



by Tom Crenshaw

WHILE AWAITING execution in prison, St. Valentine became friendly with the blind daughter of the jailer, and on the eve of his execution wrote her a farewell note, signing it, "From your Valentine."

It took Americans 16 centuries to adapt the custom to romantic purposes, and then valentine greetings were only simple handmade cards with ornate designs and homemade verses.

A canny Yankee businesswoman put valentines into mass production. Ester Allen Howland, only daughter of a Massachusetts stationer and bookseller, was graduated from college in 1847 and decided to use her artistic ability to make valentine cards as a paying hobby. Ester gave her brother, a traveling salesman for her father's company, some samples of her work. They hoped for at least 10 or 12 sales.

Instead of orders for \$100 or \$200, as expected, he returned with orders totaling \$5,000!

Within a year, Ester had established herself firmly in the valentine business and soon branched out into Christmas cards, New Year cards, and birthday cards, as well as various booklets.

Others took up where Ester Howland left off, and valentines have delighted lovers—and greeting-card manufacturers and dealers—ever since.

How many romances have been fostered by the pretty cards and sweet verses will never be known, but they brought no romance into the life of Ester Howland. She died at 75, a spinster.



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