

WAITING FOR A WIFE

(Continued from page 9.)

The older boys hung behind their father's chair at first. Presently one of them snatched playfully at Lewis's coat; he held out his hand; before supper was ready they were both leaning against his knees and climbing his chair, heedless of parental reproof.

When supper was over and the children all in bed, Lewis sat in the kitchen with Carl and Vinnie, talking over old times and old friends; but no one mentioned the name of Elliston. It was Lewis who spoke it first:

"And how are the Ellistons?"

Carl and Vinnie exchanged a glance. Carl answered.

"Well, the old folks, they're still on the old place. Sam Brackett, he works the farm now, all 'cept a little garden patch the old man's got. I guess they just about make ends meet. The old man's gittin' pretty well along now."

A silence. Vinnie broke it nervously:

"Well, she ain't much better'n he is. Last time I seen her out to the Missionary Society her hands shook so's she couldn't hardly sew—we was piecin' a quilt. I d' know but she's gittin' kind o' paralyzed."

Silence again. Lewis set his teeth:

"And Grace?"

Carl and Vinnie exchanged another glance. Lewis told himself that the throbbing alarm of his heart came of their conscious looks.

"Grace teaches," said Carl. "Fact is, Grace boards here."

"SHE ain't here now," cut in Vinnie. "This is Saturday, an' she always goes home over Sunday. Carl, he let her have the school; he's director."

"Well, it ain't no more'n right," argued Carl. "Grace ain't got much government, but the kids is all small. And she certainly does need it."

Lewis tried to look impassive; he could not have framed another question for his life. Perhaps Vinnie divined his desire.

"Grace ain't changed much," she volunteered. "She's just about the same—always kinda quiet and keeps to herself. Fond o' the kids, though. But she don't have nothin' to do with the fellahs. Grace always was queer about th—" Vinnie stopped open-mouthed, horrified at her "break."

"Shut up!" growled Carl. He rose. "Well, if you feel like goin' to bed, Lewis, I'll show you where your room is."

Lewis paced the room upstairs until he remembered that they would hear him and wonder; then he stood still. Well, what was it to him? He was not the heart-broken boy who slunk away with his grief ten years ago. What was there, here or anywhere, to threaten his hard-won peace? "I've had mine!" said Lewis to himself. "I've had mine!"

"Fond of the kids!" He felt again about his knees and shoulders the warm, restless little bodies of Carl's children. Sharply he shook off the clinging little ghosts—not altogether Carl's children, but others, unborn. "Seems like this room's full o' spooks," he muttered, pulling at his suitcase straps. He flung out his belongings recklessly, then, repenting the disorder he had made in the neat room, he decided to put some of them away, and pulled out the top bureau drawer. It held a tumbled collection of pale ribbons, little half-worn gloves and veils, small, cheap, dainty, feminine things.

Lewis stared a moment; then it came to him; they had put him in her room! If he could have left the room and the house without the knowledge of his hosts he would have gone on the instant. He bent his face in his hands with a stifled groan. As he turned to shut the drawer with unsteady hands, he saw the outline of a photograph partly hidden under some airy trifle. With one finger he brushed the laces away from the pictured face. It was his own. He remembered the day he gave it to her, the day he had it taken in the young hope of his early betrothal. It did not look to

him like himself. He pitied the frank young fellow there with a quite impersonal compassion. Then memories of that youth's love and hope began to stir; he shut the drawer quickly—but too late. The ghost of his own youth came out and joined the other ghosts in the room.

"Funny she's got that yet!" he thought. "She can't hate me as much as she used to, or she wouldn't have it lyin' round."

"I've got to quit thinkin'!" he told himself. A well-worn volume of poems lay on the table. He caught it up, though the faculty that would not stop thinking told him it must be one she loved and often read. It came open of itself at a blurred and smeary page. Four lines, bracketed with a pencil-mark, later erased, opposite a little blister in the margin, claimed his eye.

How could I know I should love thee today,

Whom that day I held not dear!

How could I know I should love thee away,

When I did not love thee a-neighbor!

A full minute Lewis stood reading over the words. Then he dropped the book, stumbled over to the bed and fell on his knees beside it, hiding his face in his arms. He was not praying, only fighting the fiery strife of his spirit. And that was pure, intolerable pain. Some hand was tearing at his old wounds and he must not let them open. All he had felt before in this room was mere uneasiness and apprehension; this was the agony of rending flesh.

He rose presently with pale, tight lips, having pressed the wounds together. As he pulled down the bed-clothes, something long and white, coiled under the pillow, fell along his arm. He flung it violently into the middle of the floor. It lay there, very still and white and fragile and helpless, like that other white, fragile thing in the cornfield. "You'll not get your teeth in me again!" Lewis gasped at it, and set his own teeth. He put out the light and lay down on the side of the bed farthest from the white thing on the floor. Rage shook him at the years of his useless suffering, at the pain of this new probing. The stained page of the book thrust itself before his eyes in the dark. "You're lying!" he whispered to it. "You can't love anything! Don't I know!"

All his past was unchained upon him and lived itself over as poignantly as in the passing. He rebelled fiercely at the blind cruelty of Nature which ripens one for another's torment. Afterwards came intolerable pity—pity for himself, for the white thing on the floor. It seemed to be shedding tears, helpless, humble tears. He wrestled against it for a long time, but at last he went softly around the bed, picked up the white thing gently and laid it across a chair. He slept not at all.

IN the morning, he declined proposals of church and after breakfast set off afoot. The ground was still wet from the last night's rain, but every tree and bush was drying and freshening in the sunny, spring air.

When he came in sight of the old place, Lewis did not go around to the house. Instead he followed the willow hedge, much taller now, but still uncared for he noted, back to an opening he knew of. He passed through the little gap and came up behind the house through the thicket of plum trees, gnarlier and thornier than they used to be, but as wild as ever, making the air sensuous with bloom and perfume. And spying through their branches, he saw her under the apple tree.

She was sitting on an old waggon seat paintless and with rusted springs; she was bareheaded and wore a black dress, and rested her chin pensively in one hand. Lewis went through between the trees. She stood up, but took no step. At first

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