

One of My Oldest Friends, F. Scott Fitzgerald

All afternoon Marion had been happy. She wandered from room to room of their little apartment, strolling into the nursery to help the nurse-girl feed the children from dripping spoons, and then reading for a while on their new sofa, the most extravagant thing they had bought in their five years of marriage.

When she heard Michael's step in the hall she turned her head and listened; she liked to hear him walk, carefully always as if there were children sleeping close by.

"Michael."

"Oh-hello." He came into the room, a tall, broad, thin man of thirty with a high forehead and kind black eyes.

"I've got some news for you," he said immediately. "Charley Hart's getting married."

"No!"

He nodded.

"Who's he marrying?"

"One of the little Lawrence girls from home." He hesitated. "She's arriving in New York to-morrow and I think we ought to do something for them while she's here. Charley's about my oldest friend."

"Let's have them up for dinner—"

"I'd like to do something more than that," he interrupted. "Maybe a theater party. You see—" Again he hesitated. "It'd be a nice courtesy to Charley."

"All right," agreed Marion, "but we musn't spend much—and I don't think we're under any obligation."

He looked at her in surprise.

"I mean," went on Marion, "we—we hardly see Charley any more. We hardly ever see him at all."

"Well, you know how it is in New York," explained Michael apologetically. "He's just as busy as I am. He has made a big name for himself and I suppose he's pretty much in demand all the time."

They always spoke of Charley Hart as their oldest friend. Five years before, when Michael and Marion were first married, the three of them had come to New York from the same Western city. For over a year they had seen Charley nearly every day and no domestic adventure, no uprush of their hopes and dreams, was too insignificant for his ear. His arrival in

times of difficulty never failed to give a pleasant, humorous cast to the situation.

Of course Marion's babies had made a difference, and it was several years now since they had called up Charley at midnight to say that the pipes had broken or the ceiling was falling in on their heads; but so gradually had they drifted apart that Michael still spoke of Charley rather proudly as if he saw him every day. For a while Charley dined with them once a month and all three found a great deal to say; but the meetings never broke up any more with, "I'll give you a ring to-morrow." Instead it was, "You'll have to come to dinner more often," or even, after three or four years, "We'll see you soon."

"Oh, I'm perfectly willing to give a little party," said Marion now, looking speculatively about her. "Did you suggest a definite date?"

"Week from Saturday." His dark eyes roamed the floor vaguely. "We can take up the rugs or something."

"No." She shook her head. "We'll have a dinner, eight people, very formal and everything, and afterwards we'll play cards."

She was already speculating on whom to invite. Charley of course, being an artist, probably saw interesting people every day.

"We could have the Willoughbys," she suggested doubtfully. "She's on the stage or something—and he writes movies."

"No—that's not it," objected Michael. "He probably meets that crowd at lunch and dinner every day until he's sick of them. Besides, except for the Willoughbys, who else like that do we know? I've got a better idea. Let's collect a few people who've drifted down here from home. They've all followed Charley's career and they'd probably enjoy seeing him again. I'd like them to find out how natural and unspoiled he is after all."

After some discussion they agreed on this plan and within an hour Marion had her first guest on the telephone:

"It's to meet Charley Hart's fiancée," she explained. "Charley Hart, the artist. You see, he's one of our oldest friends."

As she began her preparations her enthusiasm grew. She rented a serving-maid to assure an impeccable service and persuaded the neighborhood florist to come in person and arrange the flowers. All the "people from home" had accepted eagerly and the number of guests had swollen to ten.

"What'll we talk about, Michael?" she demanded nervously on the eve of the party. "Suppose everything goes wrong and everybody gets mad and goes home?"

He laughed.

"Nothing will. You see, these people all know each other—"

The phone on the table asserted itself and Michael picked up the receiver.

"Hello... why, hello, Charley."

Marion sat up alertly in her chair.

"Is that so? Well, I'm very sorry. I'm very, very sorry... I hope it's nothing serious."

"Can't he come?" broke out Marion.

"Sh!" Then into the phone, "Well, it certainly is too bad, Charley. No, it's no trouble for us at all. We're just sorry you're ill."

With a dismal gesture Michael replaced the receiver.

"The Lawrence girl had to go home last night and Charley's sick in bed with grip."

"Do you mean he can't come?"

"He can't come."

