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A Foolish Young Man;

Or, the Belle of the Season.

CHAPTER XXXVII.—(Continued).

"I don't know; was it a rabbit?"

"No!" responded Mr. Wordley, with suppressed excitement. "It was the top of a tin box—"

"A tin box?" echoed Ida.

"Yes," he said, with an emphatic nod. "I called Jason to bring a spade, and I could scarcely wait, and I found myself clawing like a dog, like one of the dogs, my dear, Jason came and he had that box up and I opened it. And what do you think I found?"

Ida shook her head gently; then she started slightly, as she remembered the night Stafford and she had watched her father coming, in his sleep, from the ruined chapel.

"Something of my father's?"

Mr. Wordley nodded impressively.

"Yes, it was something of your father's. It was a large box, my dear, and it contained—what do you think?"

"Papers?" ventured Ida.

"Securities, my dear. Miss Ida, securities for a very large amount! The box was full of them; and a little farther off we found another tin case quite as full. They were securities in some of the best and soundest companies, and they are worth an enormous sum of money!"

Ida stared at him, as if she did not realize the significance of his words.

"An enormous sum of money!" repeated Ida. "All the while—God forgive me!—I was under the impression that your father was letting things slide, and was doing nothing to save the estate and to provide for you, he was speculating and investing, and doing it with a skill and a shrewdness which could not have been surpassed by the most astute and business-like of men. His judgment was almost infallible; he seems scarcely ever to have made a mistake. It was one of those extraordinary cases in which everything a man touches turns to gold. There are mining shares that will fetch a price; but your father bought them, and they've everyone of them, or nearly everyone of them, turned up trumps. Some of them which he bought for a few shillings—gold and diamond shares—are worth hundreds of pounds. Hundreds of thousands!"

Ida looked at him as if she did not even yet quite understand. She passed her thin hand over her brow and drew a long breath.

"Do you mean—do you mean that I am no longer poor, Mr. Wordley?" she asked.

Mr. Wordley laughed so suddenly and loudly that he quite startled the hall porter in his little glass box.

"My dear child," he said, slowly and impressively, "you are rich, not poor; immensely rich! I do not myself yet quite know how much you are worth; but you may take it from me that it is a very large sum indeed. Now, you are not going to faint, my dear!" For Ida's eyes had closed and her hands had clasped each other spasmodically.

"No, no," she said in a low voice. "But it is so sudden, so unexpected, that I can't realize it. It seems to me as if I were lying in the cot upstairs and dreaming. No, I cannot realize that I can go back to Herondale; I suppose I can go back?" she asked, with a sudden piteousness that very nearly brought the tears to Mr. Wordley's eyes.

"Go back, my dear!" he exclaimed. "Of course, you can go back! The place belongs to you. Why, I've already given notice that I am going to pay off the mortgage. You will get every inch of the land back; you will be the richest lady in the county—yes, in the whole county! The old glories of the dear old house can be revived; you can queen it there as the Herons of old used to queen it. And everybody will be proud and delighted to see you doing it! As for me, I am ashamed to say that I have almost lost my head over the business, and have behaved like a—well, anything, but like a staid and sober old solicitor."

He laughed, and blew his nose, and nodded with a shamefaced or which affected Ida even more than his wonderful news had done.

"How can I thank you for all your goodness to me," she murmured, a little brokenly.

"Thank me! Don't you attempt to thank me, or I shall break down altogether; for I've been the stupidest and most wooden-headed idiot that ever disgraced a noble profession. I ought to have seen through your father's affection of miserliness and indifference. Anybody but a silly old numskull would have done so. But, my dear, why are we staying here, why don't we go away at once? You'd like to go back to Herondale by the first train. You must hate the sight of this place, I should think."

"No, no," said Ida, gently. "Yes, I would like to go back to Herondale—ah, yes, as soon as possible. But I should like to see someone before I go—the sister, the nurse, who have been so good to me. You are sure—she paused and went on shyly, "you are sure there is no mistake, that I have some money, am I rich?"

"Rich as Croesus, my dear child," he responded, with a laugh.

She blushed still more deeply.

