

"THE OLD, OLD STORY."

"It is nothing over and over again but the old, old story!" I exclaimed, as I threw down the periodical I had been reading, and turned with a contemptuous air to my friend, Laura Delworth. "Writers in general," I continued, "seem to consider a tale incomplete, unless somebody marries somebody else; and I am heartily tired of it. The idea that a woman's earthly happiness consists in her being linked by Hymeneal vows to a male specimen of the human race, is utterly nonsensical."

I must confess that I said this a little wickedly, for I was fully aware that Laura's entire hopes in life were very closely connected with the engaged ring on her left hand.

As I ceased speaking, the dear blue eyes were gazing at that little jewelled circlet, and there was a tremor in her gentle voice, as she said, softly:

"Nevertheless, Amy, the 'old, old story' is very sweet. You will say so yourself some time."

"Never!" I answered, energetically.

I had been an orphan from a mere child—brought up and cared for by a maiden aunt, in whose large, old-fashioned sitting-room the above conversation occurred.

At this time I was one-and-twenty, and had been home from school two years. I cared nothing for society, my only friend being Laura Delworth, a school-mate. I loved her tenderly. Dear Laura! Such a contrast to my own decided, brusque nature.

I often wondered how she could love me, for everyone called me eccentric and cold. I suppose that I did appear so, for I had never been surrounded by those sweet home influences that tend to bring forth all that is lovable in a girl's heart.

However, my woman's nature would assert itself in a passion for dumb pets, which had never been gratified in the slightest degree. Many a little homeless dog and kitten had I brought in from the street, only to see Aunt Roxana's eyes glare through her spectacles, and to hear her exclaim:

"Good gracious, child! take that dirty creature back to where you found it. Ugh!"

This last said with a shrug that is indescribable.

So, with tears, I would surrender the poor thing to its vagabond existence.

While away at school, pets of any kind were out of the question, but my love for them grew stronger with every year of denial. On returning home I found Aunt Roxana more nervous and irritable than ever; and felt that gratitude—if nothing else—bound me to respect her every wish.

So my time had been occupied by an extensive course of reading, music, and drawing, and waiting on Aunt Roxana. My solitary life had made me rather scornful of the outside life surrounding me; and I felt that I had become very distant and reserved to all, save darling Laura. She was now making me a visit, and it was on a rainy afternoon, while auntie was taking her daily nap, that I almost startled her by that "Never!"

"But, Amy dear," she replied, "I know how all your life you have longed for something to love. Would not a noble husband supply that place in your heart?"

"Laura, what I mean is simply this: I insist that a woman's life can be perfectly happy without marriage, and I mean to prove it. I should wish for nothing more, if I could have a little gem of a home, and all the pets I could care for. Auntie has plenty of money, but she is afraid of a horse, dislikes dogs and cats of every colour and kind, and is distracted by a canary bird's trilling notes. All these things I love. I have always wanted them. I should be so happy if I possessed them."

"I don't think so, Amy. I know you very well, and I am sure that there is a large place in your heart that will be lonely and aching sometimes, and need the 'old, old story' that you are so tired of reading about. Amy, have you forgotten Harry?"

There was a spice of mischief in the question, but somewhere in that queer heart of mine, a fine string vibrated just enough to send a flush to my cheeks, as I thought of the picture and faded flowers in the tiny box upstairs. But I answered, laughingly:

"Nonsense! That was only a silly affair of three years ago. Then he went to Germany to study, the family taking up their abode in Paris. We had a slight disagreement the week before he sailed, and I would not say good-bye.

He wrote once, but I did not reply. He is nothing to me," I declared, bravely.

Laura looked askance at me out of those truthful blue eyes. I walked across the room to her chair, and, leaning over her shoulder, said, with a kiss:

"You charming unbeliever. Wait until you visit me in the delightful paradise you are so sceptical about. There you shall see me, the personification of earthly bliss, surrounded by flowers, books, and an array of pets, from a pony to a canary bird. How you will sigh over your domestic tribulations!"

"We will wait," answered Laura.

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It is two years later. I am sitting alone in the old reception-room. All alone in the house with the exception of the waiting woman. I hear her slow step in the kitchen. Aunt Roxana is dead. Only yesterday we followed her remains to the family vault. I am glad I did what I could to make her last years pleasant. I sit here alone, the same strange creature that I always have been, with the same strange heart. The house is very lonely. Do I think of the picture in the tiny box? What is that to me? I am Amy Aylmer; proud, self-reliant as ever, bold to all but Laura, who still gives me a corner of her heart. Still do I build my air-castle that ere many months will be fulfilled.

Still a month later, and I have dropped a letter in the office to Laura, among whose closely-written pages are these lines:—

"I am about to sell this place, and buy the old Granville property. Such a magnificent stretch of land, with its giant trees. It has been for sale for a great while, and the old house itself is fast yielding to time's decaying influences. I shall have it torn down, and my ideal home erected. Ere long, you will be called upon to observe the practical verification of my pet theory."

A year rolls around, and finds me sitting in my phaeton at the village railway-station, waiting for the train which will bring me, Laura, and her baby. Womanly Laura! wife and mother. Will she envy me my happiness? For of course I am happy. Ought not any woman be happy, who is proving that she can live without the 'old, old story' of loving and being loved? A woman who has never a thought of a tiny box, containing a picture and a few faded flowers.

