it was a strange, futile sort of place, he complained to himself, when there was no feminine junk strewn around, no negligee across a chair, no silk slippers beside a bed.

And anyway — Bill glared at a too-neat row of perfume bottles — there was no greater indignity to which a man could be subjected than to be left all alone with a befrilled and beruffled dressing table!

In the living room he sniffed the air. A cabbagey smell! That wench in the kitchen was actually giving him Brussels sprouts again for the fourth consecutive night! If there was one thing he couldn't stand it was those damned imitation cabbages.

And where in heck was his daughter?

Delia, the maid, came into the living room. "Miss Kathy phoned she wouldn't be home to dinner."

"Did she say when she would be home?"

"No, she didn't. She just said to tell you not to wait."

Bill sat down grumpily at the table. Somehow he never enjoyed a meal unless Helen was with him. It wasn't because he liked to see her soft, brown hair and watch the light in her dark eyes, although he had to admit Helen was the best-looking woman he knew. And it wasn't because she was always sympathetic and understanding about his problems with his newest book or the antics of his publishers — just wait until he told her about Atherton and love! Wouldn't she laugh! — but having a wife like Helen was habit. That was all. Just a habit.

IN THE kitchen Delia set another plate heaped with meat and Brussels sprouts before a husky, red-haired man. "There you are, darlin', all the sprouts you can eat to your heart's content." Her round, flushed face shone adoringly as she spoke. She placed coffee and bread beside his plate and sat down heavily at the other end of the table.

"It's funny, ain't it, Joe? Here you can put away a ton of sprouts and the Mister in there turns up his nose at them."

"Wumph!" grunted Joe, his mouth full.



NOBODY

FALLS IN LOVE ANY MORE

"People are too intelligent to fall in love these days," insisted Bill Matthews . . . And he was sure he was right

by Martha Foley

Illustrated by James Schucker

"Not that it makes the particle of difference, because it doesn't. If you want sprouts, Joe darlin', I'll give you sprouts no matter which way anybody turns his nose."

After dinner, Bill sat for a long time in the living room. He thought of going out, but the cocktail party had provided him with the sight of enough people for one day. Besides, where was there to go? If Helen were here, he and she could go to a show.

He twiddled with the radio, but could get no program that pleased him. He read the paper. There seemed to be nothing new in it. He shut his eyes, slumped back in the chair and went to sleep.

KATHY stood on the top step outside the apartment house, looking down at a handsome boy. It was a warm night, with a gentle breeze stepping softly down the quiet street.

"Look at the stars," said Kathy; "they seem so close tonight."

"I'd rather look at your eyes. Your eyes are so beautiful. Sometimes when I look deep into them I feel as if I were drowning."

"Then I'll never let you look into them again! I don't want you to drown!"

"But it would be such a nice way to die!"

"Oh, David, don't speak of dying like that! I couldn't stand it if you were dead!"

"What would you do?"

"Do? Why I'd kill myself! I wouldn't be able to live without you!"

"Darling!" David pressed the hand he held in both of his.

"Well, how would you feel if I were to die?"

"You know I'd kill myself!"

"Darling!" Another breeze came down the street and lifted a lock of Kathy's hair. Then the world was very quiet.

"Oh!" Kathy drew her hand away from David's. "It must be getting awfully late! I'll have to go in."

Bill roused himself from his chair as he heard the door open. He looked at the clock on the mantel. It was ten minutes past one.

"Listen here, young lady!" he said sternly.

"Do you know what time it is?"

"Yes, but —"

"Just because your mother's not home, you seem to think you can stay out all night."

"But you don't understand, Dad! I didn't know —"

"Running around until all hours with that silly Allen kid!"

"Oh, Dad! You're — you're cruel!" Kathy rushed to her own room and slammed the door.

At the station next morning, Bill paused at a florist's stand. Roses? They reminded him of that fool Atherton and his talk about love. He'd take orchids. Helen would say he was extravagant, but what the hell. Can't a man buy orchids for his own wife?

The train gates opened, passengers and porters poured through. There was no sign of Helen. Bill stood fuming. Where was his wife, damn it? She had no business not being on that train. The passengers had all gone. He stood alone, sadly clutching the corsage in its waxed paper wrapping.

The gateman was drawing the gates together. Suddenly he stopped and drew them apart again. A woman was coming along the platform. By Jove, it was Helen! Bill's heart

leaped. Helen, and looking as good as ever! He certainly had known how to pick a wife, all right.

"Bill!" Helen's voice was surprised.

"Sure! What of it?" Bill's voice did not sound as gruff as his words.

"How nice! I had no idea you would come and meet me, or I never would have waited to pack my bag until the train stopped."

"Here." Bill thrust the orchids at her.

"And orchids, too! Oh, Bill!" Helen reached up and kissed him. Bill felt the lips, as soft as a girl's, on his.

"Er — well, the flower stand was full of 'em." He liked the feel of Helen's lips. He kissed them again.

"How's everything, Bill?"

"Okay."

"Been working hard?" she asked with a friendly smile.

"Say!" Bill remembered something and grinned. "I bumped into Atherton yesterday. Guess what he said!"

"What?"

"He said the reading public wanted love. Said his firm could clean up on a romance right now."

"He did?"

"Yep. Even asked me — me, a realist — to write one! Can you tie that? As if anyone believed in that kind of sentimental guff any more!"

Helen did not answer. She was busy pinning Bill's orchids on her coat, right above her heart.

The End