

and be my Love

By PEGGY DERN WNU RELEASE

THE STORY THUS FAR: Jim MacTavish announced that Alicia was selling her place, and he was going to marry her. They would live with Megan. Again they quarreled, and Meg went out into the night to be alone on the ridge. Tom Fallon startled her as he walked into the moonlight near the rock. She told him of her father and Alicia, and the demands to sell the farm. He talked again of his wife and how she went to pieces when she was born dead. She was sorry for him. The house was dark and silent when she returned. She was half asleep when she heard a sound and slipped to her father's room. He had just returned from another "walk," and rudely commanded Meg to go to bed.

CHAPTER X

It was after one o'clock, so she knew that her father must be asleep by now.

She undressed in the dark and slipped into bed. She felt a little ashamed now of the violence of emotion that had sent her flying from the house to the Ridge; in the face of the grief and heartache that Tom carried with him twenty-four hours of the day, seven days a week, her own seemed trivial.

She was half asleep when she heard the downstairs door open and her father start up the stairs. There was something in the stealth, the furtiveness of his tread on the stairs, and the way he opened his door, inching it shut, that roused her more than noise would have done. He so seldom bothered to be careful about noise. He walked into the house and up the stairs and closed his door forcefully, no matter what time he came in; but tonight he had crept so cautiously that she was puzzled, and she slid out of bed, caught up her cotton crepe kimono, and stepped into her bedroom slippers.

She listened at her father's door, and when she heard only a soft, rustling sound, she tapped and asked, "Is that you, Father?"

"Who the blazes did you think it was?" he snapped at her.

"I was afraid it might be a burglar."

"Oh, for the love of—what the devil would a burglar want here? I fell asleep over my paper downstairs, and tried to get upstairs without waking you. Hereafter, I'll see to it that you are awakened." There was something odd about his voice that she couldn't quite distinguish. He seemed to be breathing hard, as though he had been running or were laboring under some terrific excitement.

"Go to bed!" he called to her sharply, and she turned and went back to her room.

It was near noon the following day and Megan was busy in her perennial border along the walk, resetting some clumps of phlox and thinning out some of the other perennials that were taking too much room for themselves, when a sudden sharp scream of terror rent the peaceful, mild air.

Megan jerked to her feet as the scream came again—from the direction of Alicia's house, and now she saw a girl whom she recognized as Betty Hendrix, whose father owned a dairy, come stumbling down the path from Alicia's house, wringing her hands and screaming.

"What in the world—" somebody asked. One of the men ran up the walk to the house, stepping over the milk pail, whose contents had splashed over the porch, and looked through the half-open door of Alicia's house.

He gave a yell and stepped back. Then others crowded close and looked in and instantly stepped back as though they had received a blow.

The first man who had reached the place—Bill Logan, it was—pulled the door shut and said sternly, "Mustn't anybody go in there till the police get here. Might mess up a clue or something. Somebody go call the law."

"But what is it? What's happened? Bill, for Pete's sake—" cried Mrs. Stuart, as usual one of the first at the scene of any catastrophe or unusual event in Pleasant Grove.

"Miz' Stevenson's been—murdered," said Bill, swallowing hard and looking a little green.

There was a stunned moment of silence and then a little buzz ran around the crowd, and the word "murder" was the only word that could be distinguished in that buzz.

"Murdered? Fiddlesticks, Bill Logan—you read too many o' them mystery stories," snapped Mrs. Stuart, thrusting her way forward. "Maybe Miz' Stevenson's got hurt—an accident. Get away from that door and lemme see. We ought to see how bad hurt she is."

"She's dead!" Bill said grimly, and Mrs. Stuart saw the greenish tinge to his sallow face. "Ain't no mistake about that. And the police always want to be the first ones to get into a place where there's been a murder. So I'm standing right here till the cops get here and there ain't nobody going in till then."

Megan stood at the end of the walk, still holding the sobbing Betty close. Betty was stammering, her voice choked with sobs. "I brought her milk, like I always do, and I stopped at the door and I said 'yoo-hoo—it's me, Mrs. Stevenson—can I come in?' And when she didn't say

anything, I opened the door—and she was lying there—all bloody—" Megan urged her across the road and to the porch, where Annie stood watching and listening.

Megan was too shocked, too appalled at what had happened, and too busy trying to soothe the hysterical girl to realize that Annie's dark face was ashen, or that her eyes were wide and the whites showing to an unusual degree. Annie's thick-lipped mouth was tightly folded and she said no word as Megan and Betty reached the porch. But Annie's hands were kind and gentle, and between them, she and Megan were able to get the girl into the house, away from that rapidly increasing crowd around the road, out of reach of voices that were sharpened with excitement and curiosity.

