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A Tale for the 90's From Louisa May Alcott

By **LAWRENCE VAN GELDER** DEC. 20, 1994

More than a century after its author's death, a manuscript by Louisa May Alcott that was rejected in the 19th century as too sensational is to be published by Random House.

Titled "A Long Fatal Love Chase," it is the tale of a young woman stalked by a former lover.

"Its connection to modern day is a little too close for comfort," said Lane Zachary, who handled the sale for Palmer & Dodge, a literary agency in Boston.

"What speaks particularly to our time is, I think, obsessional love," said Ann Godoff, a Random House editor who snapped up rights to the book for publication next September. A person familiar with the sale who declined to be named said the price was in seven figures.

Mingled in the story of the emergence of the manuscript are a collector whose passion exceeded his purse and leading characters with shared zeal for Alcott, whose best known work, "Little Women," was published in 1868. (A new film version of that novel opens in New York and Los Angeles tomorrow.)

The collector is 47-year-old Kent Bicknell, the headmaster of the Sant Bani School, an alternative day school in Sanbornton, N.H., about 25 miles north of Concord, N.H.

Mr. Bicknell, who began collecting Alcott material a couple of years ago, said that a friend told him in May 1993 that an unpublished Alcott manuscript had been consigned by some of the author's descendants to Ximenes (pronounced ZIM-in-eez) Rare Books in Manhattan.

"I couldn't believe it," Mr. Bicknell said. "From a collector's point of view, to think of having an entire unpublished novel was astounding."

Explaining the background of "A Long Fatal Love Chase," Mr. Bicknell said Alcott had made an unhappy trip to Europe in 1866 as a companion to a sickly young woman. When she returned to Concord, Mass., she recorded in her diary that the family finances were in poor shape. Her father, Amos Bronson Alcott, a noted transcendentalist philosopher and author, was not much of a breadwinner.

But a letter from James R. Elliott, the publisher of the magazine *The Flag of Our Union*, awaited Louisa May. He wanted a story of 200 to 250 pages in 24 chapters, "and the close of each second chapter so absorbingly interesting that the reader will be impatient for the next."

"I want it to run through 12 numbers of our magazine," he said.

In her journal, Alcott recorded how she worked on the novel through August and September. But, she wrote, "Elliott would not have it, saying it was too long and too sensational."

The novel opens with the words: "I tell you I cannot bear it. I shall do something desperate if this life is not changed soon. It gets worse and worse, and I often feel as if I'd gladly sell my soul to Satan for a year of freedom."

The words are those of an 18-year-old named Rosamond, who is living on an island off the English coast with a heartless grandfather who tolerates her only because she stands to inherit some wealth.

"In the books I read," Rosamond says, "the sinners are more interesting than the saints, and in real life good people are dismally dull. I've no desire to be wicked, but I do want to be happy. A short life and a gay one for me, and I'm willing to pay for my pleasure if necessary."

Mr. Bicknell commented, "She doesn't know what the cost is going to be."

She is soon swept off her feet by Philip Tempest, a wealthy man nearly twice her age, who takes her away, marries her, sets her up in a villa in Italy and then is revealed to be a bigamist.

Rosamond flees, and despite her efforts to drop out of sight as a seamstress in Paris and in a convent, Tempest pursues her.

"They're in Germany, in France," Mr. Bicknell said. "She's committed to an insane asylum. There are fights. There are duels. There's a murder, which is wonderful. She falls in love with a Catholic priest, and he with her."

Mr. Bicknell said that after he first learned of the availability of the manuscript, he spent the next year "wishing and trying and failing." But last spring he approached an old friend who had been an enthusiastic supporter of the Sant Bani School, which Mr. Bicknell had helped found in 1973. And the friend agreed to back him.

Mr. Bicknell said it was only then that he went to New York to read the manuscript. Until he had financing, he said, "I didn't want to go down there and read through it and find it was delicious and then find I couldn't acquire it."

Over two days last spring, he pored over the lined, wheat-colored manuscript with many revisions that Alcott had apparently made in an effort to tone down its sensationalism. Mr. Bicknell later edited the manuscript to restore the earlier language, which he felt was better.

When he first read "A Long Fatal Love Chase," he said, he found it "an out and out good read." In addition, he said, "there were a number of underlying issues that I found were very well presented and very relevant to today."

Ms. Godoff of Random House, who said she regards herself as the biggest Alcott fan in New York, agreed. "For any time, this is a real page turner," she said. "From a publishing point of view, it was a very easy call."

But when Mr. Bicknell first went looking for a publisher after buying the manuscript and the copyright for "under \$50,000," he said, "there wasn't much enthusiasm."

Mr. Bicknell said he got the feeling that publishers and agents thought the novel might be of interest only to a university press and had no prospects for big sales.

But, he said, "I felt it was a great read that deserved attention."

"It was written for the general population," he explained. "I wanted to honor its original intent."

Last spring, he was steered to Lane Zachary at Palmer & Dodge, who turned out to be another major Alcott fan: someone who makes an annual journey to Orchard House, the Alcott museum in Concord that her descendants hoped to help by selling the manuscript.

Ms. Zachary's reaction to reading the novel: "Wow!" she said. "It's in that wonderful 19th-century prose that you never see anymore, where you feel you're in the hands of a master storyteller who's going to get you fully involved. But the thing that really made me go wow was how contemporary it was."

Ms. Zachary tipped off an acquaintance at *The New Yorker*, which mentioned the novel in its *The Talk of The Town* section this week. Ms. Godoff had learned about the novel in advance.

Mr. Bicknell said he will share the proceeds with his school and with the Louisa May Alcott Memorial Association, which maintains Orchard House.

In Concord, William F. Kussin, Alcott's great-great-nephew and the director of development at Orchard House, said he was delighted with the prospect of help for the museum, which receives some 30,000 visitors a year.

"It's all very exciting, quite startling," he said.

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