

Look Before You Leap

by “DELTA”

It was at a fashionable watering place, which was then full, and towards the close of an intensely sultry summer day. Even the mirror-like sea seemed to partake in the general feeling of depression, and looked almost too languid to lift its gently heaving bosom, while the sluggish waves broke and rippled slowly and lazily along the shore, and apparently frothed and fizzed unusually as they kissed and sank into the burning yellow sand, then brightly tinted with the first hues of approaching sunset.

Archie Stevens and his friend George Finlay were sauntering leisurely along the beach, bent, like the crowd, on enjoying the somewhat cooler atmosphere of the hour and the place, so welcome after the broiling experience of the afternoon in the veranda of their hotel. They were young men of means who had come from a large interior city for recreation, sea-bathing and ocean air. They looked strong and wiry, but even health is benefited by change. And after the somewhat fast city life of the past season, they required it.

They were old school-fellows; and this, with congenial tastes, and the recent orphanage of both, leaving them at the head—Stevens of a banking and Finlay of a commercial firm, drew them together, and brought them to the seaside for a holiday.

“Any news to-day about the Wylie forgery?” asked Finlay.

“Not a word. They haven’t caught the rascal, and no doubt he’s safe in Mexico or Canada. I’m only one of a dozen the fellow has swindled. He has taken a heap of money with him wherever he has gone.”

“By Jove, old fellow—look there!” continued Stevens, presently, stopping short in his walk; “blue eyes, flaxen curls, and rosy cheeks. That’s what I call a pretty face. I wonder who they are. Mother and daughter, evidently.”

“New arrivals, I should think. It’s the first time I’ve seen them,” said Finlay, as he looked at the passing beauty with a critical eye.

“Suppose we turn,” suggested Stevens, whose mind evidently wandered after the face that had captivated him.

Fortune favors the brave. Ere they came up to the fair strangers, the younger of the two accidentally dropped her handkerchief, which was gallantly picked up and presented to her with a polite bow by the susceptible and delighted Stevens. The lucky incident gave them the desired introduction. So together the four walked back to their hotel, which happened to be the one nearest their own, and received a pressing invitation to call again.

The two friends saw much of their new acquaintances—Mrs. Sharpe and her daughter Annie. Mr. Sharpe was traveling at present—on business, they were informed. Miss Annie, according to the

sagacious mamma's quietly dropped hint, was still "in maiden meditation fancy free," which made her all the more attractive in the eyes of the young bachelors, neither of whom was well versed either in woman's ways, or, indeed, to tell the truth, in business. That which they inherited had been made for them. Their legacy gave them money, but the acumen and tact which made it could not be similarly transmitted.

Ere a fortnight passed, Stevens was head over ears in love with Annie Sharpe. Her face had first captivated him. Her manner appeared the incarnation of artlessness and purity, and her animation, charming conversation, brilliant playing and sweet voice completed the conquest. The two parties were inseparable, and the Sharpes' natty little pony phaeton just held the four comfortably. Mrs. Sharpe usually drove, being a finished whip.

"I'll back Annie Sharpe against any girl in the place. She is the prettiest—the handsomest, and the best," said Stevens, one morning when whiling the time away with a cigar.

"You're quite struck, old fellow," laughed Finlay. "They're certainly very nice; but we know nothing about them."

"Well, as much as any reasonable man can want to. They are both ladies, in appearance, manners, and conversation. They must have money, for look at their style. They admit that Sharpe is self-made, but all honor to him for that. So was my own father. Self-made men are the salt of the earth, nature's nobility. I bow to worth."

"But," suggested Finlay, "it's curious why he does not appear."

"I've seen his letters."

"Read them?"

"No; Mrs. Sharpe offered, but I declined, and took her word for it. Pshaw, old fellow, don't be so suspicious. Ah! if you once looked into Annie's eyes as I have done, you would cease to doubt. They are the well where truth lies. The only thing I don't like about her is that cough, but she says it's nothing."

"And what about Cousin Amy?"

