

and the long soft shadows here and there, where the cool, shady gorges are, full of tall ferns and white laurel blossoms, with the clear, singing brooks running through them."

"Are you your mother's only child?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied Melindy, playing with her apron-string.

"Then she must miss you very much, and you must want to see her sometimes."

A hard look settled about the young face as she answered: "I don't know how she feels, Mr. Grafton; but I know that I hope never to see her again."

"But that isn't right, Melindy. She's your mother, and you ought to love her."

"Mrs. Winter says the same, sir; and she says that God says so, too, in His book. But I don't think you and her can understand about a mother like mine—that don't care nothing for you except to make money out of you; and I don't believe God expects me to love her either."

"Well, perhaps not, Melindy. I don't know your mother. But whether you love her or not, you ought to write to her sometimes and send her a part of your wages, and maybe you could help her to be a better woman."

"Do you think so, sir? Then I'll do it. I'll do anything you tell me," she added, eagerly, as she looked up at him in undisguised admiration, "for you have been a good friend to me."

"I'm glad to have befriended you, Melindy; and I'll help you any time I can."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Grafton; but you'll go away some time, and I don't know what I should do without you, sir."

Just then, to Donald's relief, Mrs. Winter called: "Melindy, Melindy, where are you?" and her hasty departure rendered an answer unnecessary. On the next day Donald felt languid, sick and nervous. Melindy again came in after her morning duties were ended to replenish the fire. This time the blower was not needed, so after straightening the room a little and receiving no notice from Donald, who lay on his couch before the fire with closed eyes, she stopped near the foot of the couch and said, in low, beseeching tones:

"Would you like me to shake up your pillows for you, Mr. Grafton? I can make you more comfortable."

With a languid assent he sat up to allow her to rearrange his pillows, which she knew how to do quickly and deftly. As she did so, the graceful and slightly voluptuous curves of her figure, the soft pink flushed cheek and the full red mouth were temptingly near him. He thought she lingered over her task, and, resenting the temptation which willingly or not she threw in his way, he closed his eyes, settled back on his pillows as quickly as possible and said somewhat irritably:

"That will do, Melindy, and I don't want anything else this afternoon except to be alone."

He saw her eyes filled with tears, and her lips quiver as he watched her under half-shut lids, turn slowly away and leave the room.

All that afternoon her pretty, pleading face haunted him, and when he fell asleep her image, now dim, and ethereal, now life-like and very human, filled his dreams. She looked so grieved and humiliated and so physically lovable that evening, when she came up to bring his tea that it was only by a strong effort of self-restraint that he controlled the impulse to put his arm about her and caress her into smiles and happiness again.

The dangerous knowledge that he could do so had come to him that afternoon. If another ingredient is needed in the cup of temptation, which the devil mixes for a man when he puts a young and beautiful woman in his power, it is the consciousness that her happiness is bound up in his favor and that she will find joy in yielding all he asks without thought of sacrifice or fear of reckoning. Few men can resist the cup so flavored, and with the incense of adulation flowing their nostrils and turning their heads even before the cup has touched their lips.

Lying awake that night Donald saw how near he had come to the edge of a precipice, and realized that it would take

all the self-restraint upon which he prided himself, backed by all the remembered admonitions of his dear, wise mother, to help him through the days which must intervene before he should be strong enough to go home.

But Donald Grafton's Scotch blood gave him something of that stubborn defiance to that which his sense of right condemned which characterized John Knox. He knew, too, what his mother expected from him, and he remembered the evening when, both his sisters being absent from home, he sat on a low chair by his mother's side in the firelight, and as she stroked his hair with soothing, gentle fingers, as he had loved her to do since his earliest recollection, she told him of his father, who had been killed in the Civil War before his children were old enough to remember him. She had told him of his bravery and heroism and of his gallant death while leading his company to the charge at Chancellorsville; of his lofty principles and knightly chivalry, of his loving heart and pure life. "If you are to be a worthy son of your father, my dear boy," she had said, "you cannot sow any wild oats as most boys do, for there was not a smirch on your father's manhood, nor a stain on his honor. If I can persuade you to exemplify to the world as he did during his brief life, what a God-like thing is a noble manhood; and if you shall some day bless and crown a true woman's life as he blessed and crowned mine, then I have not lived my lonely widowhood life in vain." Donald's soul kindled as he recalled his mother's words, and once again he vowed never to grieve and disappoint her.