"How much money, Mr. Wordley? I mean quite a large sum of money?"

"Not a very large sum, my dear," he replied rather puzzled. "About twenty or thirty pounds, perhaps."

Ida's face fell.

"Oh, that is not nearly enough," she murmured.

"Eh?" he asked. "But I've got my cheque-book with me. How much do you want? And, forgive me, my dear Miss Ida, but may I ask what you want it for?"

"Can I have a cheque for five hundred pounds?" Ida asked, timidly.

"Five thousand, fifty thousand, my dear!" he responded, promptly, and with no little pride and satisfaction.

"Five hundred will do—for the present," she said a little nervously. "Perhaps the porter will let you draw it out."

Still puzzled, Mr. Wordley went into the porter's box and took out his cheque-book.

"Make it payable to the hospital—and give it to me, please," said Ida, in a low voice.

The old man's face cleared, and he nodded.

"Of course, of course! God bless you, my dear! I might have known what was in that good, grateful heart of yours. See here, I've made it out for a thousand pounds. That's five hundred for you and five hundred for me—and don't you say a word to stop me; for I'm only too grateful for the idea. It will cool me down, and upon my word, I feel so excited, so above and beyond myself that I want some safety-valve like this, or I should fall to dancing in the hall, and so disgrace myself and the noble profession to which I belong."

With a folded cheque in her hand, Ida took her up the stairs to the ward, Alexandra ward. The gentleman, who had parted from her so reluctantly, was naturally surprised that I want some safety-valve like this, or I should fall to dancing in the hall, and so disgrace myself and the noble profession to which I belong."

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CHAPTER XXXVIII.

The journey down to Herondale cannot be described; whenever Ida thought of it in the after years, she felt herself trembling and quivering with the memory of it. Until she had sat in the carriage, and the train had started and she realized that she was indeed going home—home—she did not know what it had cost her to leave Herondale, how much she had suffered at Laburnum Villa, how deep the iron of dependence had entered her soul. She was all of a quiver with delight, with profound gratitude to the Providence which was restoring her to the old house, the wide moors, the brawling streams which she knew now were dearer to her than life itself.

Mr. Wordley understood, and was full of sympathy with her mood. He bought newspapers and magazines, and he let her alone and pretended to read; but every now and then she met his smiling glance and knew by his nod of the head that he was rejoicing with her.

He had wired for a carriage and pair to meet them at Bryndermere, and Ida leant back and tried to be patient, tried to look unconcerned and calm and composed; but she uttered a little cry and nearly broke down when the carriage stopped at the familiar gate, and Jessie, who was standing there, with her hair blown wild by the wind, forgot the inequalities of their positions, and catching her beloved young mistress to her bosom, crooned and sobbed over her.

Jason stood just behind, balancing himself first on one foot, and then on the other, in his efforts to get a glimpse of Ida, and she stretched out her arm over Jessie's shoulder and shook the honest hand which had grown hard and horny in her service. Jessie almost carried her mistress into the hall, where a huge fire was burning, and threw a red and cheerful glow over the fading gilding and greytone hangings.

"Oh, miss, how thin you be!" she said at last, as, with clasped hands, she surveyed Ida from top to toe anxiously and greedily. "Wherever have you been to look like that? But never mind, Miss Ida; you're back, and that's everything! And we'll very soon get some flesh on your bones and drive the sad look out of your eyes." In moments of emotion and excitement Jessie forgot the schooling Ida had given her, and lapsed into semi-West-morland. "You've missed the moorland air, dearie, and the cream and the milk—I've heard it's all chalk and water in London—and I suppose there wasn't room to ride in them crowded streets; and the food, too, I'm told it ain't fit for ordinary humans, leave alone a dainty maid like my sweet mistress."

"Yes, you shall fatten me to your heart's desire, Jessie," said Ida. "I suppose I don't look of much account; I've been ill. But I shall soon get well. I felt, as we drove along the moor, with the wind blowing on my cheek, as if I had not breathed since the hour I left. And now tell me everything—all at once! Rupert? There's no need to ask about the dogs." Donald and Bess had not yet ceased to fear at her frantic efforts to express their delight.

