

# OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

## THE TATTOO

By Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews

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**I**T is seldom that a plot happens in real life. Dramatic incidents are plenty, and people in general do not distinguish, yet there is a vast difference.

There is a tale which happened and which seems to me well-fashioned, yet because I was in it, I may not trust my own judgment, so I will tell the tale and let it be judged.

It began in Washington when my lad Philip was five years old; and such a handsome boy that I found myself conspicuous wherever I went with him. On a day I had him in a big shop, in the elevator, going down. He did not like the plunge and he clutched my hand while the machine slid, stopped, and dropped with a hideous suddenness.

Next to me stood a very tall woman who had come in at the last stop. I felt her stir as everyone looked toward us, and she bowed her head as a flower might bend on its stalk over Philip.

"The dear little soul!" she said.

Then I felt a quick movement and heard an exclamation, but I rather expected people to be startled by the good looks of my son. I simply checked off one more person of discrimination in my mind, and the boy and I left the elevator and hurried to our cab. I put the youngster in and stopped to give the driver an order, and at that moment there was a touch on my arm.

I turned quickly. There was the tall woman of the elevator. I saw her plainly in this clearer light and realized at once that she was uncommon. She was tall beyond the measure of women—five feet eleven inches I knew afterwards. She was not young—I think about sixty years old—and her hair was strong silver. Her eyes were gray and large; there was color in her cheeks like a girl's bloom. The face was radiant. And about her was the quality which asserts itself without assertion—distinction. She was unmistakably "somebody."

I saw all this as I stood at the curbstone, Philip regarding us earnestly from the cab.

"I beg your pardon," she began, "but I couldn't let your little boy get away. It's such a big world—I might not have found him again. May I speak to him?" and she bent over him. "Will you shake hands with me?" and Philip put out one hand with timeliness and pulled his cap over his left eye with the other—careful training and a characteristic battening for the master.

A laugh rang out, which was astonishingly young and fascinating and delightful. I never heard a laugh so spontaneous, except in children. She turned to me with her eyes dancing.

"He's a charming person, this son of yours," she said eagerly. "And so like! It's a miracle! But I haven't told you—I am unpardonable. You will forgive an old woman." Her smile would have made me forgive real things. "The child is exactly like my own boy as he used to be—indeed it's not fancy—it's a resemblance. I saw it in the elevator, and then I thought I must have imagined it, because Philip is always in my mind. So I have followed you to see. And it's a stronger likeness than I thought. It's like having my child little again to look at him.

"I'm very glad," I told her. "And it's strange, but this is Philip, too."

"No!" she said. "Certainly Providence led me to that elevator." And then, after a second's pause: "You mustn't think I'm kidnapping you, but I feel as if I couldn't lose you and your boy. Won't you let me know you? I am Mrs. Gordon. I live in Washington. I hope you will let me show you my son's pictures and prove how extraordinarily your son is like him. Will you?"

Of course I said yes, and in a minute she had my address. I knew well enough that I was honored and that I had been talking to great lady.

"Who is Mrs. Gordon?" I asked at dinner that night. There were ten people at the table and they all happened to hear, and I think seven or eight answered with some variation of "You surely must know." And then my host gave me a short history of her.

Mrs. Gordon was a daughter of Nathaniel Emory Hewitt, who had been Governor of Delaware, Secretary of State, Ambassador to France—a well-known man. The girl had visited in England and had met and married young Lord Heringstone, and a few years later he had died, leaving her, people said, not too unhappy, for apparently he was everything that a woman is well rid of—and with a child of three or four. The son of two later her father had been made minister to France, and, as Mr. Hewitt was dead, she had gone to be at the head of his house. She lived there three years, and at the end of that time her engagement was announced to Admiral Gordon, an Englishman who had a splendid pedigree.

"How she did it—that clever woman—I don't see," said Mrs. Van Arden. "He had a great position. She met everybody English worth meeting."

I was glad to be at home the next afternoon when Mrs. Gordon came. While Philip explained the puppy in detail I watched the transparent, expressive face; a face more filled with youth than many of eighteen years.

"I see," she continued with Phil earnestly, "the puppy can run after because he has four legs and you have only two. But he hasn't any hands at all, or arms. Will you bring this charming person to lunch on Thursday?" she demanded with an impulsiveness like a summer breeze, as unexpected as welcome. Of course, we accepted the invitation for Thursday.