For the next three days Donald talked very little to Melindy, and was always engaged in reading or writing when she was in the room. On the fourth day he was to start home. His train left at mid-day, and he spent the forenoon making purchases for his mother and sisters, returning to the boarding-house just in time to lock his trunk and take a hasty lunch. He called to Melindy, who was dusting the room at the head of the steps:

"I have a package for you," he said, when she came, "but you must not open it until Christmas Day."

As she took the package out of his hands and looked up at him, trying to say thank you, she burst into tears.

"Why, Melindy, what's the matter?" asked Donald, "Has Tomkins been annoying you again, or has Mrs. Winter been scolding you?"

"Neither, Mr. Donald; it's because you are going away. Christmas won't be any pleasure with you gone."

"That's foolishness, Melindy," he answered, some impatience mingled with the kindness of his tone. "I'd have nothing more to do with your Christmas than the rest if I stayed."

"Oh, yes, you would, sir, for I'm happy so long as you are here, and I cannot bear to think of anyone else waiting on you for two whole weeks."

"You must not talk that way, Melindy. You are a pretty, smart girl, and if you try to be sensible and good, too, you will marry a worthy man some day who will be very proud and fond of you, and make you very happy."

"I'll never marry, Mr. Donald," she replied, as she threw herself on the floor beside his chair and seized one of his hands in hers, still crying as if her heart would break. "No man who respects himself will ever want me, born and raised like I have been; but if I ain't got a right to be respectable and to hold my head up like other people, I've got a right to be happy in my own way, and that's what I'll be if only you let me love you and wait on you, Mr. Donald."

As she poured out this wild talk she looked up at him with tear-filled eyes, and then in an abandon of childish grief laid her head on his knee and sobbed. Involuntarily Donald stroked her hair with a sort of tender, pitying touch, and in another instant her head was on his breast and his arms about her. For a second of time Melindy's whole being thrilled with supreme happiness. In that second the clock struck the half-hour, and Donald's conscience awoke as his mental faculties returned, telling him that he had not more than time to make his train. With an effort that made his nerves feel tense and vibrant, he put her gently



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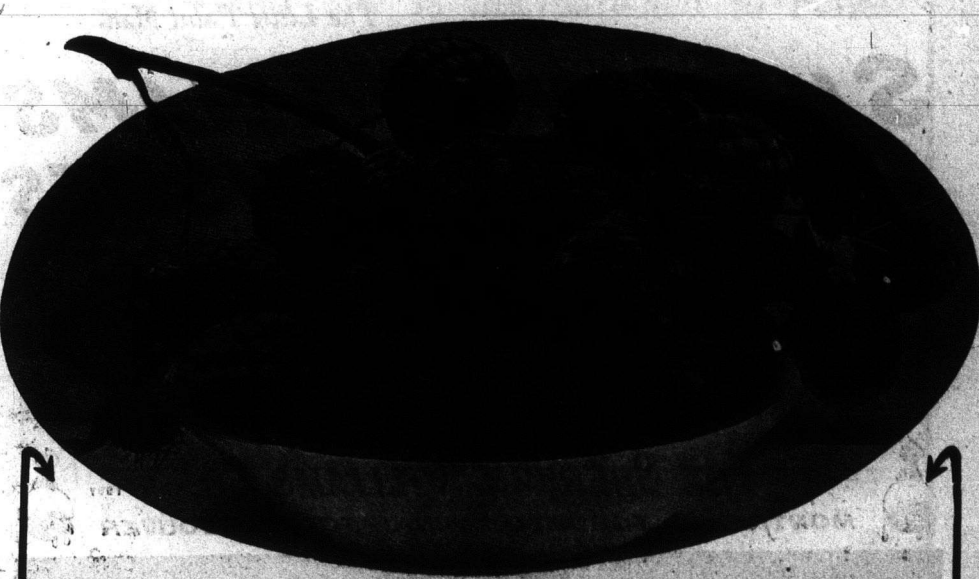
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