

*Affair
of the
Heart*

John Wyndham

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Affair of the Heart

By JOHN WYNDHAM

ELIOT left what he was telling Jean in mid-air. Jules, the headwaiter, was coming toward them, controlled horror on his face. "Excuse me, monsieur," he said, radiating distress. "I am very sorry. A mistake has been made."

Eliot heard him the way he usually heard people until he was accustomed to them. One of the troubles of a practicing phonetician's life is that every chance-heard stranger speaks in a double language: behind the words, he is telling where he comes from, where he was educated, where he lives now. His lips, tongue and teeth are watched to see how he forms sounds. All this is likely to be so professionally interesting that the intended purpose of the sounds is frequently overlooked.

It was so now. Eliot could have told that one of Jules's parents had come from the *Midi*; that Jules himself had been brought up in England; that he could speak perfect English if he liked, but that he kept his accent for professional purposes. What he could not have told was what Jules had said.

Jules went on: "An unfortunate mistake, monsieur. This table. It is reserved."

"Sure it is. I reserved it yesterday."

"But that is the mistake, monsieur. If monsieur and mademoiselle would not mind? There are other good tables. You see, every year this table is reserved on May twenty-eighth. Every year."

"Every year, on May twenty-eighth?" Jean said, her eyes on Jules's troubled face.

"Yes, mademoiselle. It is a standing order."

"Well, *this* year—" Eliot began.

But the girl broke in: "That sounds romantic. Is it?"

"Mademoiselle has guessed. It is an affair of the heart," Jules said.

"I, too, am here on an affair of the heart," Eliot said pointedly.

"That is very easy to understand," Jules said, looking admiringly at Jean.

Jean drew her handbag toward her. "In the face of that, Eliot, we can scarcely refuse, can we?"

Eliot nodded and stood up. Jules beamed. He led the way to another table and saw to their seating there with great

attention. "I am so sorry to have troubled monsieur."

"As a compensation, you might tell us something about this Darby and Joan," Eliot suggested. "Wedding anniversary?"

"Oh, no." Jules leaned a little closer. "They are Lord Solby and Mrs. Blayne. It is a famous affair, very romantic, very sad. Mrs. Blayne was once Lily Morveen."

"I've heard of her," Jean put in. "What they used to call a 'Toast of the Town.'"

"That is so, mademoiselle. All the young officers on leave went to hear her sing at the Coliseum or the Empire. They all loved her, but two of the serious ones were Lord Solby—Captain Solby, then—and Captain Charles Blayne. Everybody knew about those two young men. They were great rivals, and they were of the same regiment. The younger people saw that Captain Blayne was gay and good-looking; the older ones said that Captain Solby had a lot more money, and the title. It was very difficult for Miss Morveen.

"Captain Solby brought her here on May twenty-eighth, 1918—it was the last night of his leave—and he asked her to marry him. She told him she could not. She had secretly married Captain Blayne two months before. Lord Solby went back to France, and they said he did not seem to care whether he was killed or not. But it was Captain Blayne who was killed, a few weeks later.

"On the next May twenty-eighth, the war was over, and Lord Solby brought Mrs. Blayne here again. All evening, Lord Solby pleaded with her, but she would shake her head. Lord Solby has become an important man in some big companies, and he speaks in the House of Lords. But he has never married. Every year he brings Mrs. Blayne here, but it is always the same. It is very romantic, very sad, you see."

"Is it quite hopeless?" Jean asked. "Will they never marry?"

Jules shrugged. "Ladies' minds change, but when one has said no for more than thirty years—" He broke off. "Excuse me, mademoiselle, monsieur." He moved quickly toward the front of the restaurant. A moment later, he reappeared, leading a couple toward the table Eliot and Jean had vacated. The man was tall and thin, with an ascetic face and silvery hair. The woman was carefully tended. Her face was smooth; her fair hair looked natural. She carried perhaps a little more weight than she wished, but it was easy to re-create her former prettiness.

Jules bowed them into their seats and summoned the table waiter with an imperious flourish.

Jean studied them. "You can see *he's* had a sad life," she said. She watched Mrs. Blayne arrange herself with calm assurance, as though she were unaware of the eyes upon her, and smile at her escort. His attempt to return the smile was bleak.

"It's not fair." Jean said. "After she said no she should have cut it clean—if she meant it."

"She seems to have meant it," said Eliot. "Maybe he's the kind of guy that just doesn't know the word." He was not much interested in the couple. First they had taken his table; now they seemed to be taking all Jean's attention. She kept glancing across the room and responding with a bright inappropriateness to some of his remarks. She cut right across one to say: "Look! I think they've got to it. I'm sure he's proposing now."

Eliot looked over irritably. He watched the man's lips for a moment. "If you'd really like to know—" he began. Then he stopped. He'd always felt that knowledge which reached him through his professional abilities was in the nature of a confidence. Luckily, Jean had not heard him. Her attention was all on the couple. The man had finished speaking and was waiting for the woman's reply with anxious attention. She looked up thoughtfully. She shook her head ever so slightly; her lips moved.

"No," Jean murmured. "She said no."

The woman said something more, slowly and deliberately. A gray, pinched look came over the man's face. For several seconds, he looked at her without moving. Then he stood up, bowed slightly, and walked out of the room.

Jean's hand clenched on the table. "It's too bad, too bad! All because of a man who's been dead thirty years. It's *wrong* of her."

"It's not our affair," said Eliot, and he did his best to change the subject.

FROM somewhere outside came a sound like a door slamming. Jules, looking disapproving, hurried to investigate. A minute or two later, he came back, his expression too bland to be true. Unhurriedly, he made his way to the corner and spoke to Mrs. Blayne. She collected her belongings calmly, and followed him out.

When he reappeared, Eliot beckoned him over. "Lord Solby?" he inquired in a low voice.

"A slight accident, monsieur," Jules said.

"I know the sound of a pistol when I hear one. Is he dead?"

Jules leaned closer. "Yes, monsieur. But please—"

"Okay. We won't mention it."

"Thank you, monsieur. Not good for business, you understand." He moved away.

"Oh, dear," Jean said, inadequately. Eliot poured her some wine. She drank it gratefully, and set the glass down with a shaky hand. "I didn't know men could love women as much as that," she said. "Thirty years of hoping, and then this! If she couldn't love him, she should have sent him away."

"Un-huh," said Eliot. If he had been in any other profession than the one he was in, he might have made a more satisfactory comment. But the last thing his trained observation had understood Mrs. Blayne's lips to say was: "No, John. I feel like settling down now. It'll probably cost you a lot less, too, when you do marry me. Remember, I still have only to tell them what *really* happened to Charles in France..."

[The end of *Affair of the Heart* by John Wyndham]