

The Love Charm
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From
The New Monthly Magazine, 1835
Volume 45

Compiled
by
Peter J. Bolton

THE LOVE CHARM.

“VERY well, indeed. I see that I shall make quite a gardener of you in time.” The fair girl to whom this was addressed looked up in the old man’s face with a smile, and then went on with her task. This task consisted in tying up various flowering annuals, which, like many other things in this world, required a little wholesome restraint. A pretty little garden it was on which they were bestowing so much pains, both useful and ornamental. The straight green rows of beans had some tall stalks among them, that might have emulated their classical ancestor, on which Jack the Giant Killer mounted to the Ogre’s castle, and the peas deserved all the praises which it did their master’s heart good to hear lavished upon them. There was a background of cabbages, and some artichokes overlooked the neat quickset hedge. Gooseberries and currants were beginning to redden amid their verdant leaves, the cherries were looking a sort of yellow coral, and the small crisp apples were already set. A blue tint was already appearing on the lavender, and the pale young shoots were springing in the box edges which neatly surrounded the small flower-bed. The porch at the door was covered with China roses, pretty delicate frail things without scent. But this was compensated by the cabbage roses, now opening their crimson depths full of summer and sweetness, wearing the richest blush that ever welcomed June.

Adam Leslie was a happy man—he had all that a long life had desired—a window looking into a street—his house was the last of a row, a garden, and a small competence. He had past a number of years in the very heart of the city, where a dusty geranium, a pot of mignonette, and a blackbird, were all he had to remind him of his boyhood and his native Argyleshire. He kept a small shop, whose profits just, and only just, maintained a wife and a large family. They were not destined long to be the burthen which in his moments of temper he sometimes called them,—wife, children, were carried one after another to the crowded church-yard in the next street. He wished that they had been buried in the country, for the country to him was the ideal of existence. Years past away, and found him still the same hard-working man, toiling he scarcely knew for what. Suddenly a new tie again bound him to existence. His brother died, and left an orphan daughter to his charge. Once more that dark and narrow staircase was musical with childish feet—and Adam Leslie no longer sat down to an unshared and silent board. The timid quiet little stranger soon became to him even as a child of his own. She had the blue eyes and bright hair of those that he had lost. Like them he soon became anxious for her. The cheek grew paler day by day; the little feet lost their lightness; and the languid lip poured forth less and less frequent its snatches of mountain song. Marion was accustomed to air and exercise, and pined in the close street. “Can I not keep even one to be the joy of my old age,” thought the old man as he looked on the pale and spiritless child, who had drawn her stool towards him, and was resting her head on his knee. His resolution was taken—he gave up sundry visions of wealth and civic honours that of late had troubled him overmuch—and gathering

together what he had, gave up the pursuit of more. He sold his shop, and retired, as we have before said, on a small but comfortable independence. He took a small house at Greenwich—something of lingering habit still kept him near to the great city where he had passed so many years, and at first, it must be confessed, he found time rather heavy on his hands. But an active mind soon makes occupation for itself, and in the course of a year Leslie had quite enough to do. In the meantime he was amply rewarded by the improvement in Marion. The change did wonders for her. The cheek recovered its blooming colour, and amended health soon showed itself in the amended spirits. Often and often, when at work in his garden, he heard her sweet laugh, like musical bells in the distance; and her soft voice singing those old songs which yet struck a chord in his heart.

But Marion, from the rosy child, was now grown up into the lovely young woman, and there was one in particular who thought her so. Her engagement with Edward Meredith was known to, and approved by her uncle—certainly, in the first instance, he did say that Marion might have done better—yet, a little eloquence on the part of the lover, and a little silence and a few blushes on the part of the mistress, obtained his consent.

