



THE WESTERN HOME MONTHLY

Vol. VI. No. 13.

WINNIPEG, CANADA, JANUARY, 1906.

PRICE { 5c. per copy.
50c. per year

Melinda and the Orphan.

By Dorothea Deakin.

This idea came to Melinda quite suddenly; most of her ideas do, unfortunately.

"John," she began rather timidly; and I glanced at her from the wide pages of the "Daily Chronicle" in some alarm, for I had learnt, not without cause, to dread the sound of my name in that particular tone of Melinda's voice.

"What is it now?" I asked resignedly.

"I—er—I want to consult you about something."

"Then you've done something that you're sorry for," said I. "Do you mind if I finish Rosebery's speech first? I am just in the middle of it."

Melinda sighed.

"All right," I said hurriedly: "fire away!"

She came and settled herself in a low chair at my side, and I wondered idly if Melinda would ever grow staid and middle-aged. At thirty-eight she still looked young and pretty, and her manners were more charming than ever. I couldn't bring myself to believe that fifty-eight, even, would find her with grey hair and wrinkles—above all with a suitable air of dignity and decorum.

"Do you think it possible," she said slowly, gazing tentatively at me out of the corner of her eye, "that we could stay in England a little longer?"

I sat bolt upright in my chair, and stared at her. "What on earth—?"

"Because I don't want to go back to Canada just yet."

"Well, Melinda!" I replied, with some heat. "you really are . . . ! Considering that the passages are booked for Friday, that the things are more than half packed—"

"Don't be angry," she interrupted.

"I couldn't—I didn't—wasn't—"

"I shouldn't have thought that even you would have been so inconsiderate as to want to alter everything at the last moment, to—"

"But I didn't think of anything till the other day."

"You didn't think of anything?"

Melinda blushed like a girl. She always does. "I—er—mean I didn't write the—I mean, I didn't like to—"

"You didn't write the what? What didn't you like to do?"

I was trying hard to be patient and kind, and I saw that she was bracing herself up to some confession. I felt more than a little uneasy. What on earth had she been doing now? I wondered.

"I suppose I had better tell you everything," she said at last.

"I think you had," said I; so she began with a rush.

"I am a lonely woman, John."

"I am sorry for that," I said quietly.

"What about me? I suppose I don't count as a companion?"

"Oh I don't mean that!" she cried impatiently. "I mean I am a childless woman."

I stared and looked at her sternly, and she looked a little, as well she

might. "You are not going to begin that nonsense over again, I hope? The poor little kiddie is dead, and that chapter of our lives is finished. We must make up our minds to a childless old age, Melinda."

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "I know we both thought so. But I am not sure now that the chapter is quite finished—that we shall have the childless old age, after all."

"What on earth do you mean?" I gazed at her in amazement.

father or mother."

"They're generally that," I murmured feebly. "It's a peculiarity of orphans."

"If you weren't so rude, you would have heard what I was going to say next. Without father or mother or brothers or sisters or uncles or aunts—or anything."

"Go on," I said resignedly.

"And I have had an awful lot of answers."

"You naturally would," said I. "Then this, I suppose, is the meaning of all those greasy-looking envelopes you have been making such a mystery of? You told me that you had advertised for a cook to take out to Canada."

"John!"

"We shall sail on Friday as arranged."

"John!"

I rose from my seat, and walked across the room with some dignity.

"And we will consider this question settled once and for all," I finished severely, opening the door as I spoke.

I had nearly carried off my retreat with dignity, and had half shut the door behind me, when I caught a sound which I had learnt to know only too well—the sound of a muffled, choking sob. I steeled myself.

"She will soon get over it," and I whistled loudly as I walked slowly down the long corridor of the hotel.

At the top of the stair I stopped irresolutely. I was not, of course, going back to see if Melinda was still crying, but I couldn't go out without my hat and gloves. They were on the table in our sitting room.

She was lying full length on the sofa when I went in, and I had thought she was quite quiet when I listened at the door. But I must have been mistaken about that, for directly I opened it the choking, muffled sobs caught my ear again, and I saw that she was crying bitterly, with her poor little face buried in the pink frills of the cushions.

"You are a silly baby!" I said severely. "A woman of your age ought to know better than to lie there crying like a child of ten."

No answer, but the sobs grew louder. I began to be afraid of hysterics. I took up my hat—then paused. I felt sure that her tears would stop directly I went away, and yet—

"Melinda!" I said in a milder tone, "don't be a little goose! If I were to let you have your own way about this, it would only be laying up a lot of worry and annoyance for both of us."

But Melinda didn't speak. She knew better than to descend into argument.

"Where are the answers to your advertisement?" (said at last, in desperation.)

Up came the brown head from the cushion, as I had known it would, directly I showed signs of giving in.

"I will run upstairs and get them," she said, leaving the room with alacrity; and in a few minutes she was back at my side with those wretched documents, while at least six distinct smells floated into the room when they were taken out of their envelope. Two which spoke in unmistakably plain accents of gin I dropped into the summer decorations of the fireplace at once, and one which had evidently been written with an onion-knife I gave to Melinda to read aloud to me. She deserved it, I thought. The other odors were mixed; but paraffin, cheese, and garlic, with a healthy whiff of carbolic disinfectant, predominated. One of them was almost clean and comparatively inoffensive, and the last and grimmest filled the air honestly with the fumes of some potent and cheap tobacco. I read the clean letter first, and it was most strangely worded. The lady wrote at some length, but I gathered at last that she had a desirable orphan to dispose of at a reasonable rate.

"Why does she speak of it as if it were a villa residence?" I asked Melinda.

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"I know you'll be very cross."

"I shall be very angry indeed if you don't explain yourself."

"Then—oh, you will be in a rage—you never did understand a woman's heart!"

"I understand yours better than you think, Melinda. Get on."

"I—I've advertised for an orphan."

I threw the "Daily Chronicle" into the farthest corner of the room, and Melinda had no further reason to complain that she did not possess my undivided attention. "You've advertised for a—what?"

"For an orphan—an orphan without

"So I did!" Melinda said hotly—"it was perfectly true. But I didn't have any answer to that."

"I can quite believe it."

"I thought I ought to consult you before I decided on one of them."

"On the whole I am glad you did."

I said slowly.

"Then you do approve of the idea?"

Melinda was beginning to cheer up; she was misled, I suppose, by the calm of my manner.

"I approve of the idea so much that if you will bring the letters to me I will make a bonfire of them all!" I said deliberately.