Marion's face contracted suddenly and her eyes filled with tears.

"He says he's had the doctor all day," explained Michael dejectedly. "He's got fever and they didn't even want him to go to the telephone."

"I don't care," sobbed Marion. "I think it's terrible. After we've invited all these people to meet him."

"People can't help being sick."

"Yes they can," she wailed illogically, "they can help it some way. And if the Lawrence girl was going to leave last night why didn't he let us know then?"

"He said she left unexpectedly. Up to yesterday afternoon they both intended to come."

"I don't think he c-cares a bit. I'll bet he's glad he's sick. If he'd cared he'd have brought her to see us long ago."

She stood up suddenly.

"I'll tell you one thing," she assured him vehemently, "I'm just going to telephone everybody and call the whole thing off."

"Why, Marion—"

But in spite of his half-hearted protests she picked up the phone book and began looking for the first number.

They bought theater tickets next day hoping to fill the hollowness which would invest the evening. Marion had wept when the unintercepted florist arrived at five with boxes of flowers and she felt that she must get out of the house to avoid the ghosts who would presently people it. In silence they ate an elaborate dinner composed of all the things that she had bought for the party.

"It's only eight," said Michael afterwards, "I think it'd be sort of nice if we dropped in on Charley for a minute, don't you?"

"Why, no," Marion answered, startled, "I wouldn't think of it."

"Why not? If he's seriously sick I'd like to see how well he's being taken care of."

She saw that he had made up his mind, so she fought down her instinct against the idea and they taxied to a tall pile of studio apartments on Madison Avenue.

"You go on in," urged Marion nervously, "I'd rather wait out here."

"Please come in."

"Why? He'll be in bed and he doesn't want any women around."

"But he'd like to see you—it'd cheer him up. And he'd know that we understood about to-night. He sounded awfully depressed over the phone."

He urged her from the cab.

"Let's only stay a minute," she whispered tensely as they went up in the elevator. "The show starts at half past eight."

"Apartment on the right," said the elevator man.

They rang the bell and waited. The door opened and they walked directly into Charley Hart's great studio room.

It was crowded with people; from end to end ran a long lamp-lit dinner table strewn with ferns and young roses, from which a gay murmur of laughter and conversation arose into the faintly smoky air. Twenty women in evening dress sat on one side in a row chatting across the flowers at twenty men, with an elation born of the sparkling Burgundy which dripped from many bottles into thin chilled glass. Up on the high narrow balcony which encircled the room a string quartet was playing something by Stravinski in a key that was pitched just below the women's voices and filled the air like an audible wine.

The door had been opened by one of the waiters, who stepped back deferentially from what he thought were two belated guests— and immediately a handsome man at the head of the table started to his feet, napkin in hand, and stood motionless, staring toward the newcomers. The conversation faded into half silence and all eyes followed Charley Hart's

to the couple at the door. Then, as if the spell was broken, conversation resumed, gathering momentum word by word—the moment was over.

"Let's get out!" Marion's low, terrified whisper came to Michael out of a void and for a minute he thought he was possessed by an illusion, that there was no one but Charley in the room after all. Then his eyes cleared and he saw that there were many people here—he had never seen so many! The music swelled suddenly into the tumult of a great brass band and a wind from the loud horns seemed to blow against them; without turning he and Marion each made one blind step backward into the hall, pulling the door to after them.

"Marion—!"

She had run toward the elevator, stood with one finger pressed hard against the bell which rang through the hall like a last high note from the music inside. The door of the apartment opened suddenly and Charley Hart came out into the hall.

"Michael!" he cried, "Michael and Marion, I want to explain! Come inside. I want to explain, I tell you."

He talked excitedly—his face was flushed and his mouth formed a word or two that did not materialize into sound.

"Hurry up, Michael," came Marion's voice tensely from the elevator.

"Let me explain," cried Charley frantically. "I want—"

Michael moved away from him—the elevator came and the gate clanged open.

"You act as if I'd committed some crime." Charley was following Michael along the hall. "Can't you understand that this is all an accidental situation?"

"It's all right," Michael muttered, "I understand."

"No, you don't." Charley's voice rose with exasperation. He was working up anger against them so as to justify his own intolerable position. "You're going away mad and I asked you to come in and join the party. Why did you come up here if you won't come in? Did you—?"

