**October and June**

O. Henry

The Captain gazed gloomily at his sword that hung upon the wall. In the closet near by was stored his faded uniform, stained and worn by weather and service. What a long, long time it seemed since those old days of war’s alarms!

And now, veteran that he was of his country’s strenuous times, he had been reduced to abject surrender by a woman’s soft eyes and smiling lips. As he sat in his quiet room he held in his hand the letter he had just received from her—the letter that had caused him to wear that look of gloom. He re-read the fatal paragraph that had destroyed his hope.

In declining the honour you have done me in asking me to be your wife, I feel that I ought to speak frankly. The reason I have for so doing is the great difference between our ages. I like you very, very much, but I am sure that our marriage would not be a happy one. I am sorry to have to refer to this, but I believe that you will appreciate my honesty in giving you the true reason.

The Captain sighed, and leaned his head upon his hand. Yes, there were many years between their ages. But he was strong and rugged, he had position and wealth. Would not his love, his tender care, and the advantages he could bestow upon her make her forget the question of age? Besides, he was almost sure that she cared for him.

The Captain was a man of prompt action. In the field he had been distinguished for his decisiveness and energy. He would see her and plead his cause again in person. Age!—what was it to come between him and the one he loved?

In two hours he stood ready, in light marching order, for his greatest battle. He took the train for the old Southern town in Tennessee where she lived.

Theodora Deming was on the steps of the handsome, porticoed old mansion, enjoying the summer twilight, when the Captain entered the gate and came up the gravelled walk. She met him with a smile that was free from embarrassment. As the Captain stood on the step below her, the difference in their ages did not appear so great. He was tall and straight and clear-eyed and browned. She was in the bloom of lovely womanhood.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” said Theodora; “but now that you’ve come you may sit on the step. Didn’t you get my letter?”

“I did,” said the Captain; “and that’s why I came. I say, now, Theo, reconsider your answer, won’t you?”

Theodora smiled softly upon him. He carried his years well. She was really fond of his strength, his wholesome looks, his manliness—perhaps, if—

“No, no,” she said, shaking her head, positively; “it’s out of the question. I like you a whole lot, but marrying won’t do. My age and yours are—but don’t make me say it again—I told you in my letter.”

The Captain flushed a little through the bronze on his face. He was silent for a while, gazing sadly into the twilight. Beyond a line of woods that he could see was a field where the boys in blue had once bivouacked on their march toward the sea. How long ago it seemed now! Truly, Fate and Father Time had tricked him sorely. Just a few years interposed between himself and happiness!

Theodora’s hand crept down and rested in the clasp of his firm, brown one. She felt, at least, that sentiment that is akin to love.

“Don’t take it so hard, please,” she said, gently. “It’s all for the best. I’ve reasoned it out very wisely all by myself. Some day you’ll be glad I didn’t marry you. It would be very nice and lovely for a while—but, just think! In only a few short years what different tastes we would have! One of us would want to sit by the fireside and read, and maybe nurse neuralgia or rheumatism of evenings, while the other would be crazy for balls and theatres and late suppers. No, my dear friend. While it isn’t exactly January and May, it’s a clear case of October and pretty early in June.”

“I’d always do what you wanted me to do, Theo. If you wanted to—”

“No, you wouldn’t. You think now that you would, but you wouldn’t. Please don’t ask me any more.”

The Captain had lost his battle. But he was a gallant warrior, and when he rose to make his final adieu his mouth was grimly set and his shoulders were squared.

He took the train for the North that night. On the next evening he was back in his room, where his sword was hanging against the wall. He was dressing for dinner, tying his white tie into a very careful bow. And at the same time he was indulging in a pensive soliloquy.

“‘Pon my honour, I believe Theo was right, after all. Nobody can deny that she’s a peach, but she must be twenty-eight, at the very kindest calculation.”

For you see, the Captain was only nineteen, and his sword had never been drawn except on the parade ground at Chattanooga, which was as near as he ever got to the Spanish-American War.