On Thursday, in the large house where she lived, it appeared to me that the rooms were filled with pictures of my boy. It was odd to see him looking at me from so many strange corners—Philip as a baby, as a toddler of two, as a strapping, square man of four, and again, with his legs beginning to lengthen, just as he was now—only all in unknown clothes. It was strangest to see him grown older—like a prophecy—at seven and nine and fifteen and twenty, a splendid broad-shouldered youth keeping his promise of beauty. The pictures culminated in the strong face, still with my lad's eyes, of Lord Heringstone at thirty-five, a good face, which explained his mother's light-heartedness. The son had inherited from the right side; she was fascinated with him.

I looked at one little scene after another, and saw, as she showed them to me, that this son was the cornerstone of her life. It seemed unreasonable that a woman like this should go through life without a genuine love affair. The first marriage must have been simply two stages, delusion and disappointment; the second might have been convenience or ambition—even affection—anything but love.

Philip, when he had been extracted, lumpy and wedged, from his coat and entanglements, stalked to a table where stood a painting on ivory of a child, he regarded it with earnestness, and Mrs. Gordon and I waited. "That's me," he decided, and turned—the question being settled—to examine the room.

"Don't stop him—let him do what he chooses. No, I don't want him to be careful. I don't care what he breaks"—she threw at me, as I tried to guard priceless vases and carved pillars out of Florentine churches, and cobweb old embroideries, from the stumbling fingers. "It's a gift out of Heaven to see him. It's throwing off thirty years.

Are you too young a woman to imagine how that seems to a woman?"

She was down on her knees by the boy with an arm about his white-lined figure.

"Philip—listen. I've lost my boy. He's across the ocean, and I can't have him all the time. Will you come often and let me pretend you're my boy? And whenever mother will come we'll like that better. Will you?"

Philip looked straight in her eyes, considering. "Yesh, I will," he said at length. His fat hand went up slowly, for he was a deliberate lad always, to her cheek. "I lovesh you," he said.

When he came out crumpled from Mrs. Gordon's arms she lifted her face and her eyes were dim. But Philip had no sentiment.

"Mother told me not to mush my bloush," he reproached her.

It got to be a familiar event to see Philip driving off behind Mrs. Gordon's horses, sometimes secretly inside with his nurse, but often associating with the liveried gentlemen on the box which he preferred. The beautiful woman's affection was without bounds to take me in, but often I went with him, yet she certainly was happiest when she had him alone. More than once I met my small person driving in the city, with his foster-mother, and received, if he happened to be concerned with the horses, a preoccupied salute. It was so that affairs went on for three years, the becoming closer, until Mrs. Gordon counted for much in my life, and Philip at least for much in hers.

Two years after the encounter in the elevator Philip and I went to her one day for lunch. I sat at the piano, playing, after the meal, when through the chords I heard a crash, and I whirled toward where I had last seen Philip, for his freedom here

above this was a crown, and on either side of the crown a fleur-de-lis. The painting was done in small dots as if tattooed into the china. Mrs. Gordon's fingers fitted the pieces together, and I watched, quietly, my arm around guilty Philip.

"It can be put together; it's only three pieces and a jog," she decided. "Don't look so tragic. Philip will be afraid of me. You mustn't be frightened, Philip," she begged him. And then, "I shall like my cup better than before, because it will make me think of my American boy."

"That accident has brought back a great deal," she said.

"Things that I like to remember, that I do remember always, yet which stir me too much for everyday living when they come vividly, as today. I've never told anyone," she went on, "and today I feel as if I wanted to." I kept very still, but she knew that she had my whole interest.

"Would you like to have me tell you a story?" she asked, hesitating.

"It's a very personal story—about myself in my young days. Maybe it isn't so dramatic as I think it; maybe you wouldn't be interested."

"I'd love it. I'd love it," I said eagerly, and the great light eyes smiled.

"It's just the day," she considered. "Snow outside, fire inside, plenty of lazy time, and the lad over there to make me feel as if I were living it over. My Philip was his age. It was when I was with my father in Paris, thirty years ago, when you were a baby. Of course I met everybody—my father was our Minister to France—and one of the first people I met was the Duke d'—".

"No." She pulled herself up. "I won't tell you his name. You'd know it, and I wouldn't be as free to tell the rest. I've said his title—I'm a garrulous old person—so we'll just call him the Duke."

would not tell me any more. After a long minute I ventured to speak.

"But," I began, "something happened."

"He had this made for me," she said, and she put the orange dragon's broken back together. "It was like a tattoo done on his arm when he was a youngster in Japan. He went there on a war ship, and he and the other boy officers got themselves tattooed. He showed it to me. He rolled up his sleeves rowing on a lake at a country place, and I was fascinated. It was the first tattoo I had ever seen. I asked to see it once after. Then at a breakfast in the country, outside of Paris, which he gave for my father, my wine was put in this. He had had it made at the Sevres manufactory—the tattoo duplicated. The handles were taken from an old Japanese cup. You see it is curious gold."