"Well, Amy is a nice, loving little thing. But she hasn't Annie's style and dash."

"Which means," said Finlay, "that you've given her up."

"We never were engaged," answered Stevens. "That was only a harmless flirtation. I dare say she has forgotten me by this time."

"Well, Archie," said Finlay, after a pause, "take care and don't go too deep into it with Miss Sharpe, unless you mean something."

“You’re too late with your advice my friend. We’re engaged.”

“Are you serious?”

“Never more so. We are to be married this day fortnight. Will you be my friend on the occasion?”

So, Finlay desisted from his well-meant attempt to caution his more impulsive and less cautious companion against a hasty alliance with a comparative stranger.

He had aroused some secret misgivings in Stevens’s mind, however. But a sight of Annie soon dispelled them. Dazzled and blinded by her beauty—like a moth by a candle—he argued himself into belief that matters were all right. He was too much involved to attempt to retract, and too deeply smitten to wish to do so.

A fortnight later the two parties came on to New York, where, in the absence of Annie’s father, Finlay [performed] the double office of giving the bride away and acting as Archie’s groom’s-man. The wedding was a quiet one, the bride being married in travelling [sic] costume. After the ceremony Finlay returned home; while the newly married pair proceeded on their brief marriage trip to Niagara, after which they rejoined Mrs. Sharpe, whom they had left in New York.

On returning to their hotel one evening, they found Mrs. Sharpe in close conversation with a gentleman, up to whom the young wife rushed and threw her arms around his neck.

“This is my husband—Mr. Sharpe,” said the mother. “His arrival gave me such a surprise.”

Neither of the ladies appeared to have expected him. However, after a welcome from Archie, the party seated themselves for a cozy chat. The new comer was about to give an account of his travels, when they were interrupted by a somewhat imperious knock at the door, which made Sharpe start, turn pale, and look round as if for some hiding-place.

Before any reply could be made, a man unceremoniously opened the door and walked in, glanced at the group—finally fixed his eyes on Sharpe, and took a photograph from his pocketbook.

“Humph,” said he, as he looked from one to the other. “You’re the man, and no mistake, with your beard grown. You are my prisoner Mr. Algernon Wylie.”

“What do you mean—my name is Sharpe?”

“Alias Wylie,” answered the private detective, “accused of three separate forgeries, and several swindles. It’s no use trying to blind me. You’ve given me a thundering chase, but I’ve earthed you at last. Come along.”

Sharpe was immediately handcuffed and marched off, after bidding his wife and daughter a hasty adieu, but evading his lately made son-in-law. The latter had barely time to take in the situation and realize the predicament into which his hasty and ill-advised union had led him, when his

attention was directed to his wife who had been seized with a violent fit of coughing and was bringing up blood in large quantities.

A physician managed to stem the life-current for the time; but this was the beginning of the end. The pink tinge in her cheek that had charmed her husband and the ominous cough which had alarmed him, were the incipient signs of consumption, that had now taken a more active form.

Stevens had married the daughter of a forger—the very man who had robbed his own firm. But it was too late now to mend the matter or retrace his steps, and inopportune to talk of false pretense, and think of divorce. He had gone into the trap with his eyes open, and could find no fault in the wife of his own free choice, on which to found a plea. It was just possible that she might not know of her father's delinquencies. At present it would be cruel and dangerous to question her on the subject. She was now his wife, and perhaps on her death-bed. He felt that he could not desert her, and so resolved to wait for the issue. Notwithstanding the suspicion, Archie had a real affection for her. The physician said that she might not need his care long.

It was now impossible to take her to his own home, even if it had been prudent. He felt that he had been victimized by the mother if not by the daughter, and was ashamed of the entire transaction. How he regretted that he didn't take Finlay's advice, and act more cautiously.

All conversation was strictly forbidden the patient. But a week later another violent hemorrhage took place, which brought her to death's door.

"Call my husband," she said, to the nurse, faintly.

Stevens came and knelt by her side to support her in her sore distress.

"Leave the room, nurse," she whispered.

