

A Little Child

By
Martha McCullough Williams

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"Yes, sir," Miss Prue said oracularly. "You hear my racket! Somewhere in the wind over to Barton's—shore's I'm knee-high to a grasshopper."

"How come you to be so shore?" Widow Allan demanded, settling her knitting-needle more firmly against her plump side. Miss Prue half shut one eye—a devout church member of course could not wink—set her arms akimbo, advanced a large foot, and said still with the same oracular intonations: "I'd tell you—only I'm main afraid y'all go stroun' all up and down Bresh Creek neighborhood, and gittin' me the name o' talkin' scandal."

The widow smiled broadly. Miss Prue was known already for the head and front of all gossip—especially of the more lurid sort. "Sult yourself," she said tranquilly. "Till bit or keep yer mouth shut. I know and you know I can't possibly want to hear things half as bad as you want to tell 'em."

Which was fact, rudely stated. Miss Prue magnanimously ignored it. "I know you're a sensible person," she began. "Besides—I'm sure must have somebody to take counsel of. This yer business is too much for one lone woman ter wrangle with."

"How many other ones have ya done said 'sensible'?" the widow interrupted. Miss Prue looked down. "I jest sorter sketched things to Nan Wickfield and Joy Crimes—" she began. The widow threw up both hands, shaken with just laughter. "Ye had better write hit to the county paper," she said. "But I wonder at yo' choosings. Nan and Joy won't rest till you've told the whole neighborhood, not leavin' you nobody but me."

"They come in on me in the middle of things—while the young man was here, making the way—alright makin' out like he was on admira' my dominion p'p'les," Miss Prue protested. "They seen him—also heard. So I jest had to tell 'em—partly—the rest."

"Stop bawlin' the bushes, fer goodness sake! What is the rest, the rest?" the widow demanded. Miss Prue drew a long breath. "I jest knowed the whole fall of hit; would be worth money—a heap of money. Five hundred dollars!"—in an awed voice. "Enough to send a mission to China."

"If I didn't know folks can't sit sunstruck in the late fall, I'd think your head was tetch'd," the widow exploded.

Miss Prue looked at her lightly, reverently. "Make light of hit all you want, here! Look at the handbill! Didn't you find one like hit in your letter box?"

The widow read, gasping. Sure enough there was a reward—five hundred dollars for information leading to the capture of counterfeiters, double the price for capture of a girl, hardly more than a child, an elderly person, very dark-skinned, a small boy, almost a baby. All pictured in the usual ghastly fashion of "dodgers." Over the widow's shoulders Miss Prue glared down at the alleged portraits. "Them two's at Barton's shore," she said, her finger on the dark woman with the baby in her arms. "Gwanthy told me out of her own mouth they was goin' to board a boy-child and his nurse till after Christmas. Now I ask you, what would honest folks be doin' sendin' a child to the country such a time o' the year?"

"Oh, that ain't nothin'! Town folks has got so silly they don't s'prise me, no matter what they do," the widow commented. "You're bawlin' 'em more'n out of nothing, as usual. Prudence, your parents ought to a named ye In-bredence—you talk so wild."

"Wait! You ain't heard half," Miss Prue said indignantly. "Two of the men, and the gal, are at Barton's every little while—come an go in a car—always on the edge of dusk else might early mornin'. And this other—him come yesterday—he makes up the hull three."

"Are you shore? Did he look like them pictures?" the widow demanded. "As much as anybody else," Miss Prue answered, tossing her head. "But that ain't all I judge by. He actually offered me one o' his bad bills—a twenty, brand-new—wanted to buy a dozen pullets, and said he hadn't no change."

"You took hit—then you've got the gang dead to rights," the widow said quivering in her eagerness over the unfolding drama.

Miss Prue sniffed. "I didn't do no sech fool thing," she said. "Once is enough for me. I ain't forgot that time I took in a bad dollar so's to sell a dozen signs—and had the bank man shove it back at me, marked 'counterfeit.' I told that man I hadn't no change—he might come again fer the pullets, I don't believe he will do it—but if he should—"

"Well, what?" the widow asked. Miss Prue's lips closed like a steel trap. "Oh, nothin'—much," said that lady, "only I've got a telephone and the sheriff's office has done promised me already to come running when I call it."