Young Meredith had his way to make in the world, but his steadiness and activity had made him a favourite with the merchant in whose counting-house he was a clerk, and, in a couple more years, he confidently calculated on being able to support a wife. Adam Leslie had not much to give during his life, but at his death Marion would inherit his little property. In this they were as happy as youth and hope could make. Expectation is in itself a very pretty sort of reality. Night after night Edward used to row, or if the wind served, sail down the Thames, and land about a mile above Greenwich, when a quarter of an hour's rapid walking brought him to Leslie's house. He usually arrived there about eight, which just left time for a walk in the fine old park with Marion. Slowly did they wander through those green and shadowy glades, where the deer feed so fearlessly, conscious, though scarce observant, of the beauty around them. They had no eyes for the Venetian palace at their side, through whose divided domes are seen the masts of a thousand ships. They looked not on the mighty city dark in the distance, nor on the green country that stretched far away; they had eyes only for each other. But the natural influences around were not unfelt, the soft air aided her companion's words to raise the rich colour on Marion's cheek; and Edward grew more eloquent with the free breath that he drew on the fresh and open height, which the Scotch girl laughed at him for calling hills. At nine punctually they returned to the house, when Marion used to disappear for a few minutes, "on hospitable cares intent," and she and supper came in together. They say suppers are very unwholesome, our grandfathers and grandmothers never discovered it, and Adam Leslie belonged to them; at all events, it was very pleasant, when on a summer evening the little table was drawn to the window seat, which two of the party found quite large enough for their accommodation, and on the other side the old man in his large arm-chair. In this seat Adam Leslie had three sources of happiness, he saw his supper, the clematis he had planted and trained round the window, and the young people who were to him as his children. "We

shall have a thunder-shower soon," had been his prophecy the whole day,—“The wish had been father to the thought;”—still hour after hour the dark clouds had passed provokingly away, taking their showers with them; however, they were now gathering in good earnest. A low clap of thunder growled in the distance, and the wind awoke on the branches. A shower of leaves, green fresh leaves falling before their time, whirled through the air. This was followed by the pelting rain, and Edward shut down the window. The gardener congratulated himself and his peas and beans, and the supper went on with added cheerfulness. Suddenly Edward exclaimed, “Look, Marion, how beautiful!” She turned and saw the clear silvery crescent of the new moon just emerged from a black cloud; a ring of blue sky was around, and the edges of the dense vapour were touched with light.

“Ah!” exclaimed Marion, who had all the ready superstition of a mountaineer, “I have seen the new moon through glass for the first time, and you, Edward, have shown it me.”

“It is very unlucky,” continued her uncle, “to see the new moon through glass for the first time.”

Edward tried to laugh at the superstition, but unshared mirth only damps the spirits of a small circle, and he gave up the attempt. That night they parted somewhat sooner and less cheerfully than usual. The next morning was too glad and sunny for any ill omen to be recollected, and by a sort of tacit agreement the moon was kept quite out of the conversation, Marion a little ashamed of a belief which she could not reason upon, and Edward as little liking to renew any subject in which he could not agree with her.

A fortnight passed away, and the moon was at its full; Edward was now later of an evening than he usually had been, for an extreme pressure of business on the house in which he was employed made the work of extra hours necessary, and he was only too glad to do anything that put him forward in his master's favour. One night he was returning very late, but the tide served, the night was a lovely night in June, and he enjoyed it, as those enjoy whose naturally poetic temperament is checked by their ordinary circumstances, but which lends the keenest delight to any touch of romance or beauty that breaks in upon the commonplace. He floated down the noble river with a navy resting on its dark stream. The light arched bridges, with the long lines of light trembling through them, were left far behind. The huge dome of St. Paul's arose bathed in the moonlight, that giant fane of a giant city, a hundred spires were shining silvery in the soft gleam, and all meaner objects were touched with a picturesque obscurity: all around was silence and rest. The myriad voices of London were still, and nothing vexed the lulled ear of midnight. The only sounds were those that might have soothed even the ear of sleep—there was the languid waving to and fro of some loose sail, and the dip of Edward's oars. His little boat was the only moving thing on the water, for if the black colliers, whose gloomy canvass was still spread, moved, the movement was imperceptible. But his light boat went on and left behind a train of glittering bubbles, like the small stars that meet and mingle on the milky way.

