

Three Days of Her Life

How One Woman Satisfied the Instincts of Motherhood

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Drawing by A. Lismer

IN the life of Corinna Vanguard there were three days which stood head and shoulders above their fellows. The first one was the day on which she received a proposal of marriage. She was then twenty-four and the proposal came from a young man of whom she knew nothing save that he was a farmer of sterling character, exceedingly shy and silent of disposition, and that, though he lived twenty miles distant, he occasionally drove to their village on a Sunday morning and attended services in their church. Corinna's father, being the pastor in charge, manifested his pleasure in this evidence of favour by inviting the youth to his home. On one of these occasions, to the well-concealed surprise of the family, he remained not only to dinner and supper, but spent Monday and Tuesday with them. On the morning of Wednesday he arose early and, finding Corinna in the kitchen about to put some biscuits in the oven, he asked her if she would marry him. Corinna deposited her pan carefully on the upper grate, closed the oven door, turned and looked the young man in the face, and very distinctly said, "No." Thereupon the youth, without another word and without his breakfast, departed to the barn, where he hitched up his horse and drove away.

"Couldn't you have softened the refusal?" asked her father, when these facts were presented for parental judgment.

"Couldn't he have softened the proposal?" pertinently inquired the girl.

"You are getting on in years, Corinna, nearly quarter of a century."

"Well, I'll be three-quarters of a century before I'll tie myself to a man who can do nothing but eat his meals and sit around and stare at me between them."

"I've heard that he's a good worker and very kind to his parents."

"What's the good of a man who can work and is kind if he can't talk?" demanded this heartless girl. "A husband should be able to make bright and sportive remarks. He should joke about the little ills of life and make his wife feel as gay as a basket of kittens."

"You can't get everything," said Corinna's mother, sagely.

"No," replied the girl; "so it's just as well that I don't want anything."

A TOO independent spirit does not attract admirers, and Corinna was more than forty before a second turning point appeared in her life. By that time her parents were dead and her brothers and sisters (with the exception of the bachelor brother with whom she shared the homestead) married and gone. She and her remaining brother were a prosperous and capable pair, growing old together with a deadly monotony that at unexpected moments struck terror to her soul. One such moment appeared on a summer morning at 5.30 when, standing before her mirror, putting the last hairpin in her hair, she discovered that the entire braided structure at the back of her head wobbled loosely and had to be taken down again and rebuilt more firmly. "This," reflected Corinna, "is what it means to grow old. One's hair gets so thin it can't be put up decently, and the wrinkles get so thick they can't be smoothed out at all."

She came downstairs at quarter of six. Exactly twenty years to the moment since her crude admirer, his face as hot as the stove before which he stood, had blurted out, "Will you marry me?" and she had blighted his hopes with a word she had never yet regretted. Did she regret it now? Well, not exactly. And yet—oh, how queer things turned out in this world! Here was a green gawk of a country boy who had married an empty-headed

little fliberty-gibbet (just to show Corinna that he wasn't pining for her, so Corinna privately assured herself) and begotten three unusually clever and attractive children. Corinna would not have believed such a thing possible if she hadn't seen it with her own eyes. The children were well-bred, handsome and healthy, and were carrying everything before them in school and college. Corinna, who loved to watch flowers grow, had a sudden overwhelming sense of what it must be like to watch a human soul develop and be able to call it her own.



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Perhaps I wouldn't have said, No, she reflected, if I had thought of the long, empty years that stretch out after forty.

Her brother Gideon came downstairs and dropped into the chair behind the stove, to put on his shoes, as is the immemorial custom of farmers. "Ugh!" he said. "It's chilly for midsummer, but what can you expect in Canada?" Gideon was one of those Canadians who are forever railing at the climate of their country.

Corinna was slicing bread for toast. "Why don't you move to North Dakota?" she inquired. "That isn't Canada."

"Cory," said her brother, his unwashed face and frowzy head bent above the shoe he was lacing, "you are getting up in years and you shouldn't allow yourself to make snappish remarks like that. It destroys your naturally sweet expression."

Getting up in years! What an odious phrase. But the sting of it lay in the feeling that she had nothing to show for the years she had got up into. The bitter reply that sprang so naturally to her lips was suddenly whelmed by a thought, the vastness and splendour of which made speech temporarily impossible. When Gideon came in with a pail of foaming milk, she said, "Gid, would you mind if I adopted a child?"

"Whose child?"

"Why, nobody's, of course. How could you adopt a child that belonged to anyone?"

"Well, you want to be careful."

"Oh, I'll be careful," cried Corinna. "I always

know what I want, and even better, I know what I don't want.

This, then, was the second memorable day.

She went to the nearest Orphans' Home and was shown into a large room, where a dozen children under five years of age were playing. They had the odd, unattached look of little ones who belong to nobody. She had provided herself with a number of cheap toys—little tin waggon, coloured rubber balls, animals and dolls that squeaked when pinched. They were soon playing boisterously with the new gifts and Corinna had time to inspect them. She had an idea that the one who looked wistfully at her would be the one she would choose, but they were too interested and excited to be wistful. Presently, toward a struggling, laughing knot of small boys, each striving to get the ball that had been tossed among them, a wee girl of two made her way to rescue a picture book. With a sudden movement one of the children thrust out an arm for the ball, and, wholly to his surprise, felled the baby girl to the floor. She sat up rubbing her head but making no outcry, and the next moment, dextrously seizing the block, she retreated with her prize to Corinna's knee. "I dot my block," she observed, triumphantly, as exposing one of its six sides to the lady's gaze she pointed out the picture of a squirrel. "Dat a quioile," she said.

"So it is," replied Corinna, blind to block and squirrel because she could see nothing but the dimpled little hand held up to her. The balmy aura of innocence and inexperience exhaled from the child. She had that happiness in the present moment that only carefree childhood knows the secret of, and Corinna, as the little one leaned confidently against her, felt the insistent years slip dream-like from her, leaving her on the rose-shadowed plain of life's beginning. Never again after she brought the baby home did she question the use of living. The energy that had formerly been deflected into vain arguments over trifles and bickerings with Gideon was now turned into the broad channel of the baby's well-being. At last there was reason and meaning in existence.

THE third day to be remembered in Corinna's life came with the visit of a middle-aged cousin, who had married early and brought into being ten children, ranging in age from thirty to eight. There were no black sheep among them and there had been no deaths in the family. Marietta Douglas was commonly spoken of as having had a full life, and this characteristic of fullness greatly multiplied her powers of maternal criticism. Of her it might be said that her strength was as the strength of ten because her offspring were of that number. When Corinna slapped the youthful Emmeline for some small misdemeanour Marietta would adopt a reminiscent expression and remark: "I used to spank a good deal with my first five or six, before I learned better"; or, "I got down as far as Benjamin before I was really cured of the scolding habit."

"But what would you do instead?" Corinna naturally inquired. "Oh, I learned to know before they did what they were going to do, and to head them off, if it was something wrong, by directing their attention to something else. A healthy child, my dear Corinna, is a small steam engine in motion. If it is not on the right track it is on the wrong one, and the person to blame is the engineer." Then the gentle Quakeress delivered herself to a sentence which remained with Corinna. She said: "I don't suppose thee knows what it's like to have ten children and to have it on thy mind all the time