"Are you glad I've come back, Donald?" she asked in a low voice as she knelt and put her arms round his neck and nestled her face against his, and let him lick her with his great, soft tongue. "Ah, if you are only half as glad as I am, doggie, your heart must be half breaking with the joy of it. And if I'm lean, you are disgracefully fat, Bess. Don't tell me you've missed me, for I don't believe it."

It was some time before Jessie could drag her upstairs; and the sight of her old room, as cheerful as the hall, with the huge fire, almost melted her, and when she was alone she sank upon her knees beside the bed in a thanksgiving which was none the less deep and fervent for its intensity.

When she came down the dinner was ready and Mr. Wordley was standing in front of the fire awaiting her. She was glad that Jason had not had time to prowl about the room, that the old shabbiness of the room, that its aspect was not yet changed, and that it greeted her with all its old familiarity. Mr. Wordley would not let her talk until she had made, at any rate, a pretence of eating; but when they had gone into the drawing-room, he drew a chair to the fire for her, and said:

"Now, my dear, I am afraid I shall have to talk business. I shall be too busy to come over to-morrow." He laughed. "You see I have left all my other clients' affairs to come after my stray lamb; I expect I shall find them in a pretty muddle. Now, my dear, before I go, I should like you to tell me exactly what you would like to do. As I have explained to you, you are now the mistress of a very large fortune with which you can do absolutely what you like. Would you like to live here, or would you like to take a house in London, or go abroad?"

Ida looked up a little piteously.

"Oh, not go to London or abroad!" she said. "Can I not live here? If you knew how I feel—how the sight of the place, the thought that I am under the old roof again—"

She looked round the faded, stately room lovingly, wistfully, and Mr. Wordley nodded sympathetically.

"Of course you can, my dear," he said. "But equally of course, you will now want to restore the old place. There is a great deal to be done, and I thought that perhaps you would like to go away while the work was being carried out."

Ida shook her head.

"No, I would like to stay, even if I have to live in the kitchen or one of the garrets. It will be a delight to me to watch the men at work; I should never grow tired of it."

"I quite understand, my dear," he said. "I honor you for that feeling. Well, then, first in his profession—the rub of his hands with an air of enjoyment—and he shall restore the old place, with all respect and reverence. I think I know the man to employ; and we will start at once, so that no time may be lost. I want to see you settled in your proper position here. The thought of it gives me a new lease of life. Of course, you will want a proper establishment; more servants both in the house and out of it; you will want carriages and horses; both the lodges must be rebuilt, and the old avenue opened out and put in order. Heron Hall was one of the finest places in the county and it shall be so again."

"And Jessie shall be the housekeeper and Jason the butler," said Ida, with a laugh of almost child-like enjoyment.

"Oh, it all seems like a dream; and I feel that at any moment I may wake and find myself at Laburnum Villa. And, oh, Mr. Wordley, I shall want some more money at once. I want to send the Herons a present, a really nice present that will help them, I hope, to forget the trouble I caused them. Poor people, it was not their fault; they did not understand."

Mr. Wordley snorted.

"There is one topic of conversation, my dear Miss Ida, I shall be compelled to bar," he said. "I never want to hear Mr. John Heron's name again. As to sending them anything you like, of course, send them anything you like, to the half of your kingdom; though, if you ask me whether they deserve it—"

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"I didn't ask you," said Ida, with a laugh, putting her hand on his arm. "If we all got our deserts, how sad it would be for everyone of us."

Mr. Wordley grunted.

"To-morrow I shall pay a sum of money into the bank for you, and you will have to drive over and get a cheque-book; you can amuse yourself by drawing up cheques until I come again."

He lingered as long as he could, and kept the carriage waiting some time; but at last he went and Ida was left alone to face the strange change in her fortune. She sat before the fire dreaming for a few minutes, then she wandered over the old house from room to room; and every old memory and associations room had its memories and associations for her. In the library she could almost see in its place to the table; and she went and sat in it and touched with reverent, loving hand the books and papers over which he had been wont to bend. She stood before his portrait and gazed at it with tear-dimmed eyes, and only the consciousness of the love she had borne him enabled her to bear his absence. As she passed through the hall the newly risen moon was pouring in through the tall window and followed by Donald and Bess, who had not left her for a moment, she opened the great hall door and went on to the terrace, and walking to the end, she looked towards the ruined chapel in which her father had buried his treasure.

