

The Eyes of Youth

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oldest living frock coat with a silk hat to match.

"Then rustle into them," he said carelessly.

"Rustle into them! Higgins, you are more lacking in delicacy of fiber than even I supposed. Rustle into them indeed! That frock coat is entitled to all the respect that's coming to it, on the strength of an historic past. It frightens me to hear you speak of it in that rude, boisterous way. That coat must be entreated. Wait."

"I tiptoed over to the closet and carefully opened the door. There, confronting me with a serene, impressive dignity, falling in austere, noble folds from the hanger, was the oldest living frock coat. On the shelf above it, crowning it as it were, was the oldest living silk hat."

"I felt a dreaded sinking of the heart. Ruth Dufrange, whose poems my youth had dreamed over, that first volume, 'Mes Amours'! Must I give over meeting her because of the obstinacy of mere clothes?"

"I laid my cheek against the shoulder of the coat. 'Ruth Dufrange,' I whispered, 'Mes Amours.'"

"I assure you, Amy, that garment positively leaped forward and allowed itself to be taken down without a protest. The hat, too, bounded toward me. Gently I drew them from their seclusion. Gently, gently I slipped into the coat."



"I claim to possess, Higgins, the oldest living frock coat."

Carefully I adjusted the hat on my head. As I picked up my gloves, it seemed to me that Higgins suppressed a snort of goatlike laughter; but I cared nothing for that, I was to meet Ruth Dufrange. The mere thought was sufficient to send me flying down all my steps three at a time. I sprang into Higgins's cab before him, while he puffed and panted behind me. Wheezing like a pug, he gave the cabbie the name of her hotel and we were off. It had been raining yesterday afternoon, you know; one of those silver, dashing, spring showers, and the pools in the asphalt reflected bits of the shining blue sky. Flags were flying here and there along the Avenue; from the Waldorf flapped the Austrian and Chinese colors.

"We stopped at her hotel and were immediately shown to her drawing-room. Amy, I cannot describe to you the charm of the atmosphere. There was a soft pink light in the room. I think the sun fell through rose-colored silk shades; and there were roses, pink roses all about in bowls and vases, and the petals were blowing all over the room. And then—she came in."

"Is she beautiful, Harding?" I asked. "Beautiful? I didn't know at first. Believe me or not, I didn't know. I only knew at once, the moment she entered the room, that this was the only woman I ever could or would love and I knew it immediately, finally, eternally. Why, hours afterwards I couldn't have told you whether she was tall or short, dark or fair. I only knew that she was the one woman, and this stupendous fact paralyzed temporarily all conscious observation. It was long afterwards that these impressions asserted themselves."

"But, Harding, did you think her

beautiful, when you had time to remember?" I repeated.

"Of course," looking at me with surprised eyes. "Do you think a woman with her soul could be anything else? Ah, she more than fulfilled every dream. Her beautiful, old rose-colored gown fell from her shoulders in long, soft folds; her face was pale and her dark hair was twisted in a coronet about her classic head; and her eyes, oh, Amy, the depth, the darkness of those midnight eyes!"

The humble confidant was forgotten. "Go on," I touched his sleeve impatiently.

"Oh!" He roused himself. "Well, we were hardly seated before the oldest living frock coat was so vicariously overcome by emotions that it gave the most awful, ominous rip right in the middle of the back. I sat with the color crowding up into my face, and it seemed to me that I heard another goat giggle from Higgins. Just as I was planning how, when the time came to go, I should gracefully bend over her hand, kiss it, and then back from the room, she poured some tea for us. I got up, stretched out my arm to take the cup, when there was a loud report of a ghastly rip in the sleeve. It was so prolonged, so poignant. It went on and on rattling over my nerves; and it, or its echoes, seemed to last indefinitely. And Amy, truly, that sleeve was literally hanging by a thread. And then through a red mist of shame and misery, I heard her voice. And oh, Amy, quite gayly and carelessly she was saying to Higgins:

"Run away, please, Neddy, for the rest of this afternoon. I like this dear child so much. I want to talk to him."

