

LOVE'S TEST.

"And, above all, Amy, send and keep Howard away. Remember you are pale and faded, while she is young and fair; you are frank and guileless, she is the most consummate flirt I ever saw. Forgive me if I speak too plainly. But a year ago I saw a heart broken, a lover false for this same siren's sake; and saw, too, the false wooer punished by her scorn; so my heart fears and trembles when I know your quiet dove-cot is to be invaded, and I risk even your frown to warn you."

I pondered over the sentence for nearly an hour, till every word seemed burned into my heart. I knew that it was not true affection that dictated the harsh lines; but my cousin Mabel, sored by disappointment, would have denied me the one ray of light in my cheerless life if she could have done so, and, failing in this, was only too ready to dash the poison of doubt into my cup of hope. Send Howard away! Where, on what pretext? Was I afraid to trust his love when he had so proved it?

Mine had been a strange, dreary life, and well might my cousin Mabel call me pale and faded. My parents were rigidly religious, training me, their only child, to abhor all levity as sin, all cheerful pleasures as temptations, and to view life as a period of harsh, stern training for eternity. From a mere babe my heart had rebelled against this creed. I loved light, flowers, music, and would sing, dance, and laugh whenever the frown or rebuke was beyond reach. Yet, as I grew older, my desires were cramped to the iron rule, and I scarcely dared to lift my eyes lest I should see some temptation to draw me from my narrow path of duty. My mother died when I had just completed my 16th year, and sorrow broke my father's heart and destroyed his mind. In their stern, grave fashion they had loved too truly for him to endure separation. At first he was only sad and silent, but his business was neglected; he grew more and more reserved, till a melancholy madness reduced him to a state of entire idiocy. So, at 17, I found myself poor, and with a helpless father dependent on me for support. I began a teacher's life, having a large circle of friends, and drilled babies through their A B C's all day, to sit beside my poor father and try to win one smile in the long evenings. Then Howard came! He was a distant relative of my dead mother, and came to reside near us to study medicine. It was opening a new life for me. His teaching drew me nearer to true religion than I had been in my old dreary life. I grew to love God, instead of fearing Him; to see in the gorgeous sunset, the tiny flower, the melody of the bird's carol, the evidences of His power and goodness, not temptations to idleness; and he showed me how the talents, sent from heaven, are not snares to our feet, if we bring their fruits humbly and offer them in the service of the Giver. I can never write what I owe Howard! His frank, sunny smile repaid me for my exertion; his voice, ringing music far down in my heart, encouraged me to every new effort. And if my pen began, by degrees, to win the crowd I had gained so hardly before; if the music in my heart, bursting into poetry, won for me name and gold, it was Howard who found out the hidden springs, Howard who waked the song to life.

Two years passed in a dream of delight, then Howard asked me to be his wife. He was going to India, with a missionary friend, to practice his profession and win a fortune for his bride, who was to await his return. I dared not bid him come! I dared not promise to leave my father, nor to burden him with such a heavy care; so, with a breaking heart I bade him go free. And now, after twelve years, he had come to me again. My father lay in the churchyard, and Howard had come home, rich and courted, to seek again his pale, plain cousin, and tell her of his constant love.

My cousin Mabel knew the story, and when she wrote to me of Kate Harrington's visit she knew how cruelly she was wounding me. This same Kate was a niece of my father, born in England, educated by turns in every large city in Europe, and now coming home on a visit to her kinsfolk. Mabel had met her in Paris, and she was with her when Kate took it into her wayward head to see the "old maid cousin" in B—, and wrote me her self-invited proposal. I could scarcely decline the visit, and my answer had drawn forth Mabel's letter.

It was useless to ponder over it, so I put it aside and tried to forget it. Yet, when in the evening I stood, circled by Howard's arms, by the mirror in my wee parlor, I felt the words stinging me. I was pale and faded. Fourteen years of toil and care had wasted my form, thinned my cheeks, and driven the luster from my eyes, while Howard had grown handsomer, broader, more manly, and graceful. I had let sorrow and hopelessness crush me, till, beside his vigorous manhood, I was a faded, worthless flower.

He saw that I was sad, and was more than usually bright and cheerful, till I found myself talking of books and papers with my old time relish.

Kate came the next day, and I laughed at my fears. I had fancied her a tall brunette, with dashing manners and marvelous beauty; she was a fair, pretty girl, with large, gray eyes, soft brown hair, and quiet, almost shy manners. As for flirting with Howard, she hardly noticed him.

