

# **Better Than Expected**

**by**

**Steven R. James**

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**A short story by Steven R. James**

## Better Than Expected

Well, if you really want to know, I will have to tell the whole story for you to understand it and that will take a few minutes. Sit back, if I am going to tell it, I am going to have another glass of tea...

I was 18 when my father died. I had an older brother Hank that was in the Army. He came home for a few weeks after father died to help us tie up loose ends, but he was stationed overseas at the time and it took him so long to come home he missed the funeral. We saw Hank every few years, mostly around Christmas, until he retired from the Army and settled down up north. He married a girl from up north and went to work for a company as a salesman, so over time we saw less and less of Hank. That left me to care for mother and the farm.

We had a farmhand named Jackson that was sort of the foreman. He oversaw most of the farm work and the other farmhands that came and went. I couldn't go away to college since Hank was away in the Army and I was all mother had, so I read a lot and even took some courses by mail. That was new back then. I guess you could say I am a self educated man. Spending a lot of time by myself you might say I did a lot of thinking and some planning.

I was pretty much satisfied to work a little on the farm, take care of mother and do some odd project or experiment from time to time. Years passed and I was still the farmer's son and my mother's guardian. The farm wasn't all that big but father had managed to pay for it and what we made we were able to keep after the planting expenses. We were well off enough and with Jackson to manage the farm I had some free time to plant some new crop, you know I was the first to raise peanuts around here, or order some new equipment or merchandise to test and to sell to the neighbors and still there was time to do my reading and planning.

One day I went to town to buy some things at the hardware store and mail a letter from mother to aunt Sarah. Just as I was walking into the post office I came face to face with five feet and eight inches of Ruby Claire. Ruby Claire had brown hair with a reddish tint to it in the sun, eyes bluer than the winter sky on a cold clear morning and was wearing a dress like I had only seen in a catalog or on a poster outside the moving picture show. I stopped in my tracks.

After a while, just as I was about to regain my composure, Ruby Claire spoke, "Sir, when you have recovered sufficiently, I would like to go out through that doorway that you are standing in." I replied, "Oh, you wouldn't want to wait that long." I stepped on through the door and motioned to the now open doorway with my hand. I looked back to see her look back at me after she walked through the door.

I went up to the counter and bought a stamp for the letter. The postmaster was Charles Rogers. He was some kin to Will Rogers the entertainer and commentator or at least he claimed so. Without me saying a word about the woman Charlie told me all he knew. "That is Ruby Claire Fisher. She is a young widow just in town about a week. Her husband was killed in a train accident. She got some money from the train company and some other company involved."

"How could you possibly know all that and in just a week?" I asked. "Through my duties as a postmaster and by the fact that she is boarding at my sister's boarding house," he said. "Well, that explains that, the boarding house is no place to keep secrets. How did she wind up here?" Charlie told me he heard that she just started west looking for a place to make a new start and when she got off the train here she just didn't get back on. She sent for her things and here she is.

Ruby Claire caused quite a stir in our small town. Every single man and some not so single men were turning their heads as she went by. In time it settled down to two men that were serious contenders for the young widow Ruby Claire. One was the young Doctor Gilbert. He was trying to take over the practice of old Doctor Miller. Doc Miller was trying to retire and sell his practice, but he was so well established in the area that it was hard to get people to change over to Doctor Gilbert. Doctor

Gilbert didn't help matters any when he told people that weighed too much that they ate too much, people that drank too much that they drank too much and told some people that there wasn't anything wrong with them at all.

The other contender was Wendell Howard. Wendell just came into town one day looking for a job and Mr. Masters hired him as a clerk at the hardware store. Soon he was running the store for Mr. Masters. Wendell was pushy. When he waited on you, you felt like you were actually serving him instead of him serving you. If you wanted something simple he couldn't just get it for you, he had to ask you all kinds of questions. What were you using it for? What would be connected to it? Are you going to paint it? He often wound up selling you what he wanted to sell you instead of you buying what you went to buy. I suppose that is why Mr. Masters like him, he pushed a lot of merchandise off on people and that made Mr. Masters money.

