

HOLDING UP AUNT MARTHA

BY NINA MOORE JAMIESON.

"Now, Silas, you stay right there," Aunt Martha said, commandingly. "You stay right there, to-night, for it ain't fit you should start out to come home. Why the sleet is cruel. The roads 'll be a-slippery, but a-sure of ice—eh? What was that? Highwaymen, did you say? In this neighborhood? Sho—don't be ridiculous, Silas! As if anybody'd bother an old woman like me. You stay with Hiram, bein' he's so low, an' I'll make out till mornin'."

"Goodbye," she said, and turned away from the telephone quite at ease, but not without considerably started to behold, inside the door, the tense figure of a man, who aimed a deadly weapon at her! The one thing in the world she would never have expected—a live, tingling, lurid bit of stage play which seemed to her too unreal to be properly frightened.

"Put up your hands!" he ordered in a hoarse voice and even in that extremity Aunt Martha knew a certain satisfaction. It was all so, exactly as it should have been!

"It ain't a mite of use fer me to put up my hands, young man," she said comfortably, for her momentary alarm over the sight of firearms was conquered. "This here skirt-band o' mine is a little tight, or I'm takin' on flesh, or sumthin'—anyhow I couldn't make out to keep my hands up, so there. An' I have no money in the house, only a dollar or so in change, which I'm sure you're welcome to. I'll fold my arms—see? Go ahead, search if you want. I'm alone, an' likely to be."

"Where are your bonds?" he demanded harshly, slipping his revolver into his pocket, but keeping an alert hand upon it.

"Bonds?" repeated Aunt Martha, in blank consternation.

"Bonds? Yes! where are they? Quick!" He moved towards her threateningly, yet with a watchful listening air that showed his uneasiness.

"Why—them bonds," said Aunt Martha with troubled eyes. "They was coupon."

"Yes—I know that!" he broke in furiously. "Curse you—you drivin' old woman! Tell me quick—you had them yesterday!"

"So we did, so we did," she answered with a dignity that ignored his roughness. "But Silas rented a safety-box in the bank, an' put them there to-day."

He read the truth in her candid voice and manner, and cursed horribly, so that she put up an involuntary hand in protest.

"Oh, young man—don't call the Lord's attention to yourself, just at present. There might be some excuse for stealin', but there ain't ever any excuse good enough for takin' His name in vain."

He made no answer, but swung

over to the cupboard at the side of the room. "Got anything to eat?" he flung at her, savage disappointment in his tones.

"Plenty," she told him hospitably. "But you'd better call in your pardner, if that's him I hear coughin' on the back stoop. He hadn't ought to be out s'ich a night as this—he'll take his death out in that sleet an' wind, with a cough on him already. Fetch him in an' I'll make you a cup o' coffee. Land sakes, boy—!" she broke out sharply, as he hesitated, fearing a trap—"you ain't surely a-scaret o' one old woman, air you? I ain't a-scaret o' the pair of you—gun and all!"

She went briskly to the stove, turning her back on him in complete indifference to his possible actions. He waited an instant only; then stepped to the door and summoned his companion. It was a forlorn specimen of manhood he brought in—a youth in garments all too slight for protection on such a night. He blinked in the light, and as he breathed the warm air of the kitchen, he broke into such a spasm of metallic, heart-tearing coughing, as brought Aunt Martha to his side in keen active alarm.

"Dear sirs!" she exclaimed, genuinely shocked. "You've got ammonia if I'm any judge. Git that cold coat off, and come set here agin the stove in Silas' old cardigan, may I never! If it ain't Freddy Sayles!"

He let his fevered eyes rest upon her face. "Aunt Martha!" he backed out, leaning in utter weariness against the table. "Then I'm home!"

"Home, yes!" she said with such a world of maternal yearning and compassion in her kind, candid face, that the older bandit eyed her in grudging doubt. She was, he saw, incapable of pretending—yet how could such love be real?

In a moment she had the coffee ready for both of them and then she said to Freddy, as he sat weakly in the old chair.

"As soon as you've got it down, get your shoes off. I'm going to put warm irons in this bed, right off the kitchen."

"No—no!" he protested, in instant panic, while his eyes sought those of his comrade. "We—can't stay! We've got to go—"

"Where would you go such a night as this? I tell you, you'd die, afore you reached the line fence!" she broke in as he stopped panting for breath.

"Besides, there's somebody watching for you at every corner o' the road, to-night, an' will be, to-morrow, too. No, no, Freddy—trust Aunt Martha, you come here when you was only seven year old, an' you never knowed me from that till you went away, to tell you a lie, did you? No—then believe me now, I'm sayin' what's best, every way."

"But you don't know—" he gasped unevenly, fighting back the fever.

"When I ran away—I stole your money—"

"No! No!" her wrinkled hand was on his lips, and pressed his head gently back against the chair. "You didn't steal it—it was—for you—you was welcome—"

"But I—stole it—my only friends—the shame of it—kept me—from—coming back again." He paused to cough with an utter weariness. "To-night—it seemed—like home—but I wasn't sure. Never sure—must be—sick—"

She beckoned the other youth, and between them, they got Freddy into the warm blankets in the kitchen bedroom. Then she applied mustard poultices to the sick boy's chest and back though sorely doubting their value. At last, when she had done all she could, he lifted a wavering head, and spoke, in a fierce, galling effort against the onrushing delirium and the torturing cough, and the smothering breathlessness.

