

THE WINSTALLS

OF
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A TALE OF LOVE AND MONEY

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CHAPTER XXII.

WAR BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE.

Like all other men, Methuselah John Brown had his limitations. His two main faults were more or less characteristic of his race. These were—a certain pretentiousness in things religious; and a tendency to be overbearing in the exercise of authority. In this last respect, Mrs. Stowe has well shown how the most oppressed slave becomes the most oppressive slave driver. Methuselah was many removes from being a slave driver in Mr. Winstall's household, but we have seen that his easy going master expected him to have a general oversight of all the servants. Such a loose arrangement was liable to make trouble. Methuselah was a faithful servant, and on the whole very moderate for a negro; but he was a negro, and any small interference or dictation from him was likely to be resented. Still matters had moved on without any serious friction for a long series of years.

Since Jerry's unfortunate break Methuselah became more inclined to overate his own authority and importance. Especially towards Jerry he began to assume a more dictatorial manner. It was not his way to talk, but he would move about the yard with an offensive gravity, sometimes looking into the stable, and appearing to examine whether the horses were properly cleaned, or going into the harness room, and noting the condition of things there. Jerry soon grew impatient of such interference, and would sometimes accost Methuselah in terms not too respectful. "Now then, darkie," he would say, "what do you want here?" Or "Lookout there, stove pipe, and get out of my way." Sometimes, when disposed to be ironical, he would call him "Snowball," or "Whitewash," or "my brave Circassian."

Such epithets, loosely flung out by Jerry, touched Methuselah in the most sensitive spot under his black skin. Any reflection on his color was the hardest thing for him to endure. The comparison of himself to a Circassian he did not understand, but he imagined it had some reference to color, like most of Jerry's other uncomplimentary remarks. But Methuselah was wonderfully patient and self contained. He had need to be, for he had just two moods—one of absolute self control, and one of wild frenzy. We have seen him in the first mood in his daily household duties, and we have seen him in the other mood in the prayer meeting. Methuselah in fact was a volcano—very quiet usually on the surface, but full of explosive material within. If he did explode, it would be without much warning. The process of transition from the one mood to the other was so rapid it could hardly be detected. So Methuselah had need to be cautious lest Jerry's taunting remarks might some day precipitate an explosion. Miss Pearce's comparison of Methuselah to a boiler in which the steam was rising day by day was not so far from the mark.

But Methuselah had another foe, and one far more bitter, and biting, and of more irritating irony than Jerry. This was Kitty O'Connor, a South of Ireland girl, who had now for some months been a helper in the

Winstall kitchen. Except that she was scarcely the full height Kitty was a girl of typical Irish beauty. With a skin as white as paper, rosy cheeks, blue eyes, and raven black hair, this Irish flower was wasting her sweetness in the desert air of Mr. Winstall's kitchen.

Kitty hated Methuselah with a perfect hatred. She hated him because of his interfering, offensive ways; and she hated him more because he was black. And Kitty had a very loose tongue which she freely used on Methuselah whenever he came within range. The fact is, that with Jerry in the yard, and Kitty in the kitchen, Methuselah was beginning to have rather a bad time.

Now in the butler's pantry there was a safe in which was stored most of the household plate. Inside the safe there was a compartment where was kept specially valuable articles, as well as surplus plate not in daily use. In the outer part of the safe was kept the articles commonly in use. Miss Winstall kept the keys of both these compartments, but the outer one she would unlock every morning, so that others might have access to it. When locking it at night she would glance through it to see that all was safe.

On a certain night about this time, Miss Winstall, on locking the safe found that six silver dessert spoons were missing. It was a painful discovery to make. Not in her time had anything of the kind ever occurred. The worst feature of the case was not the loss of the spoons, but that some one of their trusted servants was not above temptation. There could be no mistake, however. The spoons had been in use that very day, and they were gone now.