With her shy, graceful manners, her gentle touch, her soft, beseeching eyes, she fairly magnetized me, and when she had lulled every doubt, driven back each suspicion, she began her game. I knew now how she lost her heart to Howard. She fully appreciated his talents, beauty, and manly, and, above all, his wealth. Brought up to worship gold, she bowed

down in spirit before his bank account and determined to win him.

I understand now, though I did not then, the soft cooling voice in which she invariably addressed Howard; the deference to his opinions; the gentle feminine ways she affected for him. Every art of dress, too, was brought into play. Then walks were planned at hours when she knew I was engaged, she would watch for him, and, at last, painfully and slowly, I awoke to the truth. I saw how her voice in song held Howard enthralled; I marked how deferential his tone was to her; and I clasped my misery closer into my heart and drew aside from the unequal contest. What was I, to battle for my love with her? No; better to let my crushed heart die silently than to give him pain by showing its bleeding agony.

I remember well one evening when, with no light but the rays the full moon poured into the room, Kate sat down to the piano. Softly, like a far off echo of dreamland, the notes trickled from the pliant fingers; dreamily, with the cadences melting into one another, she played one of Beethoven's symphonies, the heavy bass chords softened and mellowed, the no harsh burst should break the soothing spell. I, who could never master the intricacies of instrumental music, and who considered it a feat to play the accompaniments of a song, listened wondering to the marvelous command she had won over the keys, till the soothing spell held me quiet, lost, wrapt in the delicious harmonies.

A long sigh from Howard roused me. He, too, loved music, and I could see by the moonlight how he was drinking in these sweet sounds. Softly I stole away. After a time the music ceased, and still I was long before I heard him go out. Then, flushed and triumphant, Kate came to my side. Her goodnight kiss was given hurriedly, and, as she left the room I could hear her whisper: "He loves me! He loves me!" softly, as if no meant for my ears.

Ah! my blind folly! I let the days slip by without one effort to regain the heart that was sheet-anchor for this life; drooping in my loneliness, trying to make his happiness my reward, and never watching the dear face to see if it flashed its old look of love upon me.

One hot day, when the twilight was gathering, I lay on the parlor sofa, tired and languid, sick with suffering. As I lay, musing sadly, somebody bent over me, kissing me fondly, and the voice that made my heart's music spoke.

"Amy, darling, you are ill, and keeping it from me. I have watched you, day after day, trying to conceal your pain, growing pale and sad with some hidden suffering. You creep from me till I fear we are drifting far away from each other. Oh! my love my wife, why is this? Tell me, Amy, why you are so white and sad? I had hoped to let my love so circle your life that the sorrow should be forgotten, the long winter of your youth be gladdened by the coming summer. Amy," and his tone melted into a pathos that stirred my very soul, "have I been mistaken? Have you ceased to love me? Tell me the truth, Amy, if you break my heart."

And with bitter, repentant tears, I told him all the truth, sparing none of the degrading suspicions, none of the bitter doubts, humbling myself to his very feet to be lifted to his heart again, to cast out all fear and doubt, to know truly how Kate's witcheries had but ruffled the surface of his heart while I lay buried in its inmost recesses.

Hark! As I write the dear step is coming toward me, the clear voice rings on my name, the loved music sinks down into my soul, and I throw aside my pen to greet my husband.