He had now arrived at that more lonely portion of the river which preceded his landing. A little tired with rowing, he let the oars drop,

and his boat glided with the stream, as he leant back gazing on the clear heaven above. He started, for a wild strain of music floated on the ear. It was interrupted for a moment by the chiming of the clocks that, one mingling with another, told the hour of twelve. They ceased, and the music rose distinct upon the ear. He gazed around and saw, far away in the moonlight, a little boat, with a white and swelling sail. He rowed towards it, and could distinguish the chords of some lute-like instrument, and the tones of a human voice. As he came nearer, he saw that the little bark lay motionless on the river, and that it only held one person. The figure was too much muffled for observation, but the flowing drapery denoted a woman—even if the sweet voice had left it doubtful—Edward remained entranced by the delicious singing. The air was singularly wild, and the words were in a foreign tongue, but he thought in his heart he had never listened to music before. After pausing while

“His spirit like a swan did float
Upon the silver breath of that sweet singing,”

he rowed eagerly towards the mysterious bark. A dense cloud sailed over the moon, and the river for a few moments was shrouded in complete darkness. The moonlight softly broke through the dusky barrier, the dense veil melted into soft and glittering vapour; again the river was flooded with light, but the music had ceased, and the boat was gone. Edward strained his eyes in gazing round the horizon, but in vain.—He listened, but no sound broke the profound stillness till the clocks struck one. He started from the reverie in which he had been indulging, and snatching up the oars, rowed hastily to the landing-place. Fastening his boat, he proceeded hastily along the lane which he had so often trodden. Twice he paused to breathe the cool fresh air, for he was feverish, and his temples were throbbing, while that sweet strange air would not quit his ear. Late as it was, there was a light in the window of Adam Leslie's cottage, and a light step stole along the passage, and a soft hand unbarred the door; a few whispered words were all on which they might venture, for her uncle would have been miserable at the idea of Marion keeping such late vigils. Edward's sleep that night was broken and troubled—that song haunted him. In his dreams he was again upon the water, he drew near to the strange boat, he spoke to its lady, and she raised her veil, and he gazed on a face beautiful beyond all that he had dreamed of beauty. Morning came at last, but he woke weary and fevered.

“How ill you look, dearest Edward,” said Marion, when they met at their early breakfast, “you are overworking yourself;” and she gazed upon him with a tender anxiety which left him not a thought but for herself. She walked with him down to the boat, yet he never alluded to the mysterious music of the preceding night, though it still rang in his ear, and mingled with even her sweet voice; a shyness for which he could not himself account prevented his alluding to the subject, he shrank from naming it; and when he reached the river, he cast a hasty and confused glance around, as if it must retain some consciousness. But all was bustle and life, the ships taking advantage of a favourable wind, were under a press of canvass, and boat and barge were in full activity. Children were playing on the banks, and their shrill voices and laughter softened the deeper tones of manhood and business.

Edward sought in vain that day to fix his attention to the desk before him ; still he heard that sweet low song, and faces of strange loveliness floated before him. He was impatient for night, and when it came, he sprang into his boat, half fearfully, half eagerly. It was as his heart foreboded, again he heard that melancholy song—again he saw the veiled figure in the little boat—the clocks too told the same hour, but this time he rowed at once towards the stranger's bark. The lady flung back her veil, and he at once recognised the lovely face that had so haunted his dreams. She stretched forth her hand, as their boats lay alongside, and he took the small white fingers, that glittered in the moonlight with gems, in his own. But the touch was as an electric shock, his boat seemed to sink from under him, a mighty sound was in his ears, and he sank back insensible.

He awoke as from sleep, confused and dizzy : he gazed round, and as he gradually recovered his senses, saw that he was in a vast hall. He lay for a while in a pleasant state of half consciousness, his gaze slowly taking note of the various objects by which he was surrounded. The hall was surrounded by pillars of malachite, wrought into the semblance of gigantic serpents that supported the shining dome, and whose illumined heads made an enormous lamp in the centre. The partitions they formed were filled either by alcoves crowded with birds of rich and foreign plumage, or by paintings representing scenes in some far country. At one end was a large fountain which played in fantastic forms round an inner basin that shone with liquid fire, and mingled its reddening jets with the fountain's clear and crystal ones. At the other end was a conservatory, crowded with large beautiful flowers, but none of them familiar to Edward. Marble urns scattered around were wreathed with their magnificent blossoms, and some of the birds, loosened from the golden network, flitted past ; some with crests of meteor-like crimson, others spreading vast and radiant pinions coloured from the sunset. The waving of their pinions, and the falling of the fountain, were the only sounds heard in that stately hall ;—these, and one other : it was the low soft breathing of a woman. Edward heard it, and turning to the side from whence it came, saw, watching by his side, the strange beauty of the song and of the boat. She was tall beyond the ordinary height of woman, but stately in her grace as the ideal of a queen and the reality of a swan. Her arms and feet were bare, but for the gems which encircled them. A white robe swept around her in folds gathered at the waist by a golden girdle inscribed with signs and characters. Her hair was singularly thick, and of that purple blackness seen on the grape and the neck of the raven—black, with a sort of azure bloom upon it. It was fastened in large folds, which went several times round the head, and these were adorned with jewels and precious stones, like a midnight lighted with stars. Her complexion was a pale pure olive, perfectly colourless, but delicate as that of a child. Her mouth was the only spot where the rose held dominion, and lips of richer crimson never opened to the morning.