Doctor Gilbert and Wendell had a heated round of competition and courtship over Ruby Claire, but soon Doctor Gilbert won out. You couldn't say that Wendell was a good loser either. There were several public and heated arguments between them even after Doctor Gilbert and Ruby Claire announced their engagement. The whole thing became a public circus. Ruby Claire couldn't do anything to stop them. It had ceased to be directly about her and had become a competition between two men about their manliness.

The wedding was set for a Saturday at the First Baptist Church in town. Being Baptist it was one of several Baptist Churches in the area, but it was by rights the first. The Methodist eventually built a bigger Church across the street, but it was no contest really since the Baptist had already built a building, so the Methodist knew exactly how large to make theirs to be the biggest Church building in town.

I was in town that day and I somehow just happened by the Church that morning and decided to sit in the back as they were rehearsing for the wedding. They were going through it as a practice. When they got to the part where the preacher says, "If anyone has a reason that these two shouldn't be wed, let him speak now or forever hold his peace" the preacher just skipped it. Wouldn't you know that Wendell was there. Wendell pointed out this oversight of the preacher. The preacher said that it was only a practice and it wasn't necessary. Doctor Gilbert commented that no one had better object. After this interruption they started again at the beginning. I seldom have opportunity to use the word perplexed, but the minister truly looked perplexed.

This time, when the preacher got to the point to ask for objections, Wendell did it for him. Standing to his feet he said, "If anyone knows any reason these two should not be wed let him speak now and I am speaking. This yellow livered Doctor ain't fit to wed anybody." Well, that broke up the tea party. Doctor Gilbert was on Wendell in a heartbeat, right in the Church building, yellow liver and all. I never had occasion to see the Doctor for medical treatment, so I can't say if he was a good Doctor. I can say he had a good right hook and Wendell was out cold on the Church floor.

When Wendell came to in about two or three minutes while the guests stood by almost as stunned, he rose to his feet with a small derringer in his hand and shot the good doctor before anyone could stop him. The good Doctor Gilbert dropped like a rock. We thought he was dead at first, but he was still breathing and a group of concerned citizens took him to his medical office looking for old Doc Miller. Doctor Miller was away in Warren visiting his sister. I heard that Doctor Miller thought if he was away for a while it would be easier for Doctor Gilbert to take over the practice. Why he missed the wedding I don't know. I have suspected that Doctor Gilbert was jealous of how the people felt toward Doctor Miller and he just didn't invite him or tell him about it. In a small town Doctor Miller would have known his partner was getting married and even the day it would happen, but if Doctor Gilbert didn't mention it I am sure Doctor Miller would have gotten the message that he wasn't wanted.

I think Doctor Miller probably did have a good idea that being away some would help Doctor Gilbert take over the practice. It might have worked too, at least it would have been easier for Doctor Gilbert to take over Doctor Miller's practice if Wendell had not shot him through the shoulder with a

derringer. The Doctor was not dead, he had only fainted. The town barber patched him up until Doc Miller could be sent for. In a month Doctor Gilbert had recovered enough to be back at work. Some say the emotional injury and embarrassment was worse than the bullet wound.

The sheriff took Wendell to jail. Most of the crowd left and I went up to Ruby Claire to offer my sympathy as she just stood there all alone in the Church. In all of the unscheduled activity of the day it was as if everyone forgot about her and the wedding. "Miss Fisher, may I offer my sympathy to you for the disturbance of your planned wedding and may I also say you are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen?" She looked at me for the longest time saying nothing. I am not sure she even breathed. Then she finally spoke, "Yes, you may. A woman should look beautiful in her wedding dress, don't you think?" I agreed and said, "I certainly do" but then I said, "Some wedding dresses make the woman look beautiful, but some women make the wedding dress look beautiful. In this case, you make that dress a very beautiful dress indeed!"

She just looked at me again motionless and in time she said, "Mr. Halsey, do you own a nice suit of clothes yourself?" I answered, "Yes Miss Fisher, I go to Church regularly and I would like to think I am suitably dressed for the occasion." "Well then," she started, "if it wouldn't be too much trouble, would you go home and put them on and return in about an hour with whatever friends and family you would care to bring to our wedding? My aunt and sister have to catch an afternoon train in just a few hours, so please hurry, if they ever come back from where they carried poor Jim I would like for them to be at my wedding. Not to mention the fact that these flowers and for that matter, I am not looking any better as time passes in this heat!"

