



LESSONS IN LOVE

by Ann Shorey

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CHAPTER ONE

Chicago

July, 1858

At the sound of light footsteps in the hall outside her aunt's study, Merrie Black paused in the act of dipping her pen into an inkwell. She groaned to herself. Another interruption. She'd promised the editor of Kipler's Home Weekly an article by next week, but at this rate she'd never fulfill her agreement.

"Miss Merrie." The housekeeper's voice carried into the book-lined room. In another moment, the door swung open and Mrs. Wagner dashed in, her ruffled cap askew. "Did you forget your piano lesson? Mr. Thackery has been waiting in the music room for ten minutes."

"Why didn't you tell me he'd arrived?" Merrie dropped a paperweight over her manuscript and scrambled to her feet.

"I reminded you this morning at breakfast. He's here at three every Thursday." Arms akimbo, Mrs. Wagner frowned. "You're twenty years old—I expect you to keep your own appointments."

"I apologize. You did remind me." She slipped her arm around the shoulders of her aunt's diminutive housekeeper. "I don't know what I'd do without you to look after me."

“I don’t know either, and that’s a fact. Once you shut yourself away with your writing, lightning could strike and you wouldn’t notice.”

She opened her mouth to argue, then closed it. Nothing captured her attention as thoroughly as writing her articles. Not even Mr. Thackery’s dark eyes and shy smile. She glanced down at her emerald-sprigged muslin skirt and brushed at wrinkles.

“I wish I had time to change to a better dress.”

“Just go on. Your aunt pays him whether you’re learning anything or not. Don’t waste her money.”

She chafed at the reminder. One of these days, she’d earn enough from her writing to take care of herself.

“I’m not wasting her money. I enjoy the piano. Mr. Thackery is a good teacher.” She left the study and directed her steps toward the music room off the reception hall of her aunt’s spacious home.

“Wait. I forgot to give you this.” Mrs. Wagner held out an envelope. “Peters brought it for you when he came back from town.” She shook her head. “Don’t know why they can’t get your name right.”

When Merrie read the address—“Mr. M. M. Black,” her heartbeat quickened. Payment from Kipler’s Home Weekly for her most recent article.

“Thank you,” she called after the housekeeper’s retreating back.

Mrs. Wagner waved her hand and continued toward the kitchen.

As soon as she was out of sight, Merrie paused beneath a lighted sconce in the hall and used her forefinger to slit open the missive. She’d submitted a longer piece

last time, with several references, and hoped for a larger sum in payment. Her conscience pricked at not correcting the editor when he assumed she was a man, but she knew she had a better chance of being published as Mr. M. M. Black.

Her eyes widened when she saw the amount of the bank draft, then narrowed with concern when she noticed a folded sheet of paper remaining in the envelope. Most unusual. Mr. Kipler seldom sent messages with her payment. She glanced toward the music room where Mr. Thackery waited, knowing she should wait to read the letter until after her instructor departed. But another minute or two wouldn't hurt. She unfolded the page and scanned the contents, then drew a sharp breath and read the message again.

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