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Author: Douglass Sherley

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*A Dainty Trifle for my Lady Love*

# THE STORY OF A PICTURE

By Douglass Sherley

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# THE STORY OF

# A PICTURE

*By Douglass Sherley*

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John P. Morton & Co., Louisville,  
1884.

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*“Near my bed, there, hangs a Picture jewels  
could not buy from me.”*

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*T*HERE was a colored crayon in a crowded shop-window. Other people passed it by, but a Youth of the Town, with Hope in his heart, leaned over the guard-rail and looked upon the beauty of that pictured face long and earnestly.

It was the head of a pretty girl with dark hair and dark eyes. She was clad in a dainty white gown, loose-flowing and beautiful. In her left hand, slender and uplifted, a letter; in her right a pen, and beneath it a spotless page.

She was seated within the shadow of a white marble chimney-piece richly carved with Cupids, fluttering, kneeling, supplicating; with arrows new, broken, and mended; with quivers full, depleted, and empty. The great, broad shelf above her pretty head was laden with rare and artistic treasures. A vase from India; a costly fan from China; a dark and mottled bit of color in an ancient frame of tarnished gold, done by some Flemish master of the long-ago. Beyond all this, a ground of shadowy green, pale, cool, and delicious. On the table, near the spotless page and the dear pen-clasping hand, a bunch of flowers; not a mass of ugly blooms, opulent and oppressive, but a few garden roses, old-fashioned and exceeding sweet, blushing to their utmost red, having found themselves so unexpectedly brought into the presence of this pretty girl.

This, in outline, was the picture. The dealer had written on a slip of paper, in large, rude letters,

*Her answer: Yes, or No.*

It was a frameless crayon, thrust aside and somewhat overshadowed by a huge and garish thing in gaudy-flowered gilt, which easily caught and held the eye of the busy throng.

The Youth passed on to his duty of the day with Hope in his heart. Light grew his heavy task,

and the drudgery of his work was forgotten—he was haunted by the sight of that face in the Picture. The softness of the eye, the sweetness of the mouth, or something, made the Youth of the noisy Town believe her answer would surely be—Yes.

Now the Youth and the Afternoon Shadows together came and feasted on the beauty of that Maiden's face. The Shadows, without booty, fled away into the night. But not so with the Youth. In triumph he brought it to the favored room of his own dear home; and always thereafter this Picture gleamed in beauty from out its chimney-piece setting of ebony and old cherry.

She was always pretty, sometimes beautiful, but not always the same, this my Lady of the Picture. She was indeed a changeful Lady, as the story will tell. Those who saw her face when first she was given the place of honor in the home of this Youth, with Hope in his heart, all said, and with one accord, "There is but one answer for her to make, and that one answer is, Yes."

The Easter-tide growing old, and the Summer time new and beautiful, brought no change. The last light of each day fell on the clear-cut and delicate face, gilded the dark hair with a deep russet brown, played about the sweet mouth—and was gone, leaving her with answer yet ungiven.

The first fire of the Autumn crackled and glowed on the tiled hearth, and threw a Shadow on the face of the pretty girl in the Picture; and from that moment there was a change. "But it is only a Shadow from the fire-light glow," said the Youth of the Town. But something within whispered, "You are wrong; she is going to say, No."

Again and again the words repeated themselves, clearly and distinctly, "You are wrong! you are wrong! you are wrong!" Then vaguely and almost inaudibly, "She is going to say, No;" with his own voice he made effort to drown the words of that fateful refrain. "It is the idle, spiteful chatter of some evil spirit. My heart is full of Hope, and I will not believe it." But that night, alone with his book and the face over the fire, only embers on the hearth—*the Shadow was still there*. But he said that it was a wild and troubled fancy—"It is not, can not be an actual Shadow; women may change, but surely not pictures."

The next day Autumn repented of its wanton folly, and called out with Sunshine and Brightness for the return of the dead Summer. The light fell on the face of the girl in the Picture, but it did not lift the Shadow. Nor did the dead Summer return to gladden the heart of the Autumn, full of too late and useless regret. "No, I am not certain," said the Youth, touched with a Doubt. It was only a touch, but his step was heavy and a trifle less quick, as he went down the street to his Duty of the day. Again he passed by the crowded shop window. The dealer had filled the vacant corner; but he did not see, and he did not care to see, what was there. For there was now only one picture in all the world for this Youth of the Town with Hope in his heart; but something else had crowded into his heart, and it was—Doubt. He went on his way and about his duty with this one hopeful thought: "The nightfall will bring a change, and the Shadow will have gone." But each day the Shadow deepened, and the Youth carried with him a more troubled and a less hopeful heart. All those who saw the Picture, and who had seen it when first it came, now looked upon it with painful surprise, and unhesitatingly said, "Your pretty-faced girl over the mantel yonder is undoubtedly going to say, No."

Into the soft, dark eye there seemed to have crept a glitter, cold and almost unfeeling. The fatal Shadow had hardened, but not altogether stolen away the beauty of that sweet mouth. Even the loose-flowing gown seemed to have lost its easy grace, and stiffened into splendid and haughty folds, fit only for the form of some grand old Dame proud of her beauty and proud of her ancient coronet. The very lace about her slender throat—but a misty web of dainty and intricate work—seemed to have crystallized and whitened, as if done with a sharp and skillful chisel. The pale, pinky tinge about the perfect little ear had deepened into a more rosy hue, which had overspread the face—barely more than pale—with a deep color and a glow of emotion only half concealed. Ah, was it a look of triumph? was it the consciousness of power?