The Barton house, clean, rambling and comfortable, had an absolute monarch, by name Roy Evers. He was five years old, golden as to hair, blue-eyed, chubby, and dimpled as a Cupid. The

young woman who came intermittently in the red car hugged him throughout the most of her visits and left him always with streaming tears. She surely looked too young to be his mother, yet he called her "My mammy," and they were very much alike. Roy liked the man who came and went with Mammy—especially the tall one with graying hair, whom Mammy addressed as Big Injun. Big Injun had a way that made you mind in spite of yourself. Johnny, the other man, showed that even plainer than Roy himself. As for Mammy, all of them appeared to think the earth ought to turn around for her lightest whim. She being Roy's body-slayer, his kingship followed inevitably with her as first subject and Anne his nurse for prime minister.

While Miss Prue was expounding her beliefs to the widow, Mammy sat snugly on Roy, and smiling woe-begone at Big Injun. He had just said: "Make much of today, daughter; it won't be safe to come again before Christmas. Try to be away to bind our trail, that detective hound, Fensie, has picked it up. Fact—never mind how I know it. So be brave, girl, and say good-by to the little man for a while. I shan't be easy in my mind till we have him across the big water."

Mammy hugged so hard she hurt the tender little body. Roy began to whimper. There came a rap at the door. Mrs. Barton opened it cautiously, but seeing a stonishing figure with a hat pulled low over the eyes, and a creel of saucy pullets upon one arm, said severely: "Don't you know enough to go round back? Air them chickens Miss Jones said she'd lemme have?"

For answer the man dropped the creel, darted past her into the big south room where the strangers were assembled—grabbed the whimpering child, lifted him high on his shoulder, saying hoarsely to Mammy: "I can't take you forcibly, May, no matter how much I want you—but I will have our child."

Mammy crumpled in a sobbing heap. Big Injun got gray-faced—Johnny sprang at the newcomer, but was pulled back by the other man, crying: "Remember the child!"

"I say that! Why don't you remember him?" All eyes turned to Anne, crying, "Ain't he got no rights, the angel? Rights to father, mother, home! I tell ye, Master, to Big Injun unthinkin'ly: 'There's been packs and stacks of flies told—as I found out—never you mind how. Roy's pappy was lied to, same as his Mammy—by two that he had his own game to win—'"

But that was not all. "You know how Hamilton tangled in her net—and her cousin Peter wanted Miss May and her fortune just as bad. When I found out that game—I wrote Mr. Hamilton—that's how he comes here now. Not for his own sake nor Miss May's—there's big enough to know better. But I won't stand it no longer—havin' Roy ask me after he says his prayers. Why don't you send me back my daughter?"

Nurse Anne stopped short, swallowing hard. Through the bush, they heard Roy crying, his hands locked tight in the stranger's hair. "My daddy! My daddy! I love my daddy!"

"May," young Hamilton said low and entreatingly. She lifted her eyes, her arms, with a quick, agonized heaving beside him, held against his heaving heart, close to her boy. So the sheriff found them, when, answering Miss Prue's summons, he descended upon the homestead. Explanations followed—there were no malefactors, only actors in a domestic drama that had verged on tragedy, but was ending happily, as all dreams should. The handbill turned out to have been a practical joke played on Miss Prue—perhaps by some one who had suffered from her inquiries. It was fifteen years old at least, and undated—its mention of a woman and child had perhaps incited the joker to fit it to the folks at Barton's. Fate, which is called Chance, had done the rest. And Miss Prue took a lot of credit for the happy outcome—havin' her chickens really served Hamilton as a card of entry!

Enigma Quickly Disappeared.

An official of a railway which passes through Philadelphia, I am told, was the habit of expressing his war sentiments without restraint to his private secretary, Girard writes in the Philadelphia Ledger. These sentiments were derogatory to the allies and favorable to Germany. One day at the end of a particularly vehement tirade the secretary said: "I trust, sir, that what you have said does not represent your real feelings on the subject." "I mean every word of it," said his employer. It was just after a fire had taken place in a nearby city and the responsibility had been laid at the doors of German hirelings whose enterprise the railway man extolled. "Then I shall be obliged to arrest you," said the secretary, throwing open his coat and showing the badge of a secret service agent. The indiscreet official is now supposed to be in a place where what he may have to say in praise of kultur will reach a severely limited audience.

Nothing Extraordinary.