Michael walked into the elevator.

"Down, please!" cried Marion. "Oh, I want to go down, please!"

The gates clanged shut.

They told the taxi-man to take them directly home—neither of them could have endured the theater. Driving uptown to their apartment, Michael buried his face in his hands and tried to realize that the friendship which had meant so much to him was over. He saw now that it had been over for some time, that not once during the past year had Charley sought

their company and the shock of the discovery far outweighed the affront he had received.

When they reached home, Marion, who had not said a word in the taxi, led the way into the living-room and motioned for her husband to sit down.

"I'm going to tell you something that you ought to know," she said. "If it hadn't been for what happened to-night I'd probably never have told you—but now I think you ought to hear the whole story." She hesitated. "In the first place, Charley Hart wasn't a friend of yours at all."

"What?" He looked up at her dully.

"He wasn't your friend," she repeated. "He hasn't been for years. He was a friend of mine."

"Why, Charley Hart was—"

"I know what you're going to say—that Charley was a friend to both of us. But it isn't true. I don't know how he considered you at first but he stopped being your friend three or four years ago."

"Why—" Michael's eyes glowed with astonishment. "If that's true, why was he with us all the time?"

"On account of me," said Marion steadily. "He was in love with me."

"What?" Michael laughed incredulously. "You're imagining things. I know how he used to pretend in a kidding way—"

"It wasn't kidding," she interrupted, "not underneath. It began that way—and it ended by his asking me to run away with him."

Michael frowned.

"Go on," he said quietly, "I suppose this is true or you wouldn't be telling me about it—but it simply doesn't seem real. Did he just suddenly begin to—to—"

He closed his mouth suddenly, unable to say the words.

"It began one night when we three were out dancing," Marion hesitated. "And at first I thoroughly enjoyed it. He had a faculty for noticing things—noticing dresses and hats and the new ways I'd do my hair. He was good company. He could always make me feel important, somehow, and attractive. Don't get the idea that I preferred his company to yours—I didn't. I knew how completely selfish he was, and what a will-o'-the-wisp. But I encouraged him, I suppose—I thought it was fine. It was a new angle on Charley, and he was amusing at it just as he was at everything he did."

"Yes—" agreed Michael with an effort, "I suppose it was—hilariously amusing."

"At first he liked you just the same. It didn't occur to him that he was doing anything treacherous to you. He was just following a natural impulse—that was all. But after a few weeks he began to find you in the way. He wanted to take me to dinner without you along—and it couldn't be done. Well, that sort of thing went on for over a year."

"What happened then?"

"Nothing happened. That's why he stopped coming to see us any more."

Michael rose slowly to his feet.

"Do you mean—"

"Wait a minute. If you'll think a little you'll see it was bound to turn out that way. When he saw that I was trying to let him down easily so that he'd be simply one of our oldest friends again, he broke away. He didn't want to be one of our oldest friends—that time was over."

"I see."

"Well—" Marion stood up and began biting nervously at her lip, "that's all. I thought this thing to-night would hurt you less if you understood the whole affair."

"Yes," Michael answered in a dull voice, "I suppose that's true."

Michael's business took a prosperous turn, and when summer came they went to the country, renting a little old farmhouse where the children played all day on a tangled half acre of grass and trees. The subject of Charley was never mentioned between them and as the months passed he receded to a shadowy background in their minds. Sometimes, just before dropping off to sleep, Michael found himself thinking of the happy times the three of them had had together five years before—then the reality would intrude upon the illusion and he would be repelled from the subject with almost physical distaste.

One warm evening in July he lay dozing on the porch in the twilight. He had had a hard day at his office and it was welcome to rest here while the summer light faded from the land.

At the sound of an automobile he raised his head lazily. At the end of the path a local taxicab had stopped and a young man was getting out. With an exclamation Michael sat up. Even in the dusk he recognized those shoulders, that impatient walk—

"Well, I'm damned," he said softly.

As Charley Hart came up the gravel path Michael noticed in a glance that he was unusually disheveled. His handsome face was drawn and tired, his clothes were out of press and he had the unmistakable look of needing a good night's sleep.

He came up on the porch, saw Michael and smiled in a wan, embarrassed way.

"Hello, Michael."

Neither of them made any move to shake hands but after a moment Charley collapsed abruptly into a chair.

