

Love's Test

Written for The Western Home Monthly by Mrs. Nestor Noel

DORA HAMILTON had been so happy during the first three months of her married life that, as she told her husband, Jack, "It seemed too good to be true." Sitting now in her small, yet dainty boudoir, she looked the very picture of content. Dora was little over eighteen years of age and she was an uncommonly pretty girl. The dark velvet dress she wore accentuated the whiteness of her delicate skin. Her pink cheeks were flushed with pleasure, for she had been reading over her husband's letters, a task young married women often allot themselves when the said much-loved one is away at his office and time is hanging heavy on their hands. The brown eyes, shielded by their dark lashes and surrounded by their halo of golden hair, were beautiful, intelligent eyes and full of "unspeakable thoughts" as she pursued her self-imposed labor of love. Suddenly she paused. There was a knock at the door and her maid announced, "Miss Teresa Porter."

The name conveyed nothing to her, and, not wishing to be found at her present occupation by a stranger, Mrs. Hamilton quickly pushed her letters into a table drawer, then turned listlessly towards the door as her visitor entered. A tall, thin woman of about twenty-eight walked in. She was over-dressed for a morning call, and her prettiness seemed of the "made-up" type. Certainly, the rouge on her lips and cheeks was not natural, nor was it conspicuous by its absence. The thick, dark chestnut hair did not seem to be her own; for, evidently she had left her house in a hurry, and had not taken pains to hide the hair beneath it, which was of another color! Mrs. Hamilton motioned her visitor to a chair, and then asked her politely to what she owed the honor of her visit?

"Does not my name convey anything to you?" asked the elder woman. "Surely Jack must have mentioned me sometimes?"

Dora started slightly on hearing the other name her husband so casually, but she pretended not to notice it.

"My husband" (her voice dwelt lovingly on the word), "doubtless had many acquaintances before we were married of whom I know nothing, but if you will tell me if there be anything I can do for you I shall try to do it, if possible." She spoke frigidly. Something antagonistic in the other woman seemed to make her long to get rid of her as soon as politeness would allow.

For a few minutes neither spoke, as each seemed to be studying the other. Mrs. Hamilton thought that perhaps Miss Porter was a district visitor, and had called to ask for money for the parish poor, then, on second thoughts, she guessed she must be wrong, for the woman did not look the type generally sent by clergymen on such errands. She could not imagine anything about her visitor, so she waited in silence for information.

"I came," observed Miss Porter at length, "to see if Jack, oh, I beg your pardon, I suppose I ought not to call him that now—I came to see if Mr. Hamilton might have mislaid some of my old songs and forgotten to return them. There was one especially, 'Silver Threads Among the Gold.' He often sang that with me while I played the accompaniment."

Mrs. Hamilton pointed to the piano and music stand. "You can look for anything you want there," she said.

Teresa Porter rummaged amongst the music then she turned away from the piano. "It's strange," she said, as if musing to herself. "Considering we were such chums, I can't imagine why he never spoke of me to you. Or perhaps he did and you don't like to own it. You needn't mind. I'm not jealous of him. How could I be when I threw him over myself?"

Dora Hamilton turned swiftly on the other woman. "I do not know why you really came here; but if it was to make mischief I'll kindly ask you to go. Whatever my husband may have been to you in the past it's nothing to me, for now he's all mine, and I know he has never been anything but honest and—"

"Honest?" echoed Teresa. "You poor, simple, deluded fool! So you really

think Jack honest?" She laughed out loud. "Well, that beats anything I ever heard!"

"Go!" cried Dora, rising and pointing to the door angrily.

"O, yes, I'll go all right, in my own time; but I'll tell you this first, and you can't help hearing my words. I threw Jack over because he was imprisoned on a charge of forgery! Ah, you start! So that's news to you, is it?" Dora was so astonished that she stood hopelessly mute while the other rattled on with her tale of slander. "Yes," she went on. "Jack was imprisoned and he was guilty all right, for he told me so himself. His uncle paid an enormous sum, and, of course, the matter was hushed up so there was no trial, but that didn't palliate his offence. Do you think I'd marry him knowing him guilty? Not I! I wouldn't speak another word to him. I supposed that one day, sooner or later, he'd console himself, as all men do, but I didn't think he'd be so mean as not to tell his future wife what he was before marrying her. No woman cares to hear that she has married a thief!"

"How dare you come with such lies, to my house!" cried Dora.

"Lies!" echoed the other. "Lies!"

"I don't believe a word you've said," answered Dora with more force than politeness. Instantly she knew why the other had come here. The question of music was but a subterfuge to force herself, for some petty jealousy, into her successful rival's house. Yes, Dora felt sure of this now. She had unconsciously been the other girl's rival. Well, she couldn't help the past, but, as Jack's wife, she would uphold his honor and allow no word against him, especially in his own house.

"You don't believe me, or you pretend not to do so," said Teresa, sarcastically. "Then ask himself." She pointed dramatically to the door where a young man now stood. He had entered unnoticed, and, hearing the last words of the sentence, and seeing who his visitor was, he pretty well guessed why the two women confronted each other so angrily.

"Yes, ask himself!" repeated Teresa.

Scarcely glancing at her Mr. Hamilton walked across the room to where his wife stood, near the fireplace.

"Do you wish to ask me anything, darling?" he whispered to her gently.

"I—oh, I don't know," faltered Dora. "She," pointing to Teresa, "she says such dreadful things. She even called you—oh, Jack! Tell me, it isn't true?"

"What did she call me?" he questioned.

Teresa stepped forward. "I was only informing your dolly, golden-haired wife—"

"You can speak with respect of Mrs. Hamilton here," interrupted the man, angrily.

"Oh, well," went on Teresa coldly.

"I was informing her of something in your past which you thought well to hide. You were not so cautious when you proposed to me!" She forced a harsh, unnatural laugh.

"Dora, dear," said Jack. "What is it you want to know? Tell me what Miss Porter was saying and you were as emphatically trying to deny when I entered?"

"Yes, trying to deny," put in Teresa coldly. "That's just what. In spite of the most overwhelming evidence to the contrary, and in spite of your own assertion to me a few years ago, which I just mentioned to her, your wife was trying hard to deny that you were once a thief!"

She shrieked the last word at him, and he winced at the sound of it. Instinctively, he dropped Dora's hand and moved a few steps away from her, but she moved nearer to him and put her arm affectionately round his shoulder. He looked down at her lovely brown eyes, now dimmed with unshed tears, and, reading there nothing but love, he said:

"Will you listen to all I have to tell you dearest, all I came home early to tell you to-day? Or will you let this woman sow seeds of discord here?"

"Speak, Jack," assented Dora. "I will hear you out to the end." She leant heavily against a high-backed chair, looking unutterably miserable. He had not denied the awful charge. What terrible story was he now to unfold? "Thank you," said Jack simply. "It is true that once I forged a cheque."

(Dora shivered slightly, but he was not



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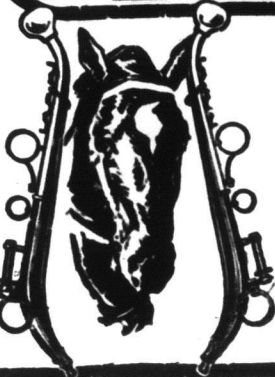
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