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The Extra Feature

By S. B. HACKLEY

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For a quarter hour only the crickets had broken the silence in the Compton orchard, where old Tobias and Minerva and Minerva, their granddaughter, asserted some mighty mounds of fallen vines. Then Minerva spoke.

"Zack wants me to run off and marry him, grandpappy, after fodder strippin' over."

"Lord, Nery, don't ye!" old Tobias faded eyes were piteously beseeching. "Stay by me honey. No body feels for us old ones like you do, Nery!"

Minerva smiled faintly. "I told Zack, grandpappy, I couldn't marry him if ma wasn't willin'. She'd drive me off and surely mistreat you and grandmammy if I married against her will."

"Was Zachariah fretted?" the grandmother asked anxiously. Minerva crimsoned. They must not know how much Zack was "fretted!"

"He—he said he'd stay away until I sent for him. I—there's ma!"

In southern Appalachia it is customary for the aged father and mother to live with the youngest son in the old home. But old Tobias' log dwelling was an unusually large one—a most desirable home, and Eliza, the wife of the eldest son, by skillful machinations contrived to get Charley, the youngest son, and his wife, Phoebe, away and to get her own family installed.

Lazy herself, she depended almost entirely on her young daughter, her only child, to do the work of the house, and to keep her services she had determined Minerva should not marry any but some young man she could take into her house and rule, as she did Joshua, the girl's henpecked father.

By her orders, Zachariah Burden, who was not the "humble sort" she desired for a son-in-law, stayed away from the Compton house, but Zack was resourceful and managed often to see the gentle little creature who was like a guardian angel to the old ones.

"Cryin', Jiminy?" old Tobias, sitting smoking on their bedroom hearth that evening, asked uneasily. Minerva wiped her eyes.

"I got to studyin' about Minerva a waitin' on her happiness on account of us and it worried me some, Bias!" she confessed.

After Minerva slept, Bias still sat on the hearth. Minerva was delicate, like their little Hettie who had died sixteen years before, three months after the soldier sweetheart they had not been willing for her to marry had been laid under Cuban palms.

"Little Hettie! Little Hettie!" he murmured. "Lord, if I'd let her had her way about Jess Duty, she might not have pined away! Jess, he wasn't a bad boy—I wish I hadn't stood in her way—I do wish it, Lord!"

His pipe clattered on the hearth. His heavy groans awakened Minerva.

"The pain Doc Higgins said was from my heart, it's pinchin' a little!" he labored out, his hand clutching his chair rungs, his rugged old face chalky.

Minerva trembled as she measured out the drops the young doctor had left for him. The doctor had warned her all worry must be kept from Tobias, and he had worried because he had caught her crying about Minerva!

"You reckon you worked too hard at the apples, Bias?" she asked him when at last she got him between the bed covers.

"No. I got to thinkin' about our little Hettie. I was wishin' I could go back them sixteen years and tell the little, lovin' thing her and Jess might marry before he went to the fightin'. Then the pain struck me."

She patted his hands in gentle soothing. "Hettie and Jess wasn't long separated, Bias, honey! The Lord saw to that! Now try to go to sleep."

But it was long before he closed his eyes.

"They could come and live with us and things would be all right," Minerva heard him murmuring over and over in his fitful sleep, "if Eliza was willin'!" Then once he cried out:

"She's a goin' like Hettie, Jiminy—like Hettie! Can't you see it?"

When he was quiet again, Minerva arose and dressed herself. If he worried himself much more he might bring on another attack, and Joel Higgins had said two attacks close together might kill him.

"I can find my way to Aaron Burden's," she said to herself, "some way, dark as it is. I'm bound to see Zack!"

Two hours later she stood breath-

less in the suncens yard on the top of the mountain. The dog slept, but fear of him set her knees shivering. With a trembling hand she tapped on the window of Zack's bedroom.

Near the dawn, when Zack helped her off the gentle mule he had led down the mountainside, her old face was shining like the eastern star.

A few days later when Eliza came home from Miranda Mulliken's "quitting," she was consumed with wrath. Naomi Rouse, whom she hated of all women, had bragged to Ran that her daughter, Magnolia, had taken Zack Burden "away" from Eliza Compton's Minerva! Long before the "fodder-pulling" was done, officious neighbors began to predict Zack's early marriage to Magnolia.

Minerva drooped visibly. Her grandfather fretted.

"Jiminy, ain't she takin' it to heart too much? Lemme give her a hint; it's just play-actin'!"

Minerva shook her head smiling. "Don't worry about Nery. She'll come out all right. Zack don't want her told until the show day, and that ain't long off, Bias!"

The circus coming to Caneyville had advertised a prize of \$10 in gold to be given to the young woman not afraid and willing to be married on an elephant's back in their ring, which advertisement doubled and tripled the size of the attending crowd on the "show day."

Early that morning Zack Burden's two mules passed the Compton wagon, en route to Caneyville. Zack rode one mule, Magnolia Rouse the other. Eliza could not restrain a look of displeasure.

"Them two are the pair that's to be married on the elephant's back!" old Bias volunteered cheerfully. "Zack's done arranged with the show folks."

This news was the last straw. Eliza turned to her daughter, her face white with wrath.

"Nery Compton, before I'd let everybody in the county see that low-down Rouse girl take my feller right before my eyes, I'd jump in Caney river!"

Minerva smiled. "Their weddin' won't discredit me, ma. Zack's not my feller no more, and all the folks know he wanted to marry me and you wouldn't let him!"

At the close of the circus performance, the largest and gentlest elephant, with a howdah on his back, was brought into the ring.

"Will the gentleman who wishes to be married please present himself?" the ringmaster called out.

Zack arose and took Magnolia's arm, but she pulled back, screeching foolishly. "I'm afraid of the elephant! I'm afraid to get close to the thing!"

"Will the gentleman try to persuade another lady then? We're bound to have a wedding!" The biggest clown rolled over in a gale of merriment, but it was tragedy to Eliza.

Zack looked about him. "I see one lady I know is not afraid of the elephant that would maybe marry me, but she's afraid of her ma!"

Eliza sprang to her feet.

"If you mean Minerva, Zack Burden," she shouted, "she needn't be afraid of me objectin'! I've concluded I'm perfectly agreeable to her marryin' a young man as industrious and well-behaved as you are!"

Tears of triumph were in Eliza's eyes when, twenty minutes later, she saw Zack lift his bride to the ground.

"Where's your gold piece, Nery?" happy old Bias whispered that evening.

"Magnolia's got that one," she whispered back, "but I've got another one just like it the show folks gave Zack for what they called the 'extra feature!'"

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- Wilkesport—Sept. 25, 26.
- Glencoe—Sept. 25, 26.
- Bridgen—Sept. 29, 30.
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- Florence—Oct. 2, 3.
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