"I'd like a glass of water," he said huskily, "it's hot as hell."

Without a word Michael went into the house—returned with a glass of water which Charley drank in great noisy gulps.

"Thanks," he said, gasping, "I thought I was going to pass away."

He looked about him with eyes that only pretended to take in his surroundings.

"Nice little place you've got here," he remarked; his eyes returned to Michael. "Do you want me to get out?"

"Why—no. Sit and rest if you want to. You look all in."

"I am. Do you want to hear about it?"

"Not in the least."

"Well, I'm going to tell you anyhow," said Charley defiantly. "That's what I came out here for. I'm in trouble, Michael, and I haven't got anybody to go to except you."

"Have you tried your friends?" asked Michael coolly.

"I've tried about everybody—everybody I've had time to go to. God!" He wiped his forehead with his hand. "I never realized how hard it was to raise a simple two thousand dollars."

"Have you come to me for two thousand dollars?"

"Wait a minute, Michael. Wait till you hear. It just shows you what a mess a man can get into without meaning any harm. You see, I'm the treasurer of a society called the Independent Artists' Benefit—a thing to help struggling students. There was a fund, thirty-five hundred dollars, and it's been lying in my bank for over a year. Well, as you know, I live pretty high—make a lot and spend a lot—and about a month ago I began speculating a little through a friend of mine—"

"I don't know why you're telling me all this," interrupted Michael impatiently, "I—"

"Wait a minute, won't you—I'm almost through." He looked at Michael with frightened eyes. "I used that money sometimes without even realizing that it wasn't mine. I've always had plenty of my own, you see. Till this week," he hesitated, "this week there was a meeting of this society and



they asked me to turn over the money. Well, I went to a couple of men to try and borrow it and as soon as my back was turned one of them blabbed. There was a terrible blow-up last night. They told me unless I handed over the two thousand this morning they'd send me to jail—" His voice rose and he looked around wildly. "There's a warrant out for me now—and if I can't get the money I'll kill myself, Michael; I swear to God I will; I won't go to prison. I'm an artist—not a business man. I—"

He made an effort to control his voice.

"Michael," he whispered, "you're my oldest friend. I haven't got anyone in the world but you to turn to."

"You're a little late," said Michael uncomfortably, "you didn't think of me four years ago when you asked my wife to run away with you."

A look of sincere surprise passed over Charley's face.

"Are you mad at me about that?" he asked in a puzzled way. "I thought you were mad because I didn't come to your party."

Michael did not answer.

"I supposed she'd told you about that long ago," went on Charley. "I couldn't help it about Marion. I was lonesome and you two had each other. Every time I went to your house you'd tell me what a wonderful girl Marion was and finally I—I began to agree with you. How could I help falling in love with her, when for a year and a half she was the only decent girl I knew?" He looked defiantly at Michael. "Well, you've got her, haven't you. I didn't take her away. I never so much as kissed her—do you have to rub it in?"

"Look here," said Michael sharply, "just why should I lend you this money?"

"Well—" Charley hesitated, laughed uneasily, "I don't know any exact reason. I just thought you would."

"Why should I?"

"No reason at all, I suppose, from your way of looking at it."

"That's the trouble. If I gave it to you it would just be because I was slushy and soft. I'd be doing something that I don't want to do."

"All right," Charley smiled unpleasantly, "that's logical. Now that I think, there's no reason why you should lend it to me. Well—" he shoved his hands into his coat pocket and throwing his head back slightly seemed to shake the subject off like a cap, "I won't go to prison—and maybe you'll feel differently about it to-morrow."

"Don't count on that."

"Oh, I don't mean I'll ask you again. I mean something—quite different."

He nodded his head, turned quickly and walking down the gravel path was swallowed up in the darkness. Where the path met the road Michael heard his footsteps cease as if he were hesitating. Then they turned down the road toward the station a mile away.

Michael sank into his chair, burying his face in his hands. He heard Marion come out the door.

"I listened," she whispered, "I couldn't help it. I'm glad you didn't lend him anything."

She came close to him and would have sat down in his lap but an almost physical repulsion came over him and he got up quickly from his chair.

"I was afraid he'd work on your sentiment and make a fool of you," went on Marion. She hesitated. "He hated you, you know. He used to wish you'd die. I told him that if he ever said so to me again I'd never see him any more."

