

had she spoken to him. But the embargo did not extend to letters. Mary was an inexperienced farmer, and often needed expert advice. She was far too sensible to send her son three throbbing, hot miles to the store for such trifling information as to how many melon-seeds went to a bill—for despite Mr. Mull's warning, or perhaps because of it, she had set her heart upon muskmelons—when not ten paces distant an encyclopedia of farming knowledge sat smoking a short black pipe on his doorstep. Under this masked regime, Tommy was like a little tramp steamer plying between two incommunicado ports, doing a brisk business, and shamelessly carrying contraband matter both ways. Since the time the captain had rigged up a barbetune for the boy, Tommy had become his chained slave.

"Tommy," Mary asked one afternoon as she sat on the rug, with a pleasant wind which drove bright-hued little clouds like a school of mackerel across the sky, "what was the name of the captain's first command?"

"The Annie," replied her son promptly. He stood behind her chair, drawing a wide-toothed comb through her dripping hair. To the initiated, this occupation indicated that Tommy had been ill, but was now in a certain stage of convalescence. At such an interregnum, it was his delight to dress Mary's beautiful hair after a very peculiar mode. First he drew a bisecting line from the tip of her nose to the soft white nape of her neck, and divided her long-suffering head into an eastern and a western hemisphere. Then he deluged the shining tresses with water, until they swam like sea-moss under a wave. When they had arrived at this delectable condition, Tommy was ready for business. The coiffure consisted simply of a score of hard, tight, wet braids which writhed about Mary's head like serpents, and confirmed the hypothesis that children in their development follow the evolution of the race. Judged by his hair-dressing, Tommy was now a small South Sea Islander.

"Mother-r!" he said, standing beatifically off. "You look awful nice! Shall I fetch a glass so's you can see yourself?"

"Yes, dear."

Mary slanted him a humorous glance between the serried braids. She was plaiting a straw hat for her son, an intricate seven-strand weave, from wild oats which reared their slender plumes amid golden poppies and purple lupines on the open mesa. As her slender fingers manipulated the amber straws her mind was adrift on a sea of recollection which Tommy's answer had evoked. Annie—in her girlhood she had known an Annie, a pretty creature, all soft curves and rosinness, but it could not be the same. Mary dropped the roll of braid into her lap, musing over the weak and wretched girl who had taken her life. She knew only the bare tragic fact, but the name of the man in the case was not the name of the captain. The Annie she knew had loved Earl Norton, the village beau, and on the night of his marriage to another girl she had drowned herself in the inlet.

Tommy had started to the house in quest of a mirror, but, arrested midway by a hail, sped joyously down the path. Startled, Mary lifted her head and beheld her neighbor a few paces distant with a letter in his hand, gazing transfixed. His thick black brows were queerly ridged, and beneath them his eyes—keen, seafaring eyes—stared with intentness. She sprang to her feet, scattering the bundle of straws, covered her outraged head with an arm, and fled into the man-house. Mingled laughter pursued her. Before the glass she unraveled the braids, coiled the bright rough mass loosely on top of her head, and dropped into a chair, breathing unevenly. Had he recognized her—at last? In that bare, fleeting glance, she fancied she had caught a light of recollection struggling across his face. There rose vividly in her the memory of a shy, boy-and-girl kiss, exchanged eternities ago, in the soft, tranquil dusk of a New England street. They did not meet again. Her mother had moved to another village, and some years later, in the hope of bettering her fortunes, to a ragged little Western mining camp, where she had kept the only respectable lodging house. There

the girl had grown up, and when a revivalist preacher, who came bringing his god of brimstone to the joyous pagans of the town, fell ill at their house, she had nursed him well, and then married him out of sheer pity for his weakness and obvious need of her. She wondered if her playmate of other days still remembered that kiss, and then smiled in grim self-derision. Since that time, doubtless, he had kissed in all the seven seas.

Tommy broke in upon her, his face crisped with reminiscent smiles. "It's for you," he announced, handing her the letter. "From Mr. Mull."

"It must be a bill," said Mary wonderingly. She took the letter and broke the seal. Tommy leaned easily against her shoulder, reading not the letter, but the mobile countenance whose slightest shades of meaning he knew so well.

"What is it, mother-r?" he breathed eagerly.

For suddenly a crimson tide had swept over Mary's face, then she had frowned, laughed, and at length dropped the letter into her lap, smiling queerly. Presently she gathered the loose sheets together and ran over their contents again, this time with a sparkling countenance.

It was not, as she had surmised, a bill, but, on the contrary, a letter of credit for honest and deep affection. Not being aware of any special form for opening a proposal, Mr. Mull had very cunningly headed his appeal with two lines of a hymn which he had once heard Mary sing:

Rescue the perishing, care for the dying,

Snatch them in pity from sin and the grave.

From this general statement, he proceeded to concrete particulars, mentioned frankly the name of the sinner, his age and material prospects, and, commending himself to her mercy, signed himself, "I am, ma'am, yours fondly, Jim."