Up to this moment she had been buoyed up by excitement and the joy and pleasure of her return to the old house; but suddenly there fell a cloudlike depression upon her; she was conscious of an aching void, a lack of something which robbed her heart of all its joy. She had no need to ask herself what it was; she knew too well. Her old home had come back to her, she was the mistress of a large fortune; she stood, as it were, bathed in the sunshine of prosperity; but her heart felt cold and dead, and the sunshine, bright and clear, and well-nigh dazzling, indeed, had no warmth in it. She was a great heiress now; would no doubt soon be surrounded by friends. She had been poor and well-nigh friendless that day Stafford had taken her in his arms and kissed her for the first time; but, ah, how happy she had been!

Was it possible, could Fate be so cruel as to decree that she should never be happy again, never lose the aching pain which racked her heart at every thought of him? She put the fear from her with a feeling of shame and helplessness. She would forget the man who had left her for another woman; would not let thought of him cast a shadow over her life and dominate it. No doubt by this time he had quite forgotten her, or, if he remembered her, recalled the past with a feeling of annoyance with which a man regards a passing flirtation, pleasant enough while it lasted, but of which he did well to be a little ashamed.

(To be continued.)

Butcher—Well, yer know, mum, meat's very dear, to-day. Mrs. Gubbins—Ho! Then gimme a pound of yesterday's steak, please.

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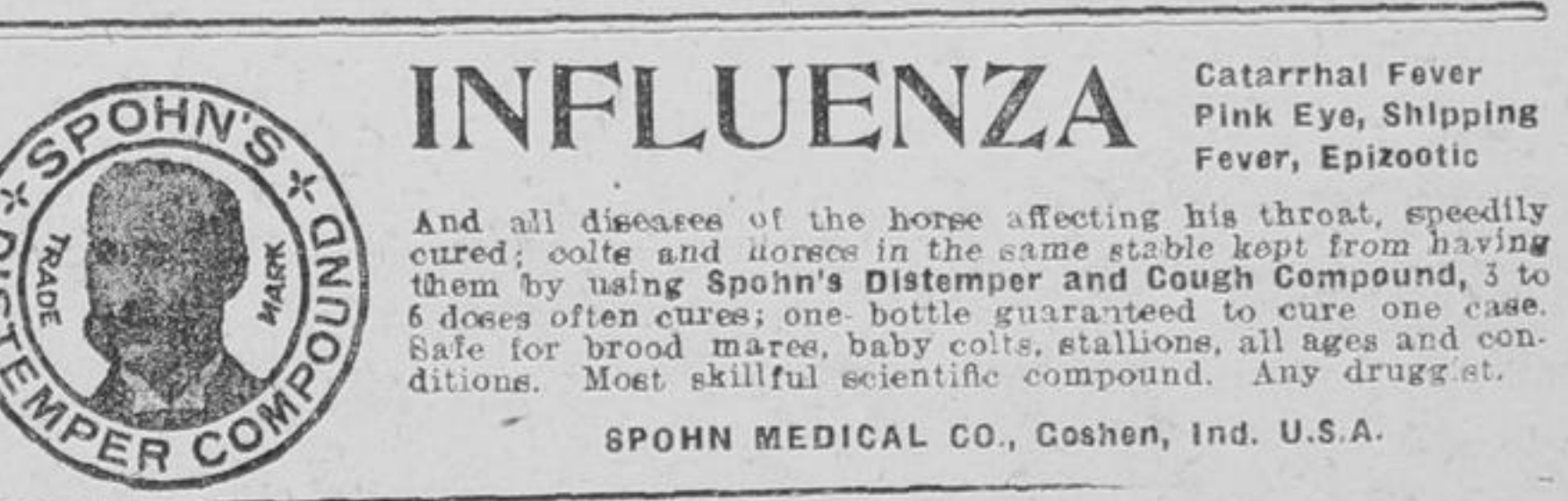