Miss Winstall determined not to precipitate any investigation. She would wait until next forenoon; whoever was guilty of the theft might meantime repent and confess, or perhaps replace the articles secretly. But the next forenoon brought no confession and no return of the property. At lunch Miss Winstall spoke of the matter to her father. Having consulted together, they determined to examine each one of their help separately and to promise forgiveness if the theft was owned up to, and the articles restored.

They began with Methuselah. In justice they had to treat him as the rest, but hinted no suspicion as to the possibility of him being involved. He disavowed all knowledge of the matter of course. Jerry came next, with the same result. Then the cook was sent for, and the housemaid, but no hint or clue was discovered. Kitty came last. When the matter was mentioned to her she looked a little mysterious.

"What sort of spoons were they, Miss?" she said

"Dessert spoons," said Miss Winstall
"What sort are they? Are they big or wee spoons?"

"Oh, neither. Just between big and wee.
"And what are the spoons made of?" asked Kitty. Are they made of gold?"

"No, No," said Miss Winstall, "they are of silver, just the color of a dollar, you know."

"So the spoons were a silver color, and they were not very big nor very wee?"

asked Kitty.

"That's just it, Kitty" said Mr. Winstall. "You have hit it exactly. Now have you seen or heard anything of these spoons? If you took them yourself, just say so, and bring them back, and there will be no more about it."

"Stole them myself, is it?" exclaimed Kitty in fury. "Stole them myself! And I'm to bring them back! Holy Moses, do you take me for a thief? What would I want your spoons for? Haven't we plenty of spoons at home in County Kerry?"

"Oh, Kitty," said Mr. Winstall, "I did not mean that you took the spoons. But you might perhaps know who did. And I am sure you will tell me if you know. I will buy you the nicest hat you can pick out if you tell me."

"But if I do tell, and the person murders me," said Kitty, "what would be the use of a new hat?"

"Have no fear of anything," said Mr. Winstall, who found he had got on the track at last. "Have no fear Kitty, I will take good care that no one shall harm you."

"Well," said Kitty, looking round the room suspiciously, to make sure that no one was within hearing, "I will tell you. It was Methuselah."

"Methuselah!" said father and daughter in one breath. And they could say no more. To think that their trusted Methuselah after such long probation, should turn out a thief! It was too horrible.

"What proof have you of this?" asked Mr. Winstall.

"Proof, is it?" said Kitty, "I have no proof. I only saw some of the spoons sticking out of his pocket." The terrible truth was confirmed. But Mr. Winstall was fair, and painful as the duty was, he must give Methuselah a chance to clear himself. He rung, and sent for Methuselah who presently appeared.

"Methuselah," said Mr. Winstall, "It is a very painful thing I have to do but I could not help it. We wish to give you every chance of what I think must be a mistake somehow. Kitty informs us that she saw one of those missing spoons stick out of your pocket."

On the instant Methuselah clasped his hands, and shot his head upward, as if struck by a bullet. It was a fine, dramatic action, whether feigned or real. And in that instant Methuselah passed from his self contained mood into his mood of frenzy.

"Me! he aldmost screamed, Me! me, de servant ob de Lor! me to steal spoons! And yo," turning on Kitty, "you vile imp ob de debil—yo say I stole dem spoons! I ought to call down fiah from heben to consume yo."

Poor Kitty was utterly terrified by this new mood of Methuselah, for she had never seen him in it before. She would have been glad now not to have said a word about the spoons. She almost feared the fire would come down and consume her, so terrible was Methuselah's manner. If he had not been so black, he would have appeared to her something like an avenging angel.

"But Methuselah," said Mr. Winstall, why should Kitty accuse you without cause? Is there any way in which you can prove that you are innocent? I hope Kitty in some way was deceived. We would be very slow to believe you a thief."

"Me a thief," exclaimed Methuselah. "Good Lor, is de end ob de world come at last? Me, de servant, de anointed ob de Lor, to be accused of stealin. And dis cussed white imp of a gal to say so ob de Lor."