



asked Martha on the veranda steps ere his departure.
"She is just tired from last night, Henry. Girls will be girls."

ALMA went with Martha promptly at three o'clock to the Mothers' Meeting at the North Street Mission. Martha was proud and happy with Alma walking the streets at her side, chic in the neat suit and the stylish hat.

Suddenly Martha remembered Harry McCoy, and some of the happiness departed. Alma was dressed for Harry McCoy, not for the Mothers' Meeting. "I'll go after you give your talk, Mamma," Alma said as they came in sight of the Mission. "I'll play for them first. But I want to hear you talk. What is it about?"

"Courage in the home," Martha said, simply.

And Martha spoke simply to those frowsy women with the fretful babies, those souls struggling against the odds of ignorance and poverty, without chance or encouragement in their sordid lives—spoke simply and truly and directly, because she felt herself to be one with them. And Alma, listening from the back of the tiny hall, felt a growing wonder in her heart and a lump came into her throat. Near by, a baby cried plaintively. She reached over and took it from the weary-eyed mother, quieting it with the silver shaking of her purse chain. Thus Martha found her with a baby in her arms, the face above the baby one intent, beautiful.

"Why, Alma!" she gasped, "I thought you had left."

"Isn't she sweet?" Alma chuckled the tiny chin playfully. "Just look at the cute dimple, Mamma. The poor mother looked tired and she wanted to listen to you so badly but the baby cried. It was great, Mamma. I felt awfully proud of you."

Alma lingered till after five, talking to the mothers, admiring babies, serving tea. Martha followed her out to the vestibule when she left.

"What made you stay?" she asked.

"Oh, I wanted to," Alma tucked in a stray lock. "Is my hat on nicely, Mamma? Oh, I wanted to stay, and besides one funny old woman said to me, 'Mees, we all loff dot Mudder you haf got,' so I just had to stay for that." She laughed, kissed Martha and started down the steps. "I'll be back about eight for sure," she called back. "Harry is leaving at nine."

MARTHA went home happy, to get dinner for Henry and Bruce. Constantly during the preparations she thought of Alma at the Belmont with that Harry McCoy. Still, she was happy. "Alma must have pleasure," she mused. "All the pleasure she desires. She must be free."

At nine o'clock Martha became uneasy. Alma had not yet returned.

"She said she'd be back at eight," she told Henry.

"Don't you worry about Alma," Henry replied. "She knows pretty well how to take care of herself."

Martha picked up the evening paper and settled down to read, but her eyes saw pages of printing blurred together. How slowly the hands of the clock moved—how slow. Every little sound—possibly a step—possibly Alma. Every little sound—she started—

At ten, Henry went up to bed.

"Kinda tired, Martha," he said and patted her shoulder, "don't you worry about Alma. She's all right."

"Oh, I'm not worried," Martha forced a laugh, and lifted her face for his good-night kiss. "Oh, I am not worried. Did you get the animal crackers for Tots, Henry?"

"Sure—put 'em in the pantry."

Martha listened to Henry's footsteps on the stairs, listened with a silent sob.

Again she looked to the clock—ten-fifteen. The right hand went to her eyes.

"Don't let me doubt her, God!" she pleaded. "Don't let me doubt her—don't

let—me—Alma—Alma—"

Bruce came in and found her. "Sleep?" he jested. "Say, Mom, there's a bed upstairs."

More forced laughter on the part of Martha.

"Been over to Charley's?" she asked.

"Sure." Then came that hungry glare Martha knew so well. "Anything in the ice-box, Mom?"

"To-morrow's chicken."

"Anything else?"

"Ice."

He grinned. "Gettin' funny, Mom. Say, what do I get? You might as well hand over something soon as later."

"You get—to bed—" Martha raised her eyes to the clock—ten-twenty-five. Bruce followed her gaze.

"It's a long time till breakfast, Mom! Come on—" He pulled lightly upon her arm, "Come on, now." She rose and followed him to the kitchen.

It was eleven when Martha went up to bed. The stairs—how—how high they were—how tired she was. She gripped the banister and ascended slowly. The railing—the next step—the pattern of the carpet—blurred together before her. A weakness overcame her. Almost she stumbled. She gripped the banister anew and went on—slowly, softly, surely. It would never do to wake Henry. He would see she was heart-sick.

She gained her room, shut herself in and sat down on the bed in the dark.

She wanted to go to Henry and tell him, plead with him to go out—somewhere—anywhere—to the Belmont, perhaps—and look for Alma. But Henry would laugh, assure her Alma was all right, tell her not to worry. Henry believed in Alma.

"Don't let me doubt her, God!" In the dark the right hand went up to her eyes.

Alma free—free. Always Alma had wanted to be free, always Martha had given her that wish. But this night—this night—

She would tell Henry—she must tell Henry. Alma had said she would be back at eight. And Buster—Buster—she would phone him—ask him about Harry McCoy. He was Buster's friend—this Harry McCoy. Buster must know! Buster must have been sure about him—sure—sure—or never would he have let Alma go with him. Buster must be sure.

The tension lessened. She thought of Buster—Buster for Alma—

A STEP on the stairs—light, buoyant—Alma there in the hall—safe—in her room. Sobs choked Martha. She went to the door and opened it—stillness in the hall—restful hush—and a crack of light beneath Alma's door. She wanted to go to Alma—and cry—cry—

Instead she closed the door and began to undress. Unseen forces held her back, unseen forces kept them apart. Alma, with youth and pleasure; Martha, with naught but Love.

She left the door ajar and crept into bed. But suspense had stayed too long with her, sleep had passed her by. Wakeful, she heard Alma in the hall, saw her go slowly, kimona-clad, down the stairs.

Martha sat up in bed waiting, listening. Was it a drink she wanted—something in the ice-box—a mislaid article? Martha strained to hear. No sound—that all pervading hush—long, slow-moving minutes of silence.

It was too much. She got up, slipped into her dressing gown and went down the stairs to Alma.

Alma was in the living-room at the little desk and writing. The little desk lamp cast a subdued light upon the bowed head. The rest of the room was in darkness. Martha drew near, cautiously, almost afraid, as one who intruded. Alma looked up quickly, half frightened, dismayed.

"Why, Mamma!" she exclaimed. "Why aren't you asleep?"

"I couldn't go to sleep. What are you doing?"

"Just a letter, Mamma. I hadn't any

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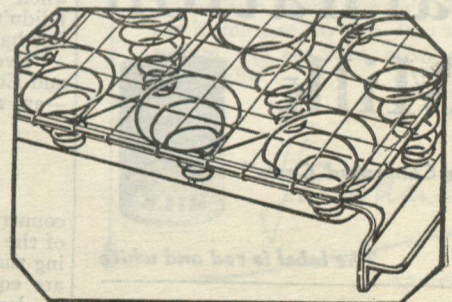
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