"Youth," said she, in a low voice of peculiar sweetness, "I love thee ;—night after night I have watched thy boat on yonder river. I know not what the customs of thy land may be ;—I speak according unto mine. I have wealth—I have power—I have knowledge ;—I can share them all with thee."

Edward started to his feet—the image of Marion was uppermost in his thoughts. “Lady,” he replied, unconsciously imitating her own highwrought language, “in my country woman pleads not to man. I have not wooed, and I do not wish to win thee. Thou art wonderful and very fair, but thou art not my love.”

She looked at him for a moment with her large dark eyes. “I think,” continued she, “I could make thee love me, if thou wert to stay here awhile. I pray thee, give me a lock of your sunny hair. I have seen none like it.”

Edward gave her one of the bright curls which clustered golden around his head.

“Look around thee,” said the lady, “for a little time. This hall is a triumph of my art. These birds and flowers belong to my native Mexico, and so do those glad valleys.”

Edward gazed around in wonder, and while he gazed there came on the air the same melancholy song that he had heard while on the river. The very sound of his own steps disturbed him; and he flung himself on a couch, to enjoy without interruption the exquisite melody. The intense perfume of the flowers intoxicated him like wine. He felt as if lulled in a delicious trance, in which one image became more and more distinct—the pale but lovely face of his hostess. His heart was filling with love for those radiant eyes. A softer fragrance breathed around him—it was her breath. He looked, and she was again bending over him; he saw himself mirrored in the moonlight of her eyes.

“You will not leave me?” whispered she, in those soft sweet tones which were like notes from a lute.

“Never!” exclaimed the youth, and threw himself at her feet.

Weeks had passed away, and done the work of years in Adam Leslie’s cottage. His garden was now in the richest season of the year. The sunshine had settled into crimson on the peach; the bloom was on the plum, and the dahlias, whose colours might vie with a monarch’s clothing, crowded the garden with unwonted prodigality. Arm-in-arm the old man and his niece wandered around the now mournful garden; he trying to speak that comfort which his every look belied, and she trying to smile as if she believed him; but the tears rose into her eyes as she tried to smile. It was now more than six weeks since Edward’s mysterious disappearance, and the little hope that had once been cherished was now dying fast away. That night, after Adam Leslie had gone to bed, Marion strolled into the garden. She could not sleep, and the lovely moonlight she thought might soothe her. Alas, the tears that had been in her eyes all day now began to flow, when suddenly the sound of footsteps roused her attention. She raised her face from her hands, and saw a little deformed negro-woman standing beside her.

“Why do you cry,” said the strange visitor, fixing on her a pair of small, bright, snake-like eyes, “like a child, when you might win your lover back like a woman?”

Marion stood silent with extreme astonishment, and the woman went on. “Yes, if you will follow me—though you look as if you were frightened to death, I can help you to set your lover free. There are other bright eyes in the world besides your own; but yours will be the best and last loved, if you dare to follow one who is your friend.”

"I will ask my uncle," said Marion, trembling with agitation.

"You must ask no one, and nothing"—interrupted the little negro, her harsh voice growing yet harsher as she raised it—"but your own true heart: unless there be love enough to lead you on, your lover will remain bound by the spells of the sorceress for ever."