An American who recently visited London was sightseeing on one occasion when a guide took him aboard the old battleship Victory, which was Nelson's flagship in several of his naval triumphs. The British sailor on the vessel came to a raised brass table over the deck. As he did so he reverently raised his cap and announced:

"Ere, sir, is the spot where Lord Nelson fell."

"Is it?" asked the American, blankly. "Well, I am not surprised, I nearly tripped over the thing myself."

Hermine's Neighbors

By EDITH WELLS

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The good neighbor rocked back and forth slowly before the crackling bank of embers on Hermine Whipple's hearth, and from time to time slipped the cup of steaming chocolate that Hermine had set beside her on the little teakwood stand.

"It really does seem a shame, Hermine," she said, rocking back, "that you should have no one to share it with," rocking forward and looking through spectacles into Hermine's face. Then a slip of the chocolate. "My husband said only this morning. 'What a shame that there are no nice bachelors about here—' you mustn't mind Hermine, that is just his way—what a shame there isn't some one to share that nice warm house these cold days, and really, I must say, Hermine, this is the warmest place I've been in for days. With coal so short and the wind so nipping, I'm sure I don't see how you do it. Why, this fire here makes the room perfect, and it's not a bit close, either."

Hermine leaned over in her rocker and refilled the neighbor's chocolate cup from the chocolate pot that she kept warm by the side of the hearth. "The cups are very small," she urged, and then: "Oh, it's just the way these grandfathers made cups, a hobby of yours, isn't it? But I'm sorry, I do smile, 'that no one can share it.' Do come often, if you find it comfortable, and I'll try to get some of the factory girls to come up for supper. There are some who are really quite in distress this winter. They must be helped."

"Oh, it isn't the poor only who suffer. Why, no one can get coal, and most of the wood fires. Why, Mrs. Dalrymple has not had any coal for a week, and really she has to stay in bed to keep warm. She tells people she's ill, but she told me in confidence that it was simply that she hated to get up in the cold. And there is Mr. Denslow Gray, next door—here the neighbor looked up from her chocolate, and rocked back and forth at the same time, to study Hermine's face. "Mr. Gray, you know, hasn't any coal at all, and they say that he has all sorts of money, in spite of the way he lives—alone in that big house, with just his man Moses. I'm really afraid he'll take pneumonia. Poor Mr. Gray! It seems so strange he never married. Still, he isn't old—only forty, and I suppose there are a good many women would be glad to have him. Still he must be very old there. And then, rising to go, the neighbor murmured out: "I am so glad that you are warm enough, Hermine. Yes, I'll come again real soon, you are so comfortable"—then she slipped her cup—such delicious chocolate!"

Hermine sat and then calling through a door that led to the kitchen she summoned her woman of all work and sole companion, Rachel. The plump old colored woman bobbed in and, taking the chair the good neighbor had vacated, answered Hermine's questions. Yes, old Moses had been having a little wood from the splendid pile every morning. "He said the master had no good wood," said the neighbor, "but he could cut no wood till it got warmer. The cold weather always stiffens Moses' arms just that way."

"Please tell Moses tomorrow," said Hermine, with a confidential tone to her good woman, "that he can't serve him wood. Tell him—but not as I suggested it—that you think if they want more wood Mr. Gray had better ask me for it. And Rachel, you might order two nice chickens tomorrow—one for that soup you make with the gumbo and another to roast; and see that you have a good fire in the range; and you might make crullers tomorrow—and if Moses begs any crullers for Mr. Gray you tell him he can't have them."

The colored woman looked her surprise, but only rocked back and forth. "Yes, Miss Hermine," she said, "I always did think you were too good—it's a long time I've had to hand crullers and things over the fence on account of Mr. Gray. I certainly think you are showing good sense, Miss Hermine. I reckon Mr. Gray will be pretty cold without the wood, but it sure does serve him right."

The next day Moses begged for wood in vain, and at ten o'clock the morning after Mr. Gray himself called and asked to see Miss Hermine. It was a most unusual occurrence. There was not, as some of the neighbors supposed, any feud between the houses of Whipple and Gray, but for ten years the bachelor had never called on his spinster neighbor. Then Hermine, recently left alone in her rambling old house, was twenty-five and Denslow Gray was thirty. He had called often then, till gossiping tongues had cut his calls short. He had heard through Moses that neighbors were expecting an engagement, and so annoyed was he at the interference that the calls had ceased. He left the neighborhood and lived in the city for several years, and it was only within the last few years, when apparently all gossip had ceased, that he returned.