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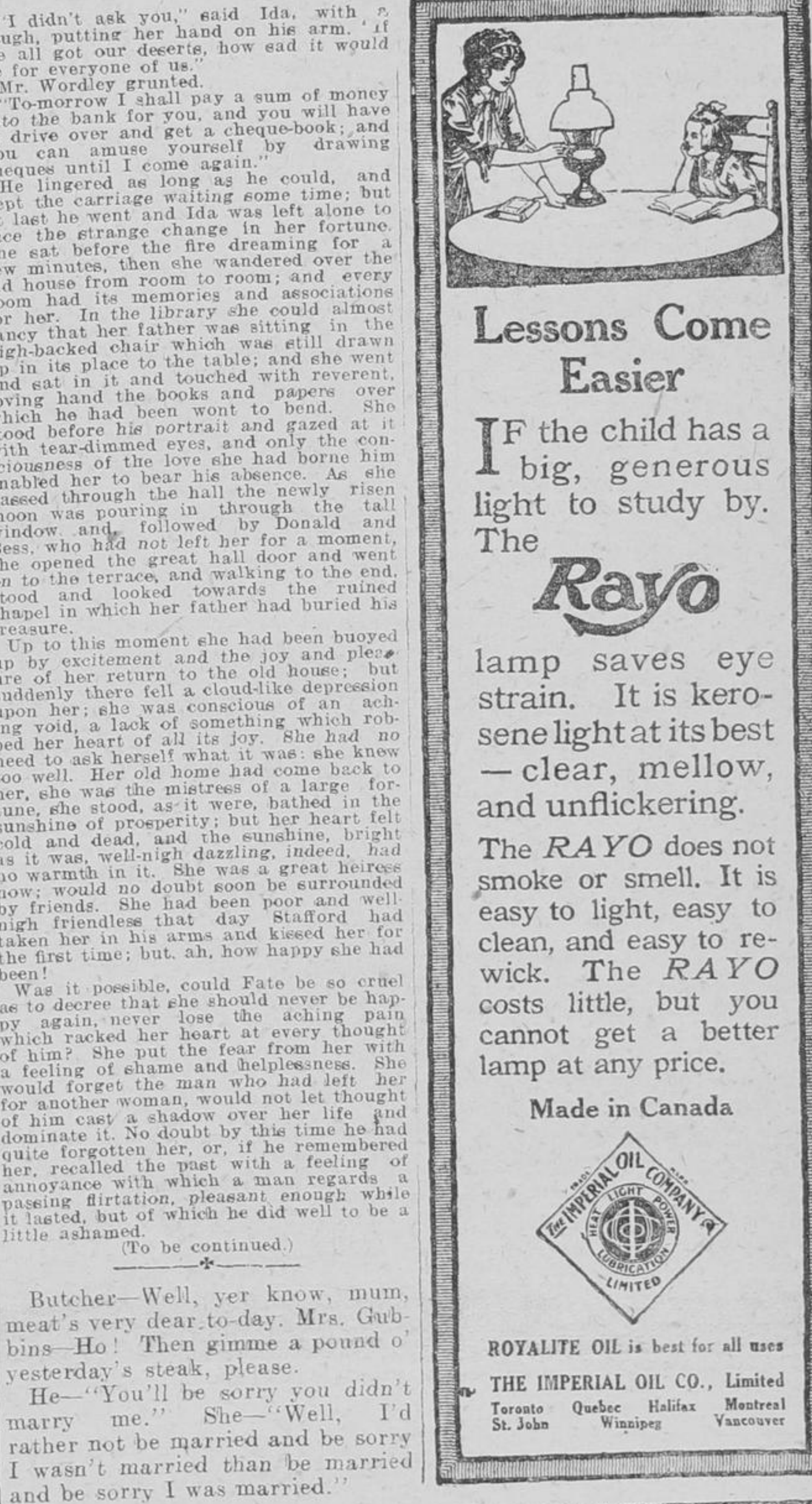


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