The thought past rapidly through Marion's mind, that if she could but see Edward, old love must revive, even if he had deserted her for another. Led on by some strange fascination, she followed the little negro woman. They came to the river side, where a small boat was moored, and when her companion was seated, took up the oars and began rowing with great quickness down the river. They stopped at a small flight of wooden steps, and an almost worn-out door admitted them into a large, but desolate-looking garden; another door, but that huge and massy, admitted them into a dark and winding passage. Marion shuddered as the little negro caught her hand to lead her forward; she followed her for some distance, when the sudden opening of another door dazzled her eyes with a blaze of light. They had entered a magnificent chamber, fitted up in the utmost oriental luxury for a sleeping-room. Marion was scarcely allowed time to look around, for her dwarfish companion whispered in a low tone, like the hissing of a serpent, "Open that gold box, and take out the lock of hair you see there; it is your lover's." Well did the forsaken girl recollect the sunny hair; she pressed it to her lips, while her fast-falling tears dimmed its lustre.

"Come, come, I will show him to you," exclaimed the little negro woman, again hurrying her on; "if you still love him, when you see him, throw that charmed lock of hair into the fountain of fire by which we shall be standing, and the spell that binds him will be broken."

Marion had not power to speak, but she followed the dwarfish creature with a heart beating louder than her steps. Again her eyes closed in the presence of sudden splendour, they were standing behind the fountain of mingled fire and water; from thence they could see without being seen. In the centre of that gorgeous hall, a lady was seated on a mattress covered with cloth of gold, and Edward was at her feet. They had eyes but for each other, and her one hand was in his, while the other was twisted in his bright hair.

"Now girl," hissed the same whisper, "fling the lock you hold in the fire."

Marion almost mechanically obeyed; she flung it, and a burst of thunder shook the building—the little fountain grew crimson, as if with blood; but one heart-piercing shriek rang above every other sound—it came from the dark lady.

"Hast thou found me, oh my enemy?" said she in the same low, sweet voice; but which now seemed the very echo of a broken heart.

"Aye," cried the little negro woman, "the dark spell has the mastery."

At this moment Marion rushed forward; she had seen Edward sink back convulsed on the couch—she threw herself on her knees beside, and supported his head—the dews of death were upon it. The tall and stately lady stood by, paler than marble, and even her bright lips colourless. Still her radiant eyes flashed defiance on the negro dwarf; but the heart's agony was in the compressed mouth, and with tears in those

starry eyes, she turned to Edward. Marion saw her approach, and clasping him passionately in her arms, exclaimed—

“He is mine, loved long before you knew him—let us at least die together.”

“Ah,” exclaimed the stranger, “is it even so; I knew not of it.”

A shrill wild laugh came from the little negro woman, and a faint cry from Marion; for Edward had sank down exhausted from her arm. Once more he unclosed his eyes, and fixing them on Marion with a look full of tenderness, murmured her name, and expired. The dark lady leant over him for a moment; whatever might be the anguish of that moment, she subdued it; but the veins swelled like chords in her clear temples, with the effort. She turned, and gave one look at the negro, who crouched beneath it like a beaten hound, and remained as if rooted to the spot.

“Take him to your home,” said she to Marion; “what I must do, your eyes would shrink to witness. I will offer you nothing; my love and my gifts turn to curses.”

She stamped on the ground, and four strange figures came forward, and raising Marion and Edward, carried them into the boat by the stairs, and there left them. The wind and tide slowly drifted them along, and the maiden sat floating over the river, with her lover's head upon her knee. Once, and once only she raised her eyes. A wild, melancholy song came upon her ear, and a dark bark, dimly seen amid the grey vapours of morning, flitted past. On the deck she fancied she saw a tall figure with long floating hair, stand wringing her hands in some passionate despair. It past rapidly out of sight, and as it past, the melancholy song died away in the distance; never since has it been heard on the Thames. The boat that bore the living and the dead was met by some watermen, who conveyed them on shore. Marion was perfectly insensible, and was carried home in a brain fever, from which she never recovered. At the last gasp they thought her sensible, for her eyes wandered round the room in search of her uncle; she caught sight of his face—a scarcely perceptible smile past over her countenance, and in that smile she died. The house and garden still remain, but they have a lonely and mournful look. The old man plants no more flowers in his garden; the few that he watches grow in the churchyard. He has planted some rose bushes on the grave of the lovers; those he still tends and waters. They are the last link between this living world and himself. Night and morning he visits those tombs; but he never visits them without a prayer that the time may soon come when he shall sleep at their side.

L. E. L.