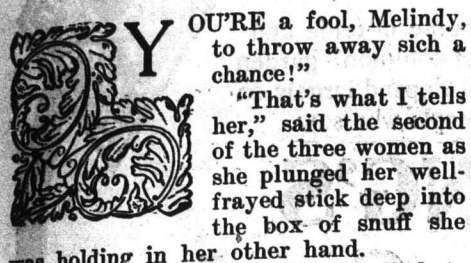


Melindy.

By Willie Walker Caldwell.



YOU'RE a fool, Melindy, to throw away such a chance!"

"That's what I tell her," said the second of the three women as she plunged her well-frayed stick deep into the box of snuff she was holding in her other hand.

They were sitting on tilted split-bottomed chairs in the shade of a big walnut tree, which graced even the rough log cabin standing on the edge of the otherwise bare common.

The irregular mountain chain facing the cabin, its seductive shadows alternated with patches of glimmering sunshine; the quiet tree-begirt village on the left; and on the right rolling green meadows, with here and there a strip of woodland, waving with slow grace in the cool breeze, made up a picture good to look upon.

But the women were too deeply engrossed with their snuff-boxes and their subject (even if familiarity and other things had not blighted their sense of joy in the beauties of nature) to observe the fair picture, though in a dim, half-conscious way it often whispered to them of God and Truth and Purity—things of which they had almost ceased to dream.

Two of the women were past middle age, and wore that unmistakable look of hardened shamelessness and shattered energies which told their story at a glance. The other one was young, and, judging from her face, had not yet become inured to sin and shame.

"Women like us," continued Mollie, the first speaker, "don't have no chance any how; and since the Good Bein' give Melindy her purty face, seems to me she got a right to make a fortune out of it if she can."

"Who said anything about a good fortune?" scoffed Melindy.

"Well," responded the second woman, who was the girl's mother, "he offered us a plum support, and promised me you might wear all the fine clothes you wanted."

"I don't keer if he said two thousand dollars a year," replied the girl.

"Yes, an' he said maybe he'd marry Melindy some day, if his sisters ever got married and moved away from here—and I know they will," eagerly continued the mother.

"I see him marrying me now," replied Melindy, flushing hotly; "and I don't know as I'd keer to marry sich an old, ugly, deceivin' critter as he is, even if he was willin'."

"It seems to me like you wuz puttin' on a mighty heap of airs, Melindy," put in the visitor, "specially after what your mother's done for you, and her expectin' you for to-be her support in her old days, too."

"Done for me!" exclaimed the girl, springing from her chair and facing them with blazing eyes—"Done for me! 'Twould have been a mercy if she had never brought me into this world, to have everybody p'intin' at me and turnin' up their noses at me; and men, sich as old Squire Thompson, a-biddin' for me same as if I wuz a filly at the horse fair."

"She's a queer girl, Mag, and I can't make her out," said Mollie, dipping snuff voraciously, as they watched her pink gingham skirts disappear along the path which led to the woods near by.

"Yes, she is kinder queer," replied the mother, calmly, as she also took another dip; "but she's young yet, and she's purty much had her own way ever since she wuz born. She'll come to her senses before many months, when wintertime comes and there ain't no meat nor wood in the house."

Somewhere among the tainted streams which were commingled in Melindy's blood there had entered one purer than the rest, and by one of those unexplained forces of heredity its influence was more plainly visible than might ever be again under similar circumstances.

This subtle force gave to her face a look of purity, to her air a touch of grace, and

to her manners a semblance of refinement. It led her to avail herself of her limited advantages of education, and put into her heart aspirations after better things than those she had known. Born to shame and poverty, reared amidst degrading surroundings and destined from the first to a career of vice, Melindy had not been given a fair chance in life. Twice her mother might have secured a home for her with respectable people, where she would have been decently taken care of and inured to hard but honest labor, had not her mother's prejudice to virtuous and seemingly hard-hearted humanity led her to fiercely reject such offers for her daughter, who promised to grow up too pretty to need to work for a living. Melindy, also, as a child, had felt that her present life—while she could laze in the sun or shade all day, hunt wild flowers or pick berries, swim, fish, or climb mountains as the mood came to her—was far preferable to hard work and strict control, even though coarse bread and meat was her daily fare and gaudy calico her clothing.

At fourteen, Melindy was tall and slim, with feet and hands too big, limbs too long, a tangle of reddish-brown hair and a clear, healthy skin, tanned and roughened by exposure and lack of care. Her large brown eyes softened by drooping lids and long lashes, a straight nose and even white teeth, redeemed her face.

At seventeen she was beautiful, and began to feel the self-importance derived from the knowledge of that fact. Her mother had guarded her thus far with the feeling that she was still a child. Now, seeing her beauty to be greater than she had supposed it would be, she valued her accordingly.

About this time a suitor, rich and respectable enough to command the mother's consent, appeared. Fortunately, he was neither young, handsome, nor fascinating. He trusted to his money to buy the mother and to her to control the girl.

Melindy did not like him; her self-love was offended by his mode of procedure, and her natural combativeness led her to resent being made an object of barter by her mother.

These feelings awoke within her the half-dormant sense of womanly purity, and once aroused it proved a powerful ally to her unconquered will. Her mother's tears, entreaties, complaints and threats availed nothing, though they made her very miserable and finally determined her to run away from home. She had heard of a woman boarding at the hotel who wanted a servant to take back to the city with her. Having secured the place, she slipped out one morning, while her mother was still sleeping, joined Mrs. Winter and took the north bound train for her new home. She felt a good deal frightened and a little regretful when she realized that she was rapidly leaving familiar scenes and faces behind her. After shedding a few surreptitious tears as she huddled in the corner of her seat, she began to feel the excitement of her adventure and to realize that it was a glorious thing to have her life in her own hands to make it what she pleased.

Mrs. Winter, who kept a second-class boarding-house for clerks, mechanics and other young business men of moderate salaries, was a kind-hearted, easy-going woman, and for two or three weeks she allowed Melindy to get gradually acquainted with her new life and duties. The boarders were much amused by her provincial idioms and her awkward, country manners, but they liked to look at her pretty, fresh young face, and did not laugh at her more than they could help. Most of the young men alternately flattered and teased her whenever they met her away from Mrs. Winter's presence, and several of them were inclined to be impertinently familiar with the poor girl, who hardly knew how to command respect.

One day, after Melindy had been several weeks in the house, Mrs. Winter was ill, and unable to preside at the dinner-table; so Melindy was entrusted with the duty of serving the meat, dessert, etc., from a side-table. One young man, a

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