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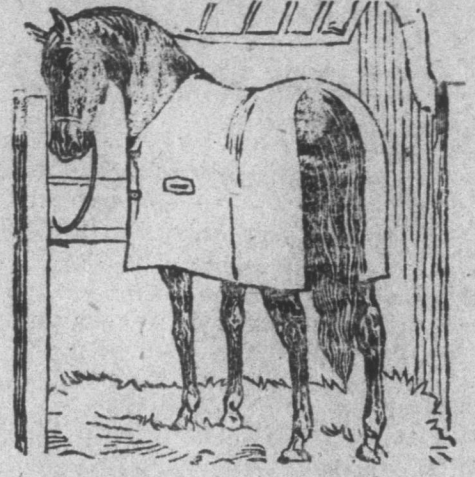
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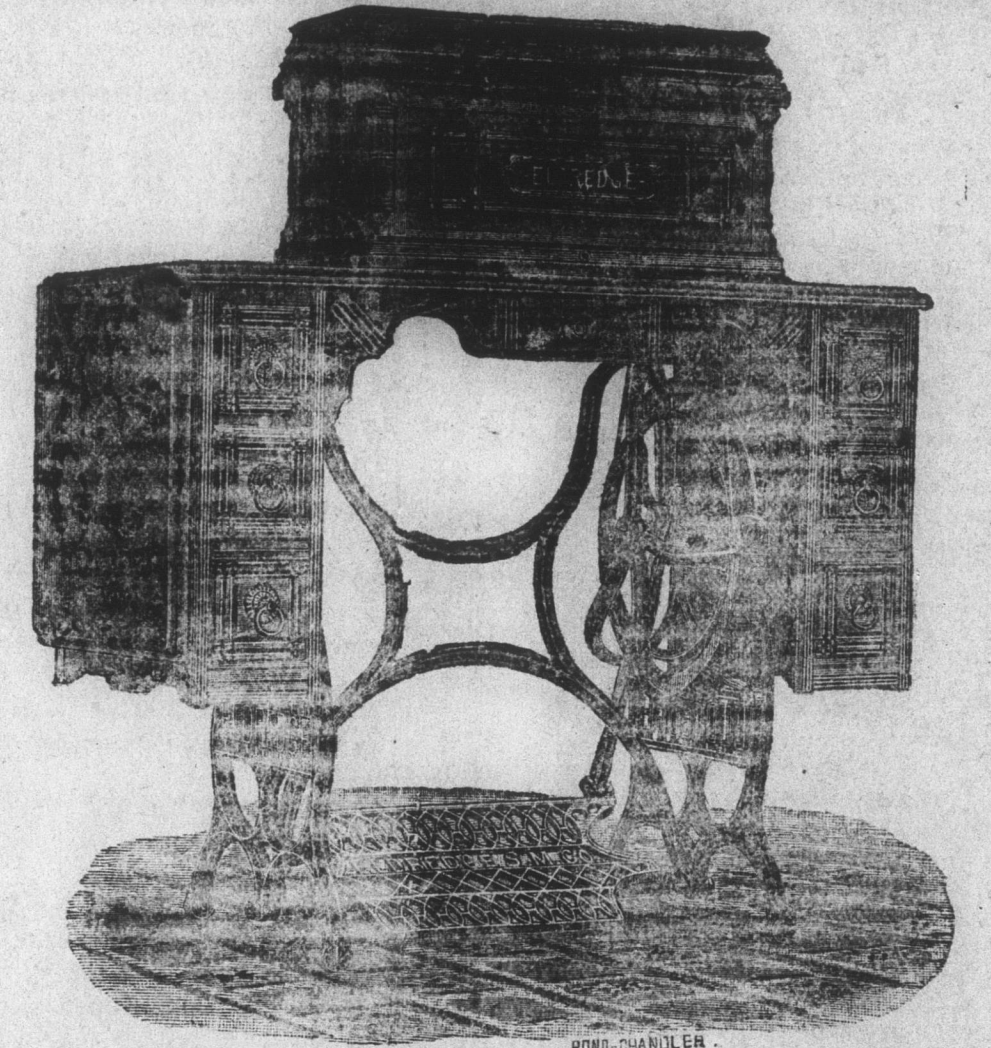
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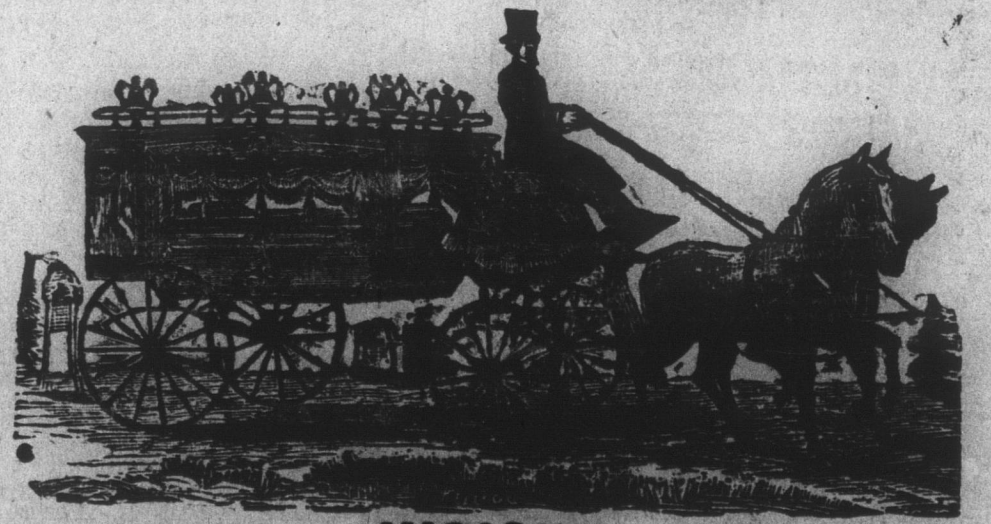
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