"She smiled at the dragon: reminiscently, her thoughts far from me. "How astonished I was! I thought simply that my wine glass had been forgotten; and then a footman placed this huge thing before me with a flourish. I remembered how my father laughed and how the French servants stood smiling at me in a corner looked up. And the bank of violets on the table and the trees and the sunlight outside—spring in France! I remember it like yesterday."

I kept very still. "That was in the brightest time, before words had crystallized what we felt. It was as bright and as evanescent then as a rainbow, light and brightness and color—and not either right or wrong, because unsaid and undefined. That was my happiest time. Afterward, when he used all his strength to make me marry him; when he won over my father to help him, it was hard. My father thought I ought to marry him," she spoke as if to herself.

"But you did not," I burst forth. "How could you not?"

Mrs. Gordon's gray eyes turned on me. "How could I?" she asked. "I was engaged to the Admiral."

I was too eager now to be afraid. "To the Admiral!" I gasped. "Then?"

"Yes. He was off on a cruise—two years. We were to be married when he came home. It was not known because of his absence."

"But," I protested, "how could you stop for that? You weren't in love with the Admiral—you were with the Duke. It meant his happiness and yours—two young and full of vitality against an old man perhaps not even greater than myself."

"Oh, no; or, no, I didn't."

The beautiful face showed no anger, but impetuous desire. "It meant holding to the greatest thing that I should keep my word. No real happiness comes from sacrificing others. And if it did, what is honor for if not to lead us through thick and thin? If we might step aside from the narrow road when we saw joy shining down another what would faith mean, how would my boy walk in the path if my footsteps weren't there? You see, my dear," her full tones rushed on as if saying words many times thought, and her face was lighted as if by fire. "You see it's a mountain climbing affair for everybody, the road of perfect honor, and each woman owes it to her own soul, and to all the other souls of the world, that her footprints should widen the path a little and level it a little. I had promised the Admiral at a time when I thought nothing but my boy would ever matter. I did love him—he knew how—and he was satisfied. His life had been lonely and he trusted to Phillip and me to bring him all along."

I sighed, convinced perhaps, but unreconciled.

"It may have been right," I said; "but I wouldn't have done it—ever. I think you're one of the martyrs."

"Hardly," she answered; and then "There are plenty of people more unhappy than the martyrs."

"But I want to tell you the rest. The Admiral came back and I married him and went away from Paris. Sometimes I was in England, sometimes in America—all over the world. He was Governor of Jamaica at the last and he died there ten years ago."

Her eyes wandered contentedly to the last picture of Lord Heringstone on her desk. "I've never felt that I made a mistake," she said.

"But," I began, "did you never see him again—the Only Man?"

"Yes," she said. "I saw him once, in London. The Admiral met him at a club and brought him to dinner. We were dining alone, and in the evening my husband had an engagement and left us. Philip was there at first—he was eleven—but he went off to bed, and he and I were alone together. There wasn't a word spoken except commonplace till just as he went."

"Good-bye," he said, and he did not touch my hand; but we looked almost on a level as we were.

"It's the last time in this world," he said calmly.

"No." I threw at him, and he laughed because I was vexed. But I disliked having him speak so. "We'll sometimes meet—you're likely to be in London with your—with the Prince. And I'm likely to be here."

"His eyebrows drew together and he looked hard at me.

"I may not be here. Things may happen," he said thoughtfully. "I've done my work. If I drop out and leave not a ripple—He said that he was tearing my soul.

"Suddenly he threw out his hands with a gesture, and on his hand one could see plainly, even in the small photograph, the green yellow topaz.

Under the picture I read: "The Abbott and Monk of the La Trappe Convent on the Mietteau." My monk was the Abbott.

In the meantime Philip was being a great nuisance.

We were in the last car; and he insisted, with the winning and plausible manner which often quieted my reason, that the back platform was the only part of the train really fitted to carry him. Pleading with him to be careful, I weakly let him go there. The door was open. I watched him closely and he held to the rail as he passed; yet I was not comfortable. All this the Abbott knew—he did not look up, yet I knew he knew it.

The car bounced on an especial boulder, and he lifted his head sharply, and threw a glance at the boy, clinging enchanted outside; then he looked squarely over at me and shook his head. I saw he had ordered the youngster in, but I did not only smile gratefully and went out, and saw the priest, who sat across the car reading a magazine. There was no mistaking the face or figure, and on his hand one could see plainly, even in the small photograph, the green yellow topaz.

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