On this morning he called very formally and requested his neighbor, with great formality, to sell him a little wood. He regretted having to

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annoy her, but he had heard from Moses that she had plenty, and, owing to the coal shortage, he was actually suffering from the cold. As he spoke Hermine led him to the corner of the living room nearest the fireplace, the embers on the hearth. The only chair available for him was the comfortable one the good neighbor had found so inviting. The fire was unusually twinkling, and the rows of Temple tiles that bloomed on a stand near a sunny window at one side of the room gave a suggestion of warmth and cheer that captivated the neighbor. He rose to go, and then returned, his hat when called to Rachel to ask her whether she could spare a little wood. At the door she whispered: "Hurry in with a pot of chocolate and nice buttered toast. Look surprised when you see Mr. Gray, and make a move to take the chocolate away. Hurry, Rachel."

Hermine walked slowly back to the fireplace. "My woman is looking to see whether we have any wood chopped," she was saying, and then the maid entered with the tray. She started at the sight of the caller and pretended to return to the kitchen.

"That's all right, Rachel; you may bring it in," said Hermine. And then, turning to Mr. Gray, she went on: "You see, I usually have chocolate at this time on cold mornings. I'll please Mr. Gray, let me give you a little—it is so warming."

A half hour later, when the caller rose to go for the third time, he asked Hermine whether he might send Moses over at once with a basket for a little wood; they actually had no fuel to cook dinner. Hermine looked puzzled. She said the wood was in a shed at the end of the garden, and that the man who came to carry the wood had the key. She was sorry, and then: "Won't you share my own very simple dinner? I believe Rachel is roasting a chicken. It is needless day, you know, and Rachel is very patriotic. She has made crullers—I can't offer you very much. Please stay, and Rachel will call to your man Moses to have him cut a little wood for the kitchen."

Mr. Gray accepted the invitation, though as he did so something that he mistook for his conscience pricked him. He felt that he was breaking down a barrier that it had taken him ten years to build up.

At six that afternoon Mr. Gray still lingered. He was playing cribbage with his spinster neighbor before the fire, with the light of a skilfully arranged bracket-lamp that threw just the right shadows on the board and a mellow, becoming glow on Hermine's face. In the kitchen Rachel was making savory coffee. A pan of Johnny cake was browning beautifully in the oven, and a broiler of bacon was sizzling on the fire. Rachel was laughing to herself—or rather to old Moses, who sat watching in admiration, with a growing appetite, at one side of the stove.

Hermine did not even ask her neighbor to stay to tea—it seemed to be such a matter of course for him to remain there in the glow of her fire, rather than to go home to his own barnlike abode to feed upon cold meat and damp, chilled bread.

When Rachel had cleared away the things Mr. Gray drew his chair closer to that of Hermine. "You're a wonderful woman, Hermine," he said. "I made up my mind once, that you were cold; but you've been thawing out my heart today—my heart and incidentally my fingers. I know it is only charity on your part. You are doing kindness in the same spirit that you had the factory girls here last night. The worst part of going home isn't the fact that it is as cold as a barn—it's because I'll have to leave you."

Hermine's expression showed complete amazement. She told Mr. Gray that never in the world had she imagined that he might want to marry her—the fact was that Mr. Gray had not expressed his sentiment in just those words—but she did hate to have him go home in the cold. Her guest room was very warm; Rachel kept a fire there. She wondered whether it might not be arranged for him to stay. And that is how it happened that

A Quick Relief for Headache

A headache is frequently caused by badly digested food; the gases and acids resulting therefrom are absorbed by the blood which in turn irritates the nerves and causes painful symptoms called headache, neuralgia, rheumatism, etc. 15 to 30 drops of Mother Seigel's Syrup will correct faulty digestion and afford relief.

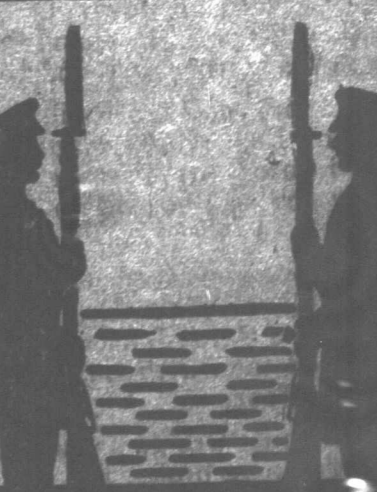
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