Michael looked up at her darkly.

"In fact, you were very noble."

"Why, Michael—"

"You let him say things like that to you—and then when he comes here, down and out, without a friend in the world to turn to, you say you're glad I sent him away."

"It's because I love you, dear—"

"No, it isn't!" He interrupted savagely. "It's because hate's cheap in this world. Everybody's got it for sale. My God! What do you suppose I think of myself now?"

"He's not worth feeling that way about."

"Please go away!" cried Michael passionately. "I want to be alone."

Obediently she left him and he sat down again in the darkness of the porch, a sort of terror creeping over him. Several times he made a motion to get up but each time he frowned and remained motionless. Then after another long while he jumped suddenly to his feet, cold sweat starting from his forehead. The last hour, the months just passed, were washed away and he was swept years back in time. Why, they were after Charley Hart, his old friend. Charley Hart who had come to him because he had no other place to go. Michael began to run hastily about the porch in a daze, hunting for his hat and coat.

"Why Charley!" he cried aloud.

He found his coat finally and, struggling into it, ran wildly down the steps. It seemed to him that Charley had gone out only a few minutes before.

"Charley!" he called when he reached the road, "Charley, come back here. There's been a mistake!"

He paused, listening. There was no answer. Panting a little he began to run doggedly along the road through the hot night.

It was only half past eight o'clock but the country was very quiet and the frogs were loud in the strip of wet marsh that ran along beside the road. The sky was salted thinly with stars and after a while there would be a moon, but the road ran among dark trees and Michael could scarcely see ten feet in front of him. After a while he slowed down to a walk, glancing at the phosphorous dial of his wrist watch—the New York train was not due for an hour. There was plenty of time.

In spite of this he broke into an uneasy run and covered the mile between his house and the station in fifteen minutes. It was a little station, crouched humbly beside the shining rails in the darkness. Beside it Michael saw the lights of a single taxi waiting for the next train.

The platform was deserted and Michael opened the door and peered into the dim waiting-room. It was empty.

"That's funny," he muttered.

Rousing a sleepy taxi driver, he asked if there had been anyone waiting for the train. The taxi driver considered—yes, there had been a young man waiting, about twenty minutes ago. He had walked up and down for a while, smoking a cigarette, and then gone away into the darkness.

"That's funny," repeated Michael. He made a megaphone of his hands and facing toward the wood across the track shouted aloud.

"Charley!"

There was no answer. He tried again. Then he turned back to the driver.

"Have you any idea what direction he went?"

The man pointed vaguely down the New York road which ran along beside the railroad track.

"Down there somewhere."

With increasing uneasiness Michael thanked him and started swiftly along the road which was white now under the risen moon. He knew now as surely as he knew anything that Charley had gone off by himself to die. He remembered the expression on his face as he had turned away and the hand tucked down close in his coat pocket as if it clutched some menacing thing.

"Charley!" he called in a terrible voice.

The dark trees gave back no sound. He walked on past a dozen fields bright as silver under the moon, pausing every few minutes to shout and then waiting tensely for an answer.

It occurred to him that it was foolish to continue in this direction—Charley was probably back by the station in the woods somewhere. Perhaps it was all imagination, perhaps even now Charley was pacing the station platform waiting for the train from the city. But some impulse beyond logic made him continue. More than that—several times he had the sense that someone was in front of him, someone who just eluded him at every turning, out of sight and earshot, yet leaving always behind him a dim, tragic aura of having passed that way. Once he thought he heard steps among the leaves on the side of the road but it was only a piece of vagrant newspaper blown by the faint hot wind.

It was a stifling night—the moon seemed to be beating hot rays down upon the sweltering earth. Michael took off his coat and threw it over his arm as he walked. A little way ahead of him now was a stone bridge over the tracks and beyond that an interminable line of telephone poles which stretched in diminishing perspective toward an endless horizon. Well, he would walk to the bridge and then give up. He would have given up before except for this sense he had that someone was walking very lightly and swiftly just ahead.

Reaching the stone bridge he sat down on a rock, his heart beating in loud exhausted thumps under his dripping shirt. Well, it was hopeless—Charley was gone, perhaps out of range of his help forever. Far away beyond the station he heard the approaching siren of the nine-thirty train.