The left hand, holding her Lover's letter, had lost its somewhat tremulous look. The fingers of the other hand had tightened about the pen, hovering over that unwritten page. And, in short, she seemed ready to write the answer—what will it be? The heart of the Youth was full of Trouble. Hope flickered up into an uncertain existence. Now the Picture had grown hateful to his sight; so a silken curtain, in crimson folds, clung against and hid away the face of this Changeful Lady.

But no sooner was the curtain drawn, hiding from sight the lovely and beloved face, but an all-powerful desire brought him back again, and lo! the curtain was rudely thrust aside; but alas! there was no change.

When away from his room and the siren-like face behind its silken folds of crimson, he fretted to return and look again for a change wrought out by his brief absence; but there was none.

Hateful indeed the sight may have been of that changeful face, but it had grown to him absolutely necessary, and more pleasant, indeed, even when hard, cold, and unkind, than other faces not less beautiful smiling sweet unspoken words.

He slept in a curtained space near by, and often waked in the still watches of the after-midnight, with the Hope in his heart, flaring up into a flame and burning him with a desire for another sight of that fickle face. Before the picture there hung a dim, red light, which burned all the night long. It was a swinging lamp of many tangled chains and fretted Venetian metal work. Once it had swung before an holy altar in an ancient Mexican town, where it had shed an unextinguished light throughout many years. It was a holy thing; so the Youth had thought it worthy of a place before the deep-set Picture of the chimney-piece—the shrine of his heart's treasure. Thus awakened out of troubled sleep, he often rose and stood before the covered Picture, beneath the swinging red light brought—stolen, perhaps—from the sacred sanctuary of that ancient church down in the land of Mexico. Often, with Hope, Doubt, and Fear in his heart, he would turn away from before the untouched curtain. "Useless, useless, useless," would be the burden of his thought.

**T**HE third Easter-tide comes with its brightness, its flowers, and its Hopes—yet my Lady of the Picture has not changed. Still that same relentless look; still that premonition of a No not yet said; still in her left hand she holds the letter; still in her right hand the pen, and the page beneath it is yet guiltless of a word.

But frowns and relentless looks have not put to flight the remnant of Hope in the heart of the Youth. "It is only a picture. Why should I trouble?" he said.

But words are easy, and many questions are hard to answer.

The Youth had loved the face when first he saw it in the crowded shop-window of the Town. So did he love it now. Change can not kill Love, if Love it be. What matter to the Youth even if the eye had grown cold and a Shadow rested about the sweet mouth? Can such things as these make denial to the heart of a Lover? Aye, to the heart of a Love-maker, but not to the heart of one who loves. There is no limit to Love. A thousand nays can not check its course if true Love it be.

**B**UT again there is a change with my Lady of the Picture. Does the heart of the advancing Easter-tide hold the magic spell? Those who chance to see her now note it, and think it strange. "No," they murmur, "will be her answer. But it is her Duty that bids her, and she must obey."

The silken curtain is torn down and the light of day completes the triple story of this, my Lady of the Picture. The cold glitter is gone from about the eyes, and the old soft light has returned, and yet it is not the same as of old. The fatal Shadow round about the sweet mouth is but a bare outline—a shade, not a Shadow any more.

Again the pretty white gown is loose—flowing and beautiful. The thought of the grand old Dame, proud of her beauty and proud of her ancient coronet, vanishes with the morning mist of the Easter-tide. Again the dainty lace that clings to her slender white and flower-like throat, softens and grows creamy and weblike, free from the bleachment and crystallization of a while ago. Again the face is barely more than pale. The deep color has faded away, leaving but a faint, delicate trace, and a pinky tinge which reaches out until it kisses the utmost tip of her perfect little ear. How deep, tender, and wondrous sad those eyes have grown! Down in their dark depths her very soul seems to tremble into sight. It is only one who has suffered who can have such eyes. And, in truth, it is worth almost a lifetime of suffering to look deep down into such eyes of sad beauty. She was but a pretty-faced girl; but now, behold! she is a beautiful woman. And she is weary, O, so weary with the long, hard battle within.

But Fear and Doubt still dwell and share with Hope a place in the heart of the Youth. He finds it sweet comfort to believe that even if her answer be No, it may come from a sense of Duty. Love is Love always, but not so with Duty. For that which may be Duty to-day may not be Duty on the

morrow.

So the Youth of the Town longs for the coming of the morrow.

Who wrote, and sent to her with those sweet red roses from some old-time garden, this, his Lover's letter, which she still is holding in her left hand, once again just a trifle tremulous? Who has asked this question of a woman's heart? Is he a man strong and noble, whom she does not love, yet does not wish to wound? Or is it some one less strong, less noble, who has her Love, although he be unworthy of it?

And does Duty bid her make denial, even though it break her loving heart?

Is it Regret, Duty, Love, or What?

But still she gives no answer. And the Youth of the Town is still hoping, doubting, fearing.

Ah, my sweet, sad-eyed Lady, what will your answer be?

Sherley Place,  
Easter-tide, 1884.

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