"I've taken a lot—of money. Spent some. Want to give back—rest. Ask Dan—he knows—names. I'm done with it—all. Sorry so bad—Aunt Martha—"

"Oh, listen, Fred!" she cried out in agony for this broken soul. "We'll pay it back, every cent. Wait, Fred—wait!" for his faltering gaze was flitting direly. "Afore you go down into the Valley of the Shadow—test your soul on the Lord, an' He'll go with you all the way. Then, life or death—it is all the same. He understands—He'll forgive!"

A flash of comprehension brightened his dim eyes for one moment, while his hot fingers tightened on hers. Then the mighty effort which had held him responsive to her will, relaxed. Disease held sway.

"Aunt Martha faced Dan. 'Make me out the list he spoke of,' she said straightly, 'an' turn over any money o' his you've got here. Silas an' I rose him up from a little home boy till he was seventeen, an' we'll be responsible for his debts. But be quick, 'cause one of us, you or me, has got to get the doctor here to Fred. Ammonia is quick—it don't care about weather."

"Don't be a fool," he said roughly. "Will I give you a list, to use against me? Will I go for a doctor, and fall into a bunch of policemen?"

"Why not?" she answered with amazing directness. "You've run an' hid till now, but of it, haven't you? Some day they'll git you, sooner or later, an' you'll be livin' in torment till they do. Poor Fred was always weak, an' easy led, but he never was a coward. Air you game to stand up an' take the consequences of what you been doin' till now? You can quit now, an' square things. Some day your gun may go off an' kill somebody—you can never square that."

A moan came from the bedroom, and Aunt Martha's face was grave as she heard it. She went to the telephone, and worked away at it a few minutes, while Dan watched her suspiciously.

"No use," she said, "I can't ring central—can't ring even on this line now, though it ain't so very long since I was speakin' to Silas. Do you understand horses?"

"Yes," he admitted heavily.

"Well," she said, wasting no time. "I'll git you the lantern. Put on these overalls o' Silas', these leggings, these overshoes, this sheep-skin coat, this heavy cap, these mittens. Go out to the horse stable, an' throw a blanket on old Jeff—he was sharpshod yesterday, an' he'll carry you as safe as any beast will. Fasten it on with a surcingle, rig up a bridle an' lines from the harness an' away you go."

She proceeded to give him minute directions for finding the doctor's residence, and impressed the urgent need for wasting no time in getting him to the sick boy.

At last, as he stood ready in Uncle Silas' disguising clothes, he stretched out his hand to her for the lantern, and said with a short laugh:

"What if I take this fine chance and clear out?"

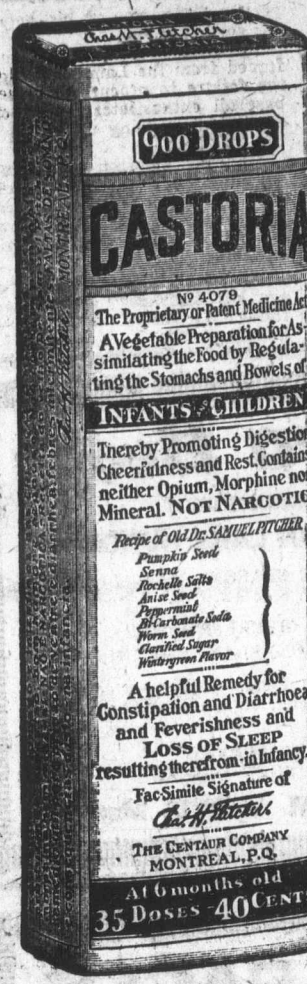
Do so if you think best," she answered serenely. "Fred has to die sometime—it wouldn't matter so much to him. But it would matter to you, havin' a choice, if you choosed wrong. But you won't. You didn't come of traitors. You mebbe think you can go, an' leave him to die—but somethin' in you won't let you. I know you'll come back with the doctor—that's why I ain't detainin' you now, fer that list. It's up to you—an' I know what you'll do."

She gave him the lantern, yet halted him a moment.

"Mind this—I trust you, all through. If Jeff falls, or you git lost, or hev an accident, an' you don't get through to the doctor—well, I'll never believe but what you tried your best, anyway. Now go."

The door slammed behind him. She crept into the bedroom and knelt beside Freddy's bed, while her soul groped blindly for help. "Oh Lord," she begged unevenly, incoherently, "I'm such an ignorant old woman—but you can work even through my mistakes. Now give me wisdom for this sick boy—an' be with that other lad, an' help him in his fight with himself."

Presently she rose, and took the mustard poultices off her patient. "Poor lad," she murmured gently. "Home—an' so sick he didn't know it—home, an' a-scaret to come in! But the main thing is—he got home, anyway."



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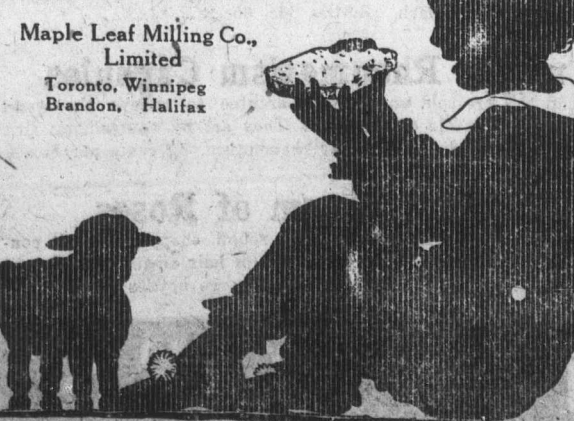
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