The train is coming. My beautiful snow-white pony pricks up his ears at the whistle. The bright black-eyed Esquimaux dog, with long, silky hair, sits up on the seat beside me, in proud display of his pink satin collar; while my noble Newfoundland, Bruno, comes now and then, with joyous bark, to receive a caress.

The train has arrived and gone, and I drive away from the confusion of the station, with Laura and Laura's baby at my side.

"Aren't they beautiful?" I said, after a while, glancing at my pony and the two frisking dogs.

Laura's great, blue eyes looked into mine, and she said:

"Oh, Amy! If these things satisfy, and and make you happy, I pity you. I would not give my baby for all the dogs and ponies in the world."

And the mother-eyes gazed at the small, precious bundle in her lap.

There was a brief pause between us, and then we turned into the grounds about my home. While Laura was lost in admiration we arrived at the house, which was an odd arrangement of verandas, bay-windows, balconies, and vine-covered porticos. We alighted on the terrace, and as the man led away the pony, we entered my abode.

"Welcome, darling," I said, "to the home of my choice."

Well, we had tea in the west room, where we might view the sunset. The wide glass door opened into a garden of fragrant flowers, which were sprinkled by the spray from a small marble fountain. Two beautiful Maltese cats sat, one on each side of me, on the floor, and the dogs gambled in the garden. Several canary birds trilled their sweetest notes from their cages in the bay-windows, and were answered by the blackbirds and robins in the elms.

Laura was delighted, but her life devotion shone calmly and undisturbed in her eyes. After tea we wandered into the drawing-room, and I showed her all my pictures. Then taking the harp I sang to her the choicest songs I possessed. She said it pleased her so to hear me sing again. I wonder if she knew that the lullaby she cooed to her baby in the twilight was far sweeter than the most artistic music in my portfolio. I will not dwell on all the

incidents of that visit. The days passed swiftly, and Laura's husband came to take her home. He could not spare her longer. I said, "good-bye," and tried to smile triumphantly, while I whispered in her ear:

"You see my theory is a success."

My attempt was an utter failure, for Laura said:

"Amy, you are not happy. Your eyes betray you. Everything is beautiful, but, darling, you need the 'old, old story.'"

My pride would not let me assent to those friendly words, so I straightened myself up, and exclaimed, as three years before, "Never!"

But then I broke down completely, and Laura put her dear arms around my neck and kissed me, and I—Amy Aylmer—cried like a little child, and Laura cried too. Then a few parting words, and I was alone again. Alone! It was only the middle of the morning, and I went about tending to my pets, and household duties. After lunch I took Bruno and went up to my room. The sky had been cloudy all day, and now the rain had begun to fall. It grew very dark, and the wind blew fiercely, and slammed the shutters against the house. I paced to and fro, followed by patient, faithful Bruno. I heard the little waiting girl down stairs singing over her dishes. I went to the mirror and surveyed my pale face and dark, mournful eyes. Then I took a small key from my watch-chain and unlocked the tiny box that lay in the drawer of my secretaire. I could not open it. The key clicked in the lock. I closed the drawer. The rain beat piteously on the window-pane. I sat down in a low chair, and Bruno came and put his head in my lap. I laid my face on his head, and sobbed from the depths of my loneliness. Ah! was *this* my boasted happiness? The honest brown eyes looked up with their intelligent, almost human, sympathy, but still I wept. There was a ringing at the bell. I wondered who could have come in the storm. I heard the little maid usher some one into the drawing-room. Then she tripped upstairs to my door, and informed me that a strange gentleman was downstairs, but had sent up no card. Sending word that I would come presently, I dashed cool water on my burning face, and smoothed my hair. Then I descended the stairs, but paused at the open drawing-room door. Could I mistake after six year's absence the one whose face the tiny box had held so long?

Again I heard the old familiar voice, though all it uttered was "Amy!"

I went right to him; I cried:

"Oh, Harry! I treated you shamefully. Will you, can you, forgive me?"

He took me in his arms, and said:

"That is a thing of the past. I have hoped on in silence, working and waiting for the time when I could come and find you, praying that you might be kept for me. I am now well started in life's struggles, and ask you, Amy, may I claim you?—will you be mine?"

And what do you suppose I said to that noble man? Cold, disdainful Amy Aylmer, that I always had been, what did I reply? Was it my old energetic "Never?" Ah no! you would not recognise the faint low answer:—

"Yours, Harry, now and for ever."

So we are wed. But why write more? It is only the 'old, old story.'

B. G. P.

TRICKS OF MANNER.

IF it were as easy to drop little personal peculiarities as it is to acquire them, one need not object so bitterly to forming the habit of indulging tricks of manner. This same habit is universal.

Looking around among our friends and acquaintances, we shall find scarcely one who has not his favourite word, his perpetual formula, his automatic action, his unmeaning gesture—all tricks caught probably when young, and by not being corrected then, next to impossible to abolish now.

Who does not know the familiar "I say" as the preface to every remark? and the still more familiar "You know" as the middle term of every sentence? Then there are the people who act as perpetual ejaculation points: who say "Goodness!" as a mark of surprise, and "Good gracious!" when surprise is a little mixed with reprobatation. Lower in the social scale it is, "Did you ever!" and indifferently to all stations, "You don't so!" Or in a voice of deprecation, "No!" and "Surely not!"

To judge by voice and word, these ejaculatory people are always in a state of surprise. They go through the world in unending astonishment, and their appeals to their goodness and that indeterminate quality called "Good gracious!" are incessant, and, to people of good taste, annoying.