"Mother-r!" implored Tommy, laying an impatient hand over the paper.

"What does he want?"

"He wants to come here and live in the man-house," said Mary gaily. "Though not a 'family man, gene'ly speakin', he is willing to make an exception in our favor. What do you think of it, son?"

Tommy knit his brow, considering the proposition according to his lights, and found it somehow lacking in spice. If it were the cap'n now! "No," he pronounced, and added, "Cap'n said Mull said that he didn't 'low to take no for an answer, an' cap'n said he's never taken nothin' else from him."

Mary blushed to the roots of her hair. "I reckon I'll have to write to Mr. Mull and tell him it isn't convenient." She drew her son within the hollow of her arm. "I'll write tonight," she said softly, "and take it across to the captain—"

"Mother-r!" protested Tommy, aghast. "You mustn't—he hates you!"

"—and take it across myself," finished Mary steadily. "I'm tired of this foolish hating business. I want to be friends."

Tommy stood hostilely away from his parent. "You can go," he said coldly. "The cap'n won't be at home. Him and me's goin' fishin'."

"All right, old man, I'll go in the morning." She smiled teasingly at his clouded brows and added, "Guess I'll go fishing myself!"

After supper she settled herself by the lamp to concoct an honorable answer. From the bunk her son noted her absorption, and stepping softly as a thief, shed his land-clothes for water-togs and slipped velvet-footed from the house.

The next afternoon, though it was bright sunshine outside with fleecy clouds riding high, a storm was enclosed in the man-house. The atmosphere became sultry when Tommy, spying Mary's letter, dropped it into his pocket, and sidled toward the door.

"Lay that down, dear."

When his mother spoke in that still voice, with a tiny throb in it, Tommy always felt inspired to smash things. The lamp on a crocheted pink mat stood in the centre of the table. He hooked his index finger into the ruffle and drew it down to his side. The lamp balanced

crazily a moment on the edge, then pitched to the floor with a splintering crash. Deadly pale, his dark eyes all pupils, and the ghost of a smile on his face, he stared across the ruins at his mother. Mary, who had been in a dozen minds about delivering the letter to her neighbor, suddenly found herself bereft of an alternative.

"Take off your things, Tommy," she said quietly, "and get into bed. I'll punish you when I return."

But Tommy gave her one molten glare and fled out of the man-house. Knowing her son, Mary let him run, and turning to the glass to smooth her hair, discovered herself in a tremble.

"One would think I was going to dynamite a safe," she muttered grimly, "instead of stepping across to a neighbor's."

A knock at the door made her heart quake as if she had been caught lighting the fuse. She spun round and confronted the captain.

"Come in," she said confusedly. She set a chair away from the debris, and knelt to rescue the letter, which lay beneath the shattered globe, dabbled in oil. "Tommy broke the lamp," she explained, "and ran off to escape his medicine."

"I saw him streaking for the bluff as if a pack of wolves were behind him." He laughed shortly and crossed one knee over the other. "I'll take that down for you," he said, nodding at the unfortunate rejection.

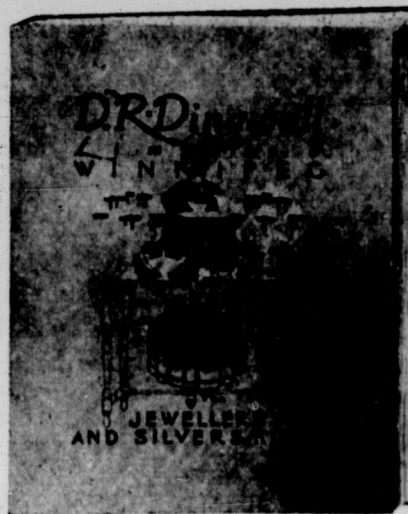
Mary laughed, her pulse quickening. "Mr. Mull is a foolish person," she said softly.

"Then—"

"Of course not!" she answered hastily. "What do I want with a man? I'm content as I am, with Tommy." She sighed.

The captain sat with folded arms as if carved out of stone. A silence filled the little room from floor to rafters ceiling.

"It's the best way, no doubt," he muttered. He cleared his throat and



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added abruptly, "I'm leaving tonight."

Something snapped in Mary's brain. "Leaving?" she repeated stupidly. "For—how long?"

"For good," he replied gruffly. "I'm bound for the desert—after that the Orient. There's blood in me that won't stick at farming, though I grant you its better here than in the East."

Mary, kneeling, stared up at him. "Tommy will miss you." Her voice began to thrill like a violin string.

"I shall miss the boy. The truth of the matter is," he continued, "this place can't hold the two of us, and so I am going. You've heard I was a woman-hater?"

She sprang to her feet, her face crimson. "I will go," she cried in strangled tones. "I will go—tonight! Oh, where is Tommy?" She started blindly toward the door.

"Hold on—I said that wrong. Please sit down and hear me through."

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