



"Why, I—I kinda want your opinion about something Honora. I—well, being as you and I were once such good friends I didn't s'pose you'd mind me coming up like this so late—"

"It's only nine."

MATTHEW was evidently relieved to find her in such a gracious mood. He cleared his throat.

"Honora, I don't rightly know how to begin what I've got to say, so I won't beat round the bush. I'll go straight to the point by asking you if you are thinking of—of making a change in your life."

"Matthew, I can't see how it concerns you, but if you wish to buy this place, it is for sale."

"So I was right! I've suspected as much. I haven't said anything to anybody, but I've just been noticing—things. Is—is the boy going to be too much after all?"

"I thought you wanted my advice about something," said Miss Honora, with a return of her old harshness.

"Well, in a way I do. I want to ask you if we hadn't better have my cousin John take him. He could be compelled to, you know."

"Never! He'd set him to work; hard farm drudgery."

"But—"

"I'm amazed you should suggest it, Matthew. From the little I saw of your cousin John, I sized him up directly for a Simon Legree, and surely you know him better than anyone else round here."

"Well, I don't know him so very well. Of course, it's true he has a reputation for hard driving of his help—"

"I won't consider it for an instant."

"Well, would you consider letting him come to me? I really like the little chap, and you can have him whenever you want him, and can plan his education yourself, and I'd fall in with what you decide. I want to do it, Honora."

She was silent. Then after a moment she said:

"Mrs. Porter may not like children."

"Mrs. Porter? The Widow Porter, you mean? What does she have to do with it?"

She stared at him in astonishment. "Aren't you going to marry her?" she demanded, sharply.

"Me? Marry her? Huh! Not if I'm awake!"

"People have been saying it is all arranged."

"People have been saying you are to marry this Mr. Wildrew or Mildew who's been to call on you twice. It is all arranged in the village."

Miss Honora could never have been accused at any time of a very strong sense of humor, but at this announcement she smiled with evident enjoyment.

"I suppose that's really what you were hinting at when you asked me if I was making a change in my life. In the first place his name is Muldrew. And he's bald and absent-minded and devoted to bee-culture to the exclusion of everything else. He is merely my tenant-to-be, Matthew."

"What I can't see," observed Matt, whose face had cleared very perceptibly, "is why you have to rent or sell at all."

Miss Honora turned slowly and faced Matt.

"Matthew, I want to apologize to you for all my—my overbearing treatment of you. I want to tell you that I am sorry, ashamed, mortified. This hurts my pride, but I will say it. No, don't interrupt. Matthew, I accept your kind offer and am very grateful to you for being such a good friend—a friend in need. Take Marcel and my blessing on you. I do not possess three hundred dollars in all the world."

Matt Stubbs gaped, his mouth fallen open and his eyes rounded in incredulity. Briefly she related the facts.

"And so you see how I am situated," she ended, brokenly.

Slowly his big right hand reached to her right one.

"My dear woman! And you would have said nothing! You would have lived in three small rooms, done sewing or taught music or sold garden-stuff rather than give up those infants!"

Miss Honora was not proof against such sympathy. Down went her head, and by some strange prevision, Matt's big shoulder happened to receive it.

"For ten years—yes, all this time and longer than that," he said, a new note in his voice.

"Ten wasted years, Matthew."

"But we'll make up for them!"

Suddenly down the path appeared a small white-robed vision!

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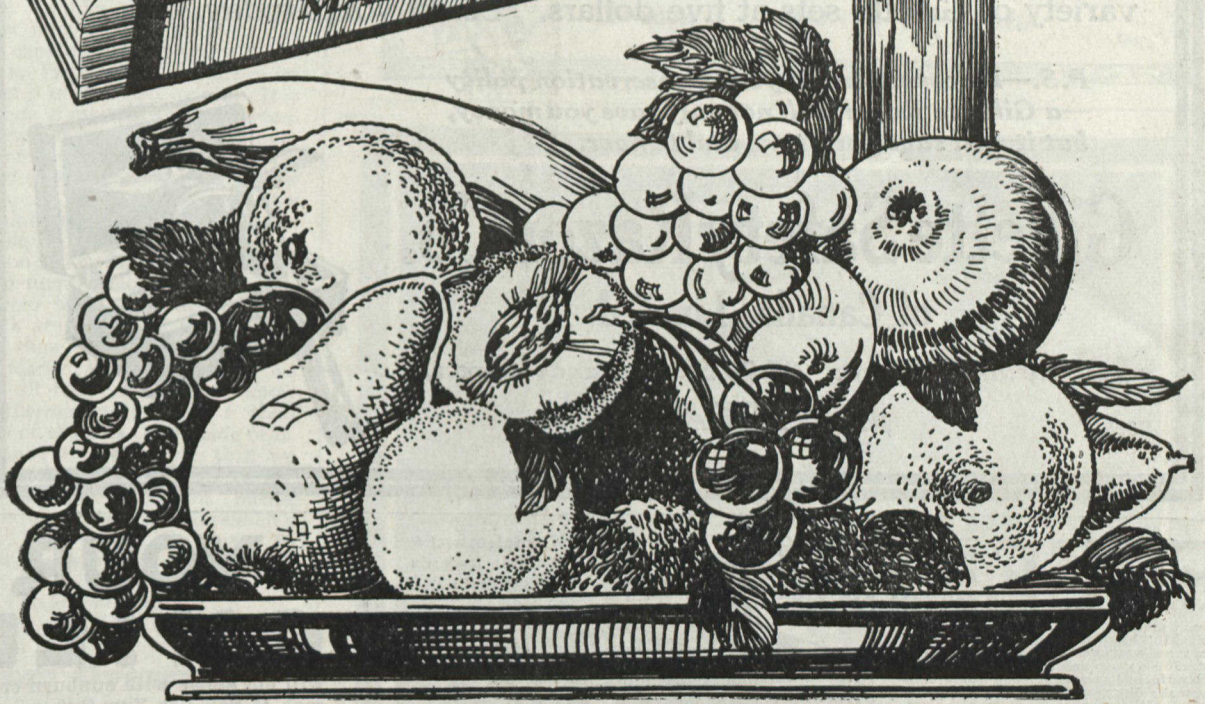
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