"He went. He went, and in that moment of supreme triumph, that poor, game old coat tried to give the college yell of its youth, and another seam, several I think, gave way."

"But I don't care, for she smiled on me so tenderly and with a sort of amused, comprehending sympathy."

"There was once a poor young man," she said archly. "His clothes were old and worn, his shoes were broken so that the water came in—"

"But the stars shone through his soul," I capped her quotation, Amy; I too had read Victor Hugo, "for he was in love."

"She laughed, 'Of course he was in love,' she murmured; 'when one is twenty or eighteen—'

"I am twenty-two," I said firmly, "and I fell in love for the first time in my life ten minutes ago."

"She looked rather quickly then; not at me, but into the depths of an old-fashioned mirror between the windows, and she seemed to forget me she was looking so earnestly at her own reflection with a little smile that was half triumphant and half sad, half sweet and half bitter. And then she remembered me again, and turned away from the glass and smiled dazlingly at me with a smile that was all sweetness."

"The Eyes of April," she murmured. Then she asked me about myself and I talked and talked until it got late and I had to go, and I assure you, I forgot all about the oldest living frock coat; but it does bother me now to think I can't remember how I got out of that room."

He wrinkled his brows and stared at the fat robins hopping over the lawn. "Amy, you're a good sort to listen to me," He squeezed my hand. "But good old Amy, fancy what it must be like to be young and beautiful and famous and write poetry like hers! Have you ever read 'Mes Amours'?"

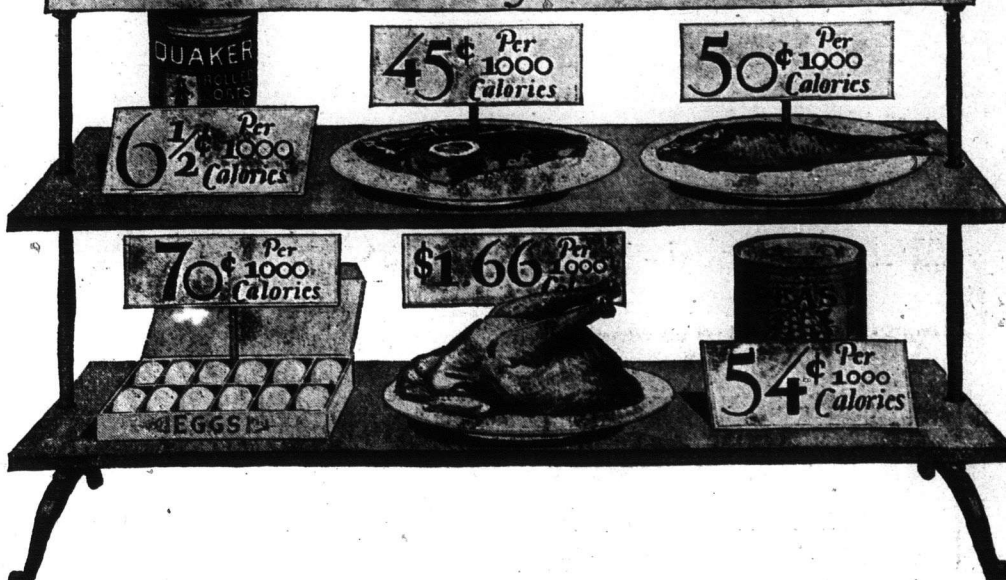
"Yes, and I knew one of the poems long before it was published. The one that begins:

"When first we loved, Sweetheart, he sighed,
The world was all a tender mist,
The gray-green mist of young Spring-tide,
The peach buds blossomed when we kissed."

"But—'before it was published'—!" he stammered. "How on earth could you—?"

"Ruth Dufrange wrote it in an old autograph album of my mother's. They were school-girls together."

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