"Archie," she said, "I'm going fast. Don't think I misled you. I knew nothing of my father's dishonest doings. He has killed me as well as robbed you. I love you truly. Pardon my father as much as you can for my sake. Kiss me, Archie, and say you forgive me."

Archie kissed his dying wife, and in a few minutes she passed away gently where there will be no suffering and no sorrow. He ended his brief but eventful honeymoon by putting her in a premature grave, after which he thought of returning home.

He felt convinced of her innocence, but was as sure of her mother's complicity in the fraud. Though guiltless of Sharpe's crimes, she had schemed to marry her daughter and entrap him. Her manner betrayed her, for she kept out of his way, and could not face him. Still, he did not feel inclined to cross-question her. She was his mother-in-law, and penniless, and he could not wholly cast her off. Her husband lived on his wits, and that uncertain source of income was gone. So Archie gave her a small pension, which he did not miss out of his ample means, on the understanding that she was to live abroad, and hold no communication with him. He did not press the charge against Sharpe. But there was enough to convict him besides, and to send him to Sing Sing for life.

Archie returned home, feeling that, after all matters might have been worse, and that he had reason to be thankful for the escape, such as it was, from the false position into which he had so thoughtlessly put himself by a hasty, ill-advised marriage.

“Amy! It is so kind of you to meet me,” said he to his cousin on arrival at the station. “I didn’t expect you. And Finlay, too! this is a double pleasure.”

Amy had not forgotten Archie, as he fancied, or wished to fancy. But his marriage showed that he had in great measure forgotten her. At first, self-respect forbade, but pity for her afflicted cousin over-ruled her first design, and made her go to give him welcome home. There was a greater change in her than his hasty and superficial observation noticed. Her face was wan, and her air listless, so different from the bright, lively Amy of old.

Archie settled down to business to banish unpleasant reminiscences. Every one knew of his marriage, and the subsequent events soon leaked out. But he was a favorite, and his friends let the matter drop, though it was impossible to prevent outside gossip and scandal.

So matters stood for some months; Amy, however, getting paler and sadder, till at length she was ordered change of air, which she found in a neighboring State. There was no special ailment; but merely a general wasting, depression, and failure of vitality, which her physician could not account for because he had not fathomed its cause. In reality, it was a broken heart; the intense longing of a super-sensitive nature for reciprocated love, once thought hers, was overshadowing and crushing every other function and feeling in her frame.

A fortnight later, her mother telegraphed to Archie that Amy was worse and wished to see him. Through some misunderstanding he did not reach his destination for two days; and then he was too late. This last presumed neglect and indifference had given the final blow. Her spirit had gone where there will be no disappointments.

Archie helped to consign this second fruit of his folly to her marriage bed—the grave. She had left no message for her cousin. Womanlike she had concealed her love, though her mother guessed the secret. Close to her heart was found a small locket in which there was a lock of hair with a date, which Archie remembered having given her ere he left for the seaside. And then he realized for the first time the intense love and the happiness that he had lost, and that might have been his had he not thoughtlessly thrown them away.

Word count: 2297

The New York Ledger, Look Before You Leap, December 16, 1876

https://iammdaniel-my.sharepoint.com/personal/mbendels_mcdaniel_edu/_layouts/15/onedrive.aspx?q=look%20before%20you%20leap&searchScope=folder&id=%2Fpersonal%2Fmbendels%5Fmcdaniel%5Fedu%2FDocuments%2FWestminster%20Detective%20Library%2FWDL%20pdfs%20of%20our%20sources%2FLook%5FBefore%5FYou%5FLeap%2Epdf&parent=%2Fpersonal%2Fmbendels%2FDocuments%2FWestminster%20Detective%20Library%2FWDL%20pdfs%20of%20our%20sources%2FLook%5FBefore%5FYou%5FLeap%2Epdf

[5Fmcdaniel%5Fedu%2FDocuments%2FWestminster%20Detective%20Library%2FWDL%20pdfs%20of%20our%20sources&parentview=7](#)