Michael found himself wondering suddenly why he was here. He despised himself for being here. On what weak chord in his nature had Charley played in those few minutes, forcing him into this senseless, frightened run through the night? They had discussed it all and Charley had been unable to give a reason why he should be helped.

He got to his feet with the idea of retracing his steps but before turning he stood for a minute in the moonlight looking down the road. Across the track stretched the line of telephone poles and, as his eyes followed them as far as he could see, he heard again, louder now and not far away, the siren of the New York train which rose and fell with musical sharpness on the still night. Suddenly his eyes, which had been traveling down the tracks, stopped and were focused suddenly upon one spot in the line of poles, perhaps a quarter of a mile away. It was a pole just like the others and yet it was different—there was something about it that was indescribably different.

And watching it as one might concentrate on some figure in the pattern of a carpet, something curious happened in his mind and instantly he saw everything in a completely different light. Something had come to him in a whisper of the breeze, something that changed the whole complexion of the situation. It was this: He remembered having read somewhere that at

some point back in the dark ages a man named Gerbert had all by himself summed up the whole of European civilization. It became suddenly plain to Michael that he himself had just now been in a position like that. For one minute, one spot in time, all the mercy in the world had been vested in him.

He realized all this in the space of a second with a sense of shock and instantly he understood the reason why he should have helped Charley Hart. It was because it would be intolerable to exist in a world where there was no help—where any human being could be as alone as Charley had been alone this afternoon.

Why, that was it, of course—he had been trusted with that chance. Someone had come to him who had no other place to go—and he had failed.

All this time, this moment, he had been standing utterly motionless staring at the telephone pole down the track, the one that his eye had picked out as being different from the others. The moon was so bright now that near the top he could see a white bar set crosswise on the pole and as he looked the pole and the bar seemed to have become isolated as if the other poles had shrunk back and away.

Suddenly a mile down the track he heard the click and clamor of the electric train when it left the station, and as if the sound had startled him into life he gave a short cry and set off at a swaying run down the road, in the direction of the pole with the crossed bar.

The train whistled again. Click—click—click—it was nearer now, six hundred, five hundred yards away and as it came under the bridge he was running in the bright beam of its searchlight. There was no emotion in his mind but terror—he knew only that he must reach that pole before the train, and it was fifty yards away, struck out sharp as a star against the sky.

There was no path on the other side of the tracks under the poles but the train was so close now that he dared wait no longer or he would be unable to cross at all. He darted from the road, cleared the tracks in two strides and with the sound of the engine at his heels raced along the rough earth. Twenty feet, thirty feet—as the sound of the electric train swelled to a roar in his ears he reached the pole and threw himself bodily on a man who stood there close to the tracks, carrying him heavily to the ground with the impact of his body.

There was the thunder of steel in his ear, the heavy clump of the wheels on the rails, a swift roaring of air, and the nine-thirty train had gone past.

"Charley," he gasped incoherently, "Charley."

A white face looked up at him in a daze. Michael rolled over on his back and lay panting. The hot night was quiet now—there was no sound but the far-away murmur of the receding train.

"Oh, God!"

Michael opened his eyes to see that Charley was sitting up, his face in his hands.

"S'all right," gasped Michael, "s'all right, Charley. You can have the money. I don't know what I was thinking about. Why—why, you're one of my oldest friends."

Charley shook his head.

"I don't understand," he said brokenly. "Where did you come from—how did you get here?"

"I've been following you. I was just behind."

"I've been here for half an hour."

"Well, it's good you chose this pole to—to wait under. I've been looking at it from down by the bridge. I picked it out on account of the crossbar."

Charley had risen unsteadily to his feet and now he walked a few steps and looked up the pole in the full moonlight.

"What did you say?" he asked after a minute, in a puzzled voice. "Did you say this pole had a crossbar?"

"Why, yes. I was looking at it a long time. That's how—"

Charley looked up again and hesitated curiously before he spoke.

"There isn't any crossbar," he said.

The story was written in Great Neck in March 1924. When Fitzgerald sent it to Ober he noted, "Here's the revised story. I don't know what to think of it but I'd rather not offer it to the Post. The ending is effective but a little sensational." It was published in *Woman's Home Companion*, September 1925. The story was included in *The World's Best Short Stories of 1926* and was probably syndicated in newspapers, as short stories often were at that time.