My friend Paul Baker, the lawyer, was my best man. Many of the guests from the first attempt stayed for this wedding, after all it was a small town and everybody knew everybody. When I told mother the details she stood frozen like a statue for a few minutes and then she said, "Well, it is about time you got married" and quickly put on her Sunday best. It took a while to convince the preacher we were serious, but in time he relented and came out of his study and performed the ceremony and that is how I married your grandmother.

Wendell did a little over year in prison for attempted murder and when he got out he went to some other town. I never saw him again. He would have gotten a much stiffer sentence, but Doctor Gilbert didn't really press the matter and the judge took in consideration the peculiar circumstances and granted that to Wendell's account showing leniency and with good behavior Wendell was on the street in less than two years. After that I don't know what happened to him and to be honest, I really don't care.

Doctor Gilbert practiced medicine in town a few years and then sold the practice to a Doctor Williams. Doctor Williams did well at it. He didn't tell people that were over weight that they ate too much, he didn't tell people that drank too much that they drank too much and as far as he was concerned there was something wrong with everyone's health.

Mother went to live with her friend Mrs. Lyle in town for a few years after Ruby Claire and I were married. Mother said that newlyweds needed space and time alone. Later when her health became bad she moved back in with us and lived the rest of her life right here in this old house in that section over there that is the original part of the house. I think the fact that your grandmother had just had your father was another reason she was eager and willing to move back home.

I bought the hardware store from Mr. Masters after Wendell went to prison and I added some stores and built some warehouses for my stores and for merchandise for other stores and other companies. That is how I got into the hardware and then the department store and warehouse business.

"Now there is your mother at the door, Mary how are you?" "Fine Jim, what have you two been up to?" "Jimmy wanted to hear how I met and married grandma Meemee, I just told him the story." "Granddaddy Jim, I would like to hear that one myself." "I am sure your Big Jimmy can tell you sometime Mary." "Oh, but I would like to hear it from you and get the whole story." "Well, sometime Mary."

"Now don't be a stranger Mary and bring Jimmy back soon. We want to get in some fishing before the weather starts getting bad, don't we?" "Sure Granddaddy, we sure do!"

I closed the door and waved goodbye again through the glass. I had heard a noise in the kitchen. "Ruby Claire, I believe you have slipped in the back door on me, how long have you been here?" "Oh, Jim, I just brought in the groceries and I have been here long enough just to hear what happened to Gilbert and Wendell." "Well why didn't you come out here?" "Oh, I thought I would just put up the groceries and fix us a late snack, I met Mary at the store and knew she would soon be here and it would just be us left here tonight to eat, but they did get away while I went back to the car for my purse and I didn't get to say goodbye."

"Now, Jim Frank, I didn't want to interrupt you two men and your man talk, but it just seems to me that there are some details you left out!" "Nothing important I think Ruby, not that I can remember anyways." "Oh, I think getting Wendell drunk and incensed at Gilbert before the wedding was a very important detail you left out." "Ruby, I am deacon now, you don't want me to tell our grandson that I got anybody drunk do you?" "Or shot Jim, that you got someone shot too?" "Ruby, you know I always felt bad about that. I didn't know Wendell carried that little derringer." "Jim Frank, sometimes it wouldn't surprise me if you gave poor Wendell that derringer! I have been married long enough to you to know that if you want something you don't let things stand in your way."

"One more thing Jim Frank, why didn't you ever call on me? You know that would have saved a lot of trouble. You know I always liked you from that day in the post office." "Ruby, when I was young I entered a contest in the fair and I did very poorly against the other boys. It really hurt my self esteem. My uncle came to me and said, "Jim Frank, you are a fine young man. These other boys have just had experience you haven't had. It is not their first contest. People with experience always win these things. It has nothing to do with what kind of man you are." "I just didn't have any experience in contests over women, so I didn't think I could win going about it that way. I just thought I would have a little contest they didn't have experience at and that would even up the playing field."

Ruby paused and said, "Jim Frank, did you intend to get the hardware store too when you got me?"

"Well, really Ruby Claire! Now I didn't plan on Wendell shooting Gilbert, but let's just say the rest went better than expected."