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Short Story: 'The Exact Science of Matrimony' by O. Henry

STEVE EMBER: Now, the VOA Special English program AMERICAN STORIES. Our story today is called "The Exact Science of Matrimony." It was written by O. Henry. Here is Barbara Klein with the story.

BARBARA KLEIN: Jeff Peters and Andy Tucker could never be trusted. One day, the two men decided to open a marriage business to make some quick and easy money. The first thing they did was to write an advertisement to be published in newspapers. Their advertisement read like this:

"A charming widow, beautiful and home-loving, would like to remarry. She is only thirty-two years old. She has three thousand dollars in cash and owns valuable property in the country. She would like a poor man with a loving heart. No objection to an older man or to one who is not good-looking. But he needs to be faithful and true, can take care of property and invest money with good judgment. Give address, with details about yourself. Signed: Lonely, care of Peters and Tucker, agents, Cairo, Illinois."

When they finished writing the ad, Jeff Peters said to Andy Tucker: "So far, so good. And now, where is the lady?"

Andy gave Jeff an unhappy look. "What does a marriage advertisement have to do with a lady?" he asked.

"Now listen," Jeff answered. "You know my rule, Andy. In all illegal activities, we must obey the law, in every detail. Something offered for sale must exist. It must be seen. You must be able to produce it. That is how I have kept out of trouble with the police. Now, for this business to work, we must be able to produce a charming widow, with or without the beauty, as advertised."

"Well," said Andy, after thinking it over, "it might be better, if the United States Post Office should decide to investigate our marriage agency. But where can you hope to find a widow who would waste her time on a marriage proposal that has no marriage in it?"

Jeff said that he knew just such a woman.

"An old friend of mine, Zeke Trotter," he said, "used to work in a tent show. He made his wife a widow by drinking too much of the wrong kind of alcohol. I used to stop at their house often. I think we can get her to work with us."

Mrs. Zeke Trotter lived in a small town not far away. Jeff Peters went out to see her. She was not beautiful and not so young. But she seemed all right to Jeff.

"Is this an honest deal you are putting on, Mister Peters?" she asked when he told her what he wanted.

"Mrs. Trotter," said Jeff, "three thousand men will seek to marry you to get your money and property. What are they prepared to give in exchange? Nothing! Nothing but the bones of a lazy, dishonest, good-for-nothing fortune-seeker. We will teach them something. This will be a great moral campaign. Does that satisfy you?"

"It does, Mister Peters," she said. "But what will my duties be? Do I have to personally reject these three thousand good-for-nothings you speak of? Or can I throw them out in bunches?"

Jeff explained that her job would be easy. She would live in a quiet hotel and have no work to do. He and Andy would take care of all letters and the business end of the plot. But he warned her that some of the men might come to see her in person. Then, she would have to meet them face-to-face and reject them. She would be paid twenty-five dollars a week and hotel costs.

"Give me five minutes to get ready," Mrs. Trotter said. "Then you can start paying me."

So Jeff took her to the city and put her in a hotel far enough from Jeff and Andy's place to cause no suspicion.

Jeff Peters and Andy Tucker were now ready to catch a few fish on the hook. They placed their advertisement in newspapers across the country. They put two thousand dollars in a bank in Mrs. Trotter's name. They gave her the bank book to show if anyone questioned the honesty of their marriage agency. They were sure that Mrs. Trotter could be trusted and that it was safe to leave the money in her name.

Their ad in the newspapers started a flood of letters – more than one hundred a day. Jeff and Andy worked twelve hours a day answering them. Most of the men wrote that they had lost their jobs. The world misunderstood them. But they were full of love and other good qualities.

Jeff and Andy answered every letter with high praise for the writer. They asked the men to send a photograph and more details. And they told them to include two dollars to cover the cost of giving the second letter to the charming widow.

Almost all the men sent in the two dollars requested. It seemed to be an easy business. Still, Andy and Jeff often spoke about the trouble of cutting open envelopes and taking the money out.

A few of the men came in person. Jeff and Andy sent them to Mrs. Trotter and she did the rest. Soon, Jeff and Andy were receiving about two hundred dollars a day. One day, a federal postal inspector came by. But Jeff satisfied him that they were not breaking the law.

After about three months, Jeff and Andy had collected more than five thousand dollars, and they decided it was time to stop. Some people were beginning to question their honesty. And, Mrs. Trotter seemed to have grown tired of her job. Too many men had come to see her and she did not like that.

Jeff went to Mrs. Trotter's hotel to pay her what she was owed, and to say goodbye. He also wanted her to repay the two thousand dollars that was put into her bank account.

When Jeff walked into the room she was crying, like a child who did not want to go to school.

"Now, now," he said. "What's it all about? Somebody hurt you? Are you getting homesick?"

"No, Mister Peters," she said. "I'll tell you. You were always a good friend of my husband Zeke. Mister Peters, I am in love. I just love a man so hard I can't bear not to get him. He's just the kind I've always had in mind."

"Then take him," said Jeff. "Does he feel the same way about you?"

"He does," Mrs. Trotter answered. "But there is a problem. He is one of the men who have been coming to see me in answer to your advertisement. And he will not marry me unless I give him the two thousand dollars. His name is William Wilkinson."

Jeff felt sorry for her. He said he would be glad to let her give the two thousand dollars to Mister Wilkinson, so that she could be happy. But he said he had to talk to his partner about it.

Jeff returned to his hotel and discussed it with Andy.

"I was expecting something like this," Andy said. "You can't trust a woman to stick with you in any plan that involves her emotions."

Jeff said it was a sad thing to think that they were the cause of the breaking of a woman's heart. Andy agreed with him.

"I'll tell you what I am willing to do," said Andy. "Jeff, you have always been a man of a soft and generous heart. Perhaps I have been too hard and worldly and suspicious. For once, I will meet you half-way. Go to Mrs. Trotter. Tell her to take the two thousand dollars out of the bank and give it to this Wilkinson fellow and be happy."

Jeff shook Andy's hand for a long time. Then he went back to Mrs. Trotter. She cried as hard for joy as she had done for sorrow.

Two days later, Jeff and Andy prepared to leave town.

"Wouldn't you like to go meet Mrs. Trotter once before we leave?" Jeff asked Andy. "She'd like to express her thanks to you."

"Why, I guess not," Andy said. "I think we should hurry and catch the train."

Jeff was putting all the money they had received in a belt he tied around his body. Then Andy took a large amount of money out of his pocket and asked Jeff to put it together with the other money.

"What's this?" Jeff asked.

"It's Mrs. Trotter's two thousand dollars," said Andy.

"How do you come to have it?" Jeff asked.

"Mrs. Trotter gave it to me," Andy answered. "I have been calling on her three nights a week for more than a month."

"Then you are William Wilkinson?" Jeff asked.

"I was," Andy said.

STEVE EMBER: "The Exact Science of Matrimony" was written by O. Henry. It was adapted for Special English by Shelley Gollust and produced by Lawan Davis. Your storyteller was Barbara Klein. You can read and listen to other AMERICAN STORIES on our Web site, voaspecialenglish.com. I'm Steve Ember.