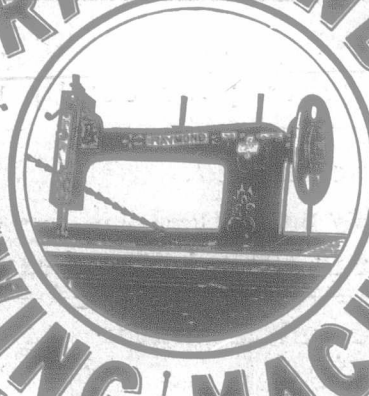


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Their Sentimental Journey.

The question burst like a blast from a cannon into the silent peace of twenty years. Sarah Ann Mohr and Aaron Konig, to whom it was addressed, gasped as they sat at opposite ends of the long bench before Sarah Ann's door in the quiet evening. To Sarah Ann, it was almost an accusation of crime, to Aaron it was a sudden sharpening of the twinges of conscience that had bothered him for twenty years.

Ollie Kuhns, lounging on his own bench next door, shouted out the impertinent, the outrageous inquiry.

"Sarah Ann!" he said, and waited for Sarah Ann's placid "Yes"; "Aaron!" and waited again until Aaron, too, had signified that he heard. "Haven't you two been going together long enough to get married?"

Neither Sarah Ann nor Aaron answered a word. Like a fat and startled pigeon, Sarah Ann rose and vanished into the covered alley that separated the two houses; like an angry sparrow, Aaron went hopping down the street.

"Ach! How could anybody say such a thing!" wailed Sarah Ann.

"And now," said Aaron Konig, when he had shut behind him the door of his little shop, "now I will have to get married!"

"It shames me," Sarah Ann wept "I suppose all Millerstown is talking over me."

"I would almost rather die than get married," said Aaron Konig.

But Aaron was no coward. For twenty years the Widow Mohr had allowed him to occupy her bench, in summer and a rocking-chair in her kitchen in winter. For twenty years she had fed him from her rich store. She had not only treated him to molasses-cake, cold meat, yeast beer, fine cake in the evenings; she had sent him warm crullers, fresh rusks and hot raisin pie—the caviar of his menu—in the mornings. She had supported his deep bass with her mellifluous soprano in the prayer meetings; she held the last note of each stanza until he caught his breath and could swing into the first word of the next. She was on his side in all church disputes. She had visited him when he was sick, she had even mended his clothes. However hateful might be the state of matrimony, he could not fail Sarah Ann, now that the subject had been broached to them both. But he wished that he might clutch Ollie Kuhns by the throat and choke him black and blue.

The next evening Aaron put on his best coat. It was perfectly true that it so closely resembled his every-day coat that even the sharp-eyed Millerstonians, greeting him from their doorsteps as he passed, noticed no difference. To Aaron, who had spent the larger part of a day and night praying for strength to do his duty, it seemed like a sacrificial robe.

The air was hot and thick, and there was the almost constant reflection of distant lightning in the sky. It was the sort of atmosphere that frightened Aaron and made him nervous.

Sarah Ann had not ventured again into Ollie Kuhn's irreverent neighborhood, but sat dejectedly on her back porch. She was mortified and troubled to the bottom of her soul, a fact that Aaron did not observe in the least. He did not think of her; he thought only of himself and his own wretchedness. He did not say good evening; he sat himself down, mouse-like, on the bench beside Sarah Ann's monumental figure. "Sarah Ann," he said, shortly, "Sarah Ann, will you marry me?"

It was evident that Sarah Ann, too, had made up her mind.

"Yes, Aaron, I will marry you," she answered, gently.

Aaron's brave voice gave no hint of the panic in his soul.

"Then let us be married to-morrow. You take the nine o'clock train for Allentown, and I will take the nine o'clock train for Allentown, and we will be married there."

Without another word, ignoring the roll of thunder that had suddenly become ominous, Aaron went out through the little alley, and home—there to realize that he was lost.

When he had gone, Sarah Ann went

into the house. She hardly realized that Aaron's behavior was strange. Her first husband, who had left her comparatively rich, after grudging her the money necessary for her clothes during his lifetime, was much more queer than Aaron Konig. Aaron was quiet, he was neat, he was small—she was used to his ways.

She closed the kitchen shutters; then she went into the cellar to get herself a piece of pie. She ate it there, looking about meanwhile at the bins waiting for apples from her fine trees and potatoes from her garden, at the shelf filled with baked things, at the cupboard overflowing with preserves and jellies. Then she went upstairs. The kitchen was immaculate. Each chair stood in its place, the red table-cloth hung straight. The kitchen might have been a parlor.

She went on into the little sitting-room, as neat as the kitchen, and into the parlor, as neat as both, and then she climbed the stairs. In her room the great bed gleamed white, like the catafalque of a princess. It had a valance and a mighty knitted counterpane, and sheet-shams and a bolster, and two huge pillows and elaborate pillow-shams. On one a sleepy child bade the world good night; on the other, the same child waked with a glad good morning. The edges of the pillow-shams and the sheet-shams and the pillow and bolster-cases were ruffled and fluted.

Sarah Ann glanced into the other bedroom, only a bit less wonderful than this; then she went into the attic, and took from its hook her best black dress, wrapped in a sheet. Back in her room, she laid it at length upon her bed, as if it were the princess herself. Then she looked down upon it.

"Ach, Elend!" (Misery!) wailed Sarah Ann. "Must I then have a man once more in my nice house?"

Worn with sleeplessness and distress, she and Aaron climbed together into the train the next morning.

Just in front of them sat a fat and voluble man who insisted upon talking to them. Neither had told any one the purpose of the journey, although now that their feet were so firmly set upon their desperate path, it would not have added to their trouble to have all Millerstown know. The fat man assumed that they were husband and wife, yet it embarrassed neither of them. They were far beyond the point of embarrassment.

"Now I don't have no wife to look after me," he said, jocularly, "I am a lonely single man. But I come and go as I like. I come from Reading, and I am going to-day to Sous Beslehem. I am such a travelling man. Now if I want to stay all night I can, and if I don't want to, I don't need to, and it don't make anything out to anybody, and I don't get a scolding, see?"

Neither Sarah Ann nor Aaron made answer. Their hearts were too full. Did not each one know only too well the advantage of single blessedness? Besides, the time of their bondage was at hand. Already the church steeples of Allentown were in sight, already the brake was grinding against the wheels. The fat man called a cheerful good-by to them, but they made no response.

For an instant they stood together on the platform. Beside them a Philadelphia train puffed and snorted; they could make no plans until the noise had ceased.

"I—I think I will buy me some peppermints!" shouted Sarah Ann into Aaron's ear.

But no marital duty was to find Aaron wanting.

"I'll get them for you," he offered. Sarah Ann shook her head. "I know the kind!" she screamed.

On arriving at the candy-stand, she stood perfectly still. Aaron's offer terrified her. It was but a forecast of his constant presence. Hitherto she had always bought her own peppermints. It was one of the joys of her life. She looked uncomprehendingly at the candy man when he asked her what she wanted. She did not know—oh, yes, in her heart she did! She wanted to burst the iron band of fright that oppressed her; she wanted—it was the first murderous wish of Sarah Ann's benignant life—she wanted to throw Aaron Konig into the river.