

Love's Miracle

Don Peterson

A GROUP OF men were sitting around a table at the Press Club in Chicago after having attended a banquet for newspapermen from different parts of the country. One of them, John Rolf, began to tell a story. Everyone at the table took an interest, for Rolf had spent seven years in Paris as foreign correspondent for the *Tribune*, and as editor for several local journals, the largest and most important of which was *La Revue Moderne*. He had come back with many fascinating stories about the Parisians which, if compiled into a book, would have made excellent material to rival even the best of best sellers.

"One day in '27 I was going through a stack of manuscripts," Rolf began, "when I came across some work submitted by a fellow named Phillip Austin. There was a strange vivacity to it which revealed a touch of whimsical genius, yet it had the depth and clarity of genuine first-class stuff. I wrote him a card, asking him to stop by the office at his earliest convenience, and when, three days later, he ambled in and announced himself, I was the most surprised man in all Paris. Standing before me was a lad that looked about twenty-two though I learned later that he was only twenty. At first I thought some of my friends had sent him around to provide a laugh at my expense.

"Austin was well over six feet, deep chested, and with blonde curly hair and blue eyes. His hands and feet were unusually large, and his voice was soft and high pitched. He acted too old for one so young, but his conversation proved he was mentally advanced for his age. I told him how much I admired his work, suggested a few changes, and offered him a job as one of my associate writers. I didn't need another writer then, but I wanted to observe him to find out what made him tick. It would be good experience for him to work with other writers, I explained, and perhaps in several months he could achieve widespread celebrity. He liked the idea, and we agreed that he would start within four days.

"The next few days passed quickly, and I debated whether to publish Austin's work or hold it back for a while. The field at the time was crowded. I finally decided to hold off a bit and wait until the works of the leading novelists had died down. I thought maybe

I could begin a new clamor with his undeniably ripe material—it was worth a try anyhow.

“After he had been working for me about six months, I felt that I knew less about him than when we first met. There was an unmistakably distant quality about him that prevented me from getting very close to him. His work, however, was extremely satisfactory and distinctly original. Then, late one afternoon, he came bursting into my office waving a crisp new manuscript. He was very excited, and I thought he had just polished off the world’s Great Novel. It was a masterpiece, but it wasn’t his. It was signed Ellen Peron, and when I read it I knew why he was so excited. It was almost as if he had written it himself, for the style mimicked his own with an uncanny exactness. He wanted to phone her at once and have her come over to the office, but I thought we should send her a routine card. He won, and after I replaced the phone and told him that she would be in early the following morning he smiled and, with a sparkle in his eye, said, ‘I never knew that two people could think so much alike. It’s almost as if we came from the same pod.’ It was the first time he had ever said anything that indicated his special talent for writing. He was not one to boast, nor did he revel in his sudden acceptance as a new and promising writer.

“The next morning promptly at nine-thirty, Miss Ellen Peron was sitting in my office. She was a beautiful woman, middle-aged, yet with a youthful vitality that was charming. Her rich brown hair was long, and her eyes were strikingly blue. I sent for Phillip, and, as soon as he arrived, I no longer existed for them. I wondered about those two—they spoke each other’s language with a mutual understanding that was obvious. I surmised what might become of their sudden friendship.

“For the next week I didn’t see much of Phillip. I was aware that he and Ellen were together constantly and that they were frequently seen in the early morning hours at the cafes along the Rue Royale. I became engrossed in my work, having put Phillip from my mind, when one day he came into my office with a big grin all over his face. ‘What’s the matter with you?’ I asked. He told me that he was in love with Ellen, but I had already guessed that, so I merely said, ‘So what?’

“‘I’m going to marry her,’ he answered.

“‘Have you asked her yet?’

“‘No, I will tonight,’ he said and then left suddenly.

“He had a habit of coming to me with little unimportant problems, as if he had to talk things over and then suddenly realizing that an explanation would have to follow. This time I didn’t need an explanation. I was certain that Ellen wouldn’t marry him. She was twenty-three years older than he. I decided that they would carry on an affair for a while and then gradually drift apart.

"The next morning when he came into the office he looked terribly sad and broken-hearted. Before I could say anything he murmured, 'Ellen turned me down.'

"That shouldn't bother you, I replied. You two are in love. Convention is a thing of the'

"'Shut up,' he said and I could see that he was completely serious about his affection for Ellen. Things went from bad to worse. He wouldn't work or even try to write. He sat around most of the time just staring into space. I tried everything to pull him out of his lethargy, but he became indignant when I tried to reason with him. I finally kept my ideas to myself and silently cursed Ellen. Then I cursed Phillip for ruining the genius that was his, and then I cursed myself for having been the one to bring them together. I felt like I had lost a prized possession.

"I could have shouted for joy when, about two weeks later, Phillip burst into my office and laid some manuscripts before me.

"'Just like old times,' I said. 'Tell me about your sudden renewal of life.'

"'Everything is all fixed. I'm going to marry Ellen after all. I haven't asked her yet but in five days I know she'll say yes. I met a man, Lawrence Fearing, who after listening to my story about Ellen and me asked me what I'd wish for if I had a single wish. I told him I'd want to be one year older than Ellen. I couldn't have had any better luck than my meeting him. He's some sort of biological scientist connected with one of the universities, and he told me that all my worries are over.'

"I had heard of this Fearing fellow. A crack-pot if there ever was one—so I believed at the time. Right away I knew that Phillip had fallen for some idiotic notion that could be conceived only by the brain of a visionary with a twisted mind. Phillip continued to rave on and on and ended by saying that in five days he would be old enough to marry Ellen.

"'And you believe that?' I asked. A look of scorn blazed across his face, then his eyes softened and a shadow of a smile tugged at his mouth, and I knew he had fearless faith and dauntless courage in what he had done.

"The next few days Phillip was extremely happy and worked rigorously. That was enough for me. Anyone who could write as he did was entitled to a delusion or two. He kept talking about how wonderful everything would be when he and Ellen were married. He hadn't mentioned anything to her about this Lawrence Fearing. He wanted to surprise her. I knew the whole thing would blow up in his face, yet I caught myself watching Phillip for a sign of age—a touch of grey around the temples or a spread of wrinkles around the eyes. The days seemed endless. By Friday afternoon—Saturday

was the fifth day—Phillip assured me that when he awoke in the morning he would be as old as I was. I nodded my head and agreed to be his best man, knowing perfectly well that it would end in tragedy. Suddenly my office door burst open and Ellen rushed into the room. Her hair was mussed and she was out of breath. ‘Phillip,’ she gasped, ‘we can be married.’

“‘Yes, but how did . . .?’ It was obvious that he thought I had told her.

“But she added, ‘I met a man . . . Lawrence Fearing . . . he gave me a wish. . . . I’ll be nineteen in five days.’”

With that Rolf closed his eyes and eased back in his chair as if lost in reminiscence. No one knew what to say. To laugh might have been out of place, but somehow the story had a true ring to it, yet Rolf could have been leading the group on. Finally someone asked him to finish the story.

“There could only be one ending,” Rolf said. “Ellen was the prettiest and youngest bride I have ever seen, and the wedding was the most depressive I ever attended.”

Two Poems

Frances Mohr

The Muse

“My sect the rock aspires and gains.”

The hand she held him by was steady
 As he lay shifting in the sand.
 Awake, he rose, but touched mere air;
 He searched, but found no lady fair.
 But on the sand he found a word.

Suddenly the world blurred.

Globe-Trotter

Airplanes navigate my brain
 And ships cruise my reverie.
 I travel dawns of light-to-be
 And, homeless, wish me home again.