

2020 MCC Creative Writing Contest

First Place - Fiction Category

"A. Bradley" by Hannah DeVries

Grace Clemency watched from the stairwell as Henry Reed shook hands with her father. She couldn't believe this was happening! Henry had been working for her father since he was just a boy, and now he was leaving Boston to stake a claim out west. Memories flooded her mind of times they'd spent together, and the long talks they'd had. She had always hoped that he had feelings for her, as she did for him. There had been moments she'd been sure he cared for her, but the signs would disappear as quickly as they'd come. She didn't dare tell her friends, or parents, for fear of how they would react. It was so unfair! Why should it matter that he was below her class?

Grace was pulled from her thoughts as Henry approached her. He gazed at her for a moment with a smile and said, "You've been a good friend." With that he turned and walked out the door, and out of her life.

Two years Later

Grace entered the post office and the familiar scent of paper and ink engulfed her. Her Aunt Elizabeth had been writing her regularly and urging her to come for a visit. After several correspondences, Grace had discovered that her aunt was eager to introduce her to a wealthy bachelor that had taken up residence in a neighboring estate. She never agreed with marrying someone for their status. She'd always longed to marry for love, but she was beginning to feel that dream would never come true.

"Miss Clemency", the postwoman said, coming out of the backroom.

"A letter arrived for you just this morning!" She said, handing it to her. Grace sighed. Another letter from her aunt.

"Thank you", she said turning to leave, but one of the posters hanging on the wall caught her attention before she could reach the door. Her eyes widened as she stared at the paper. It was an ad from a man looking for a mail order bride. In itself there was nothing out of the ordinary about that; she saw hundreds of them around town. What had caught her attention was the name, Henry Reed. Grace looked back to see the portly postwoman waddling back into the storage room and, after ensuring that no one was watching, she quickly ripped the poster off the wall and shoved it into her pocketbook.

Grace rushed up the stairs and quickly locked herself in her room as soon as she got home. Gingerly, she pulled out the wrinkled piece of paper and examined it. Could it really be possible that, after everything, an ad from her Henry could reach her? Looking at the poster in her hand she knew her feelings for him had never truly gone away. He hadn't wanted her back then, but now that he was searching for a wife, maybe he would. The very thought made her head spin!

She couldn't make him fall in love with her in person, but just maybe, she could get him to fall in love with her on paper. After thinking of a pen name, Grace began writing.

Dear Mr. Reed

My name is Alice Bradly. I recently came across your ad in my local post office. While I do not normally pay much attention to such ads, there was something in yours that compelled me to respond. The kindness you portrayed in your words convinced me that you are a good man. I am not accustomed to farm work. However, I promise you that I would work hard to do my very best to help you on your claim. I look forward to corresponding with you and await your reply.

Sincerely,

A. Bradley

Grace brought her letter to the post office on the other side of town, and with shaky hands, started it on its way to Henry. She went to the post office as much as possible within the next few weeks. Just when she was about to give up on receiving a response, her first letter arrived. Grace excitedly tore open the letter and began to read.

Dear Alice,

I hope you don't mind if I call you Alice, but I think that, because of our situation, we should be on a first name basis. Thank you for answering my ad. You seem like a good woman, who would be a hard worker. I need to let you know that life here isn't easy. There are wild animals, rough winters, and if the crops don't grow it's hard to survive. I don't want to scare you, but you need to know what you would be getting yourself into. I also think we need to work on getting to know each other. This is not something anyone should go into lightly.

Sincerely,

Henry Reed

Grace was delighted that Henry wanted to converse with her. This was her chance to prove herself to him, without needing to worry about status or wealth! If this worked, she would owe Henry a very good explanation, but for now at least, it was a start. He didn't seem terribly friendly in the letter, but this was new to both of them. She just needed to help him get to know her. Walking over to her desk she pulled out some paper and her pen and began writing.

Dear Henry,

A first name basis sounds wonderful! I do not expect life out West to be easy. Wild animals can be dealt with, and I am not afraid of the cold. As for having prosperous crops I have confidence in your abilities, however, if something were to happen, I would not run at the first sign of hardship. Now, let me tell you a little about myself...