The day crept on somehow. Megan and Annie turned Betty over to her family, and the house grew quiet. Neither Annie nor Megan was disposed to talk; Megan, because she was locked fast in her sick, shaken thoughts; Annie, for reasons of her own that she had, at the moment, no intention of revealing.

Megan was too self-absorbed to be aware of Annie's curious, furtive glances as they went like automatons through their regular daily chores. Probably not a household in Pleasant Grove sat down to a midday meal; what food was consumed was taken more or less on the run. So it did not occur either to Megan or to Annie to wonder when Jim MacTavish did not appear for the meal.

Tom, stopping on his way from school to pick up his daily supply of milk and eggs, paused for a moment to say, distressed and unhappy, "It's a terrible thing. I can't help feeling terribly sorry for her—alone there. She must have been terrified."

Megan said, in a small, strangled voice, one hand at her throat, "Oh—don't!"

"I'm sorry," Tom said compassionately. "It must have been very unpleasant for you all day with that mob—"

"I hated her—and now she's dead—and I'm so ashamed," Megan confessed humbly. "I didn't even try to help her. Maybe if I had—"

"Oh, come now, for goodness' sake," Tom protested. "You must not give way to such thoughts! You're on the verge of becoming morbid."

"They say it happened before midnight," Megan told him thickly. "Perhaps she—she might have screamed—perhaps if I'd been at home—" Her voice broke and she was silent, her teeth sunk hard in her lower lip, her eyes sick and frightened, dark with horror.

Tom came into the kitchen and put his hand on her arm and gave her a little shake. "Stop that!" he ordered sternly. "Even if you'd been down here in the living room, you could not have heard her. And in your room upstairs at the back of the house—can't you see how foolish you're being, darling?"

The little endearment slipped out. Yet the moment, the second, after it had been spoken it seemed to crash in both their ears with the sound of doom. His face went white and set and his eyes were tragic.

Megan caught her breath and looked up at him, her eyes wide and dazed, incredulous. There was a pause between them that could have been a matter of seconds; yet to each of them it seemed to stretch endlessly.

Tom said, his voice harsh and very low, "Yes, I said 'darling'—I have thought it often enough."

"Oh—no!" Megan said in a small, choked whisper.

Tom straightened. His face looked as though it had been carved out of granite.

"Of course not—it never happened! I didn't say it—I never even think it. Forget it, will you?" said Tom in that harsh, strained voice. He took up the milk and the basket of eggs and went swiftly out of the house. The sound of his footsteps on the old broken-brick walk were the most final sounds Megan had ever heard in all her life. She stood listening until the last one had died to silence, and then she leaned, weak and shaking, against the cabinet behind her and put her cold, trembling hands over her face.

She became conscious of Annie's presence, when Annie said very quietly, her old voice gentle and warm with tenderness, "Yo' paw done come, honey."

She was too dazed to wonder how long Annie had been there, to wonder how much of that taut little scene Annie had witnessed. Somehow that didn't matter at the moment. She only knew that she must accept Annie's words as a warning and pull herself together before she faced her father.

He had gone directly to his room. She heard him moving around up there as she and Annie finished getting supper on the table. When he came down, he was freshly shaven and his shirt was immaculate. He had bathed and shaved and changed before supper, as he had done ever since she could remember. It had been one of the things that, as a child, she had been proud of. When she had gone home to supper and to spend the night with some school friend, and the school friend's father had come to the supper table, collarless, a stubble of beard on his tired face, still wearing the sweat-stained, grimy clothes he had worn in the field, she had thought always of her father with pride, if not with affection.

He came into the dining room, moving wearily, and when he had seated himself, he looked straight at her across the table and said sternly, "Yes, I know about it. We won't discuss it, if you don't mind."

"Of course not," she answered, accepting the dish Annie offered her, and serving herself without in the least knowing what the food was. She managed to eat, without the faintest awareness of what she was eating.

Her father was equally silent. He was pale and there were haggard circles beneath his eyes and his hands were not quite steady. And she did not know when the evil, staggering thought began to creep slyly into her mind; when she began to remember the unusual stealth and caution with which he had let himself into the house last night; the way he had climbed the stairs on tiptoe; the way his door had closed behind him. Suddenly the thought stood clear and hot in her mind: where had he been?

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