Henry set the letter he'd just finished reading on top the others. It had been several months since the first one had arrived, and his thoughts became more conflicted with each one. Alice seemed like an amazing girl! Someone he could trust. Someone he could have a stable future with. So why was this decision so hard? He knew what the logical decision was. The logical decision would be to send her a train ticket in his next letter. There was more at play here than logic though. There was something so familiar about Alice. Every time he read one of her letters, memories from his past would come crashing back, until all he could think of was the woman he'd loved so long ago. Henry knew what he had to do, and with the past still burning in his memory, he sat down at the table and began to write.

Grace stared blankly at the paper in front of her. How could this have happened? It didn't make any sense! Everything had been going so well. Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves, she began again at the beginning of the letter, hoping that, somehow, there had been a mistake.

Dear Alice,

Talking to you over the past few months has made me realize some things, and I need to be honest with you. We will not need to keep writing each other. I'm sorry for any pain that I caused you, but my heart already belongs to someone. You are a beautiful and kind woman. You deserve a man who can give you his whole heart, and I can't. I didn't know that I was in love when we started writing. I'm not even sure when I realized I was in love. All I know is that you deserve much more than I can give you.

Sincerely,

Henry Reed

Grace folded the letter and placed it with the rest of them as tears streamed down her face. She had failed. Henry was in love with someone else and there was nothing she could do to change it. Once again, she could feel her heart breaking for him. She wanted him to be happy, but she also knew that, without him, she never would be.

Grace startled at her mother's voice coming from directly behind her door.

“Grace darling, I have a letter for you from your aunt Elizabeth. I do wish you would reconsider visiting her, dear. It would mean so much to her.”

Henry gazed out the window as the train approached Boston. He was about to make a complete fool out of himself and he knew it, yet there was something deep inside of him that just had to try! Grace’s home wasn't far from the station, and he was at her doorstep before he could even try to get his thoughts collected. Taking a deep breath, he raised his hand to the door and knocked. The maid answered, giving him a questioning look. Henry cleared his throat.

“Is Miss Grace Clemency at home?” He asked nervously.

“I'm sorry Sir, but she's just left. She's leaving to live with her aunt Elizabeth. I heard she's found quite the wealthy suitor.” Henry stiffened.

“How long ago did they leave?” He asked hurriedly.

“About 15 minutes ago, heading East. You may be able to catch them if you hurry.” Henry thanked her and ran to the livery stable.

Grace lay her head against the window of the carriage as it jerked down the road. She wasn't sure her heart would ever heal completely, but perhaps new surroundings would be good for her. She was pulled from her thoughts by some commotion outside as the carriage slowed. Lifting her head to look out the window, she saw a man racing towards them on horseback. When he was close enough for her to make out the features of his face, she couldn't believe her eyes. It was Henry! Henry jumped from his horse and opened the carriage door as Grace stood and climbed out.

“Grace before you say anything, I want you to listen to me. I know that we’re from two different worlds, but I love you. I don't want to live my life without you in it.” Henry looked down at his worn clothing and muddy boots.

“I know I don't have a right to ask you this, but the truth is, I care about you too much not to try.” Henry took her hand in his and lowered himself to one knee.

“Will you marry me?” Grace watched the intense hope on Henry’s face change to concern.

“I don't understand. In the letter you said you were in love with someone else.” She whispered, forcing herself out of her state of shock. Henry looked at her in confusion.

“What letter?” He asked standing.

“I found your ad in the post office. I thought that perhaps, if you didn't know who I was, you could fall in love with me and not be stopped by who society says I am.” Grace said quietly. Henry's eyes widened as he realized what she was saying.

“You’re Alice?”

“I’ve loved you for a long time, and when I saw your ad, I made up the pen name A. Bradley. I thought that maybe…” Grace paused and looked away, too embarrassed to finish. Henry gently lifted her chin so that she was looking at him.

“You never answered my question.” He said kneeling once more.

“Grace Clemency will you marry me?” He asked smiling.

“Yes!” Grace shouted, laughing. Henry sprang to his feet and grabbed Grace, swinging her around in a circle.

“I have something for you.” Grace said regaining her footing. After digging through her pocketbook for a moment, she pulled out a wrinkled envelope.

“It’s a letter that I never sent you, explaining who I really am.” She said, handing it to Henry. Henry opened the letter and looked down at the signature.

“A. Bradly”, he said smiling. Grace beamed at the man standing before her and for the very first-time, she felt that everything was going to be alright. Because Henry, her Henry, loved her and she was going to be his wife.