

skirts to shreds. So I couldn't save anything."

"I do wish," said Althea, I could have embroidered some slips. Of course, the woolen things are most important this weather, but I wanted a frilly cap, too. Poor baby! He won't be going out much in this weather, but I'd like to see him in one. There's nothing quite like a baby's face with a frill around it and a bow under the chin."

"Well," said Mrs. Mack, doubtfully, "it's terrible the way they get ribbon ends in their mouths. Bad for them and hard on ribbons. You tie them under one ear, not under the chin. But even so, they always get them and chew them."

"By the bye—" said Althea, suddenly, then stopped with a shy, sidelong look.

"Yes, my dear?"

"I wish—that little trunk in the attic, the one behind your father's model. Are you sure there's nothing in it but drawings and things like that?"

"You are thinking of your old attic ghost? O, my dear; don't get the notion that it is anything more than a phantom of your poor little hungry tummy. The first thing the fakirs and those people do when they want you to see visions is to fast. You'd been wanting to get into that trunk, of course. Children always want to get into shut things, and you certainly had been fasting. Besides, you were sick not long afterwards, too. I dare say you had a temperature at the time."

"And yet," said Althea, touching the little display rather discontentedly, avariciously, "did you ever look into it—clear down to the bottom?"

"Why, no; not to the bottom, but enough so that I could see. It's only drawings. After my mother's death my father just put everything away, stuffed his drawings into the trunk, dragged the poor old model in front of it, and forgot it, as well as he could. He had had great hopes of it, but it would have taken money to finish it, and when she went and he had me to keep, he just took a bookkeeper's position at the Tracy lumber yard and finished out his days there."

"I should think mothers would come back, if anybody ever does," teased Althea, "I would."

"Would you, my dear?" Mrs. Mack thought it over. "Yes," she agreed, "it's hard to imagine anything keeping one away. I don't see how death could be strong enough," she said, thinking of Joe in the other room, Althea in this, and the other now so near—and all of them with only herself to help them in their need. Mrs. Mack felt that she at least must be a stronger force than death. And if she, why, then other mothers. Death could never quench that terrible anxiety to help. "Many waters cannot quench love."

"I thought then," said Althea, "it was old doll things she was looking over. But now—I know," and she pointed at her own collection, "it wasn't doll things. If—if I could," she said. "I mean, if I were wise—I suppose it wouldn't be—I'd ask you to let me go up and look."

"Why, you dear, persistent little Fatimal I'll look; of course I will, though I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. It wouldn't do for you to go up those stairs and pull heavy attic things around, of course. How funny it would be if there should be anything under the poor old drawings. There's just one thing that makes me think you may be right, and that's my not being able to find any of my own old things before Joe came. I hunted everywhere. I did want them. I felt just as you do now. I wanted oceans of lovely things for my baby, and in my case I really had plenty, but I was greedy for more, and there wasn't a sock or a cap or a nightie of what I had worn. I concluded she must have sent them to the Chicago fire sufferers. You know a tide of old clothes set toward Chicago in '71, just as our things all went to Belgium. That was the year of her death. I concluded it was that, and let it go."

"I was only a year old when she died," said Mrs. Mack, looking wistfully at an ill done cypress portrait. "I have no memory of her at all."

She paused and then repeated the tragic little story. Althea had heard it, and she knew that Althea had heard it, yet she repeated it, as one does some well known tale or song.

"She had gone out to pick green grapes for jelly. You know in those days there was a tongue of the real woods that came down then between our garden and the village. Hunters sometimes followed their game there, honestly supposing there were no houses near. On that morning my father heard shots and went out, as he sometimes did, to warn them. He found four lads who had just got a fox and were so proud of their splendid pet! He knew the boys, and they were special pets of my mother's, too, and he brought them all up to the gar-

den to find her and show her their prize. And—there she lay, with the grapes scattered about here . . . brought down like a partridge!

"Poor boys! After these years, I ache more for them even than for my father and mother! Of course, they knew it was one of their bullets that had killed her, though there was no way of telling who had fired the shot—not that it really mattered. But the boyhood of them all died then and there along with her. They only stayed long enough to be her pallbearers and be exonerated by everybody. Then they left town. One of them died in the Indian fighting, and another in the Spanish war. The others I don't know. They just dropped out."

"I believe she came back," said Althea. "She would!"

"If she could," agreed Mrs. Mack, "and now, I must see to the furnace."

"You're going in to Joe first?"

"Yes."

"If he's sleeping, couldn't I—just look?"

"I don't believe I would—his sleep is so light, you know."

"Oh, well—it won't be long now. The baby will cure him. If I didn't believe so—but he will! Now go and sit with him. Let him find your hand when he wakes. The sound of snow flicking against the window is so desolate, I'm afraid it will make him think—of those things. When you are there it is almost as if I were allowed to go in. I'll go on with this bootie and—then you'll look in the little trunk, if you aren't too tired? I suppose it was only a dream, but I shan't be quite satisfied until I'm sure."

So Joe's mother went softly into Joe's room. Not the room which she had given him and his little wife during their wild snatch of a honeymoon before Joe went away through black seas to that business of putting out a world fire, but the room of his boyhood, with its dado of lacrosse sticks, snowshoes, tennis rackets, newspaper cartoons, thumb-tacked to the wall. The antlers of his first buck were over the center of the mantelpiece, and underneath it the picture of Althea, his first and only love. Because of the child of the night she had put over him his bearskin—atrophy of his father's.

So Joe lay on the bed where he had lain as a little boy, and the glimmer of his half open eyes showed he was awake. And while she stood there looking down at him, to all appearance serene at heart, strong, comforting unbowed by any trouble, it seemed to her that her real self was upon its knees hysterically wailing and calling upon a deaf God, gathering her wasted son in her arms, cursing the powers of destruction that had struck him down.

"The world is no place for women," he whispered from his pillow. "You should have told me."

She sat beside him, taking the left hand that lay outside, so white and gaunt and large upon the black bear skin. The other one was still helpless. But recovering—O, yes! Some day, if this wound of the soul permitted, he would walk about and have two arms and hands. Had it been a mistake, bringing him home? Should she have left him at the hospital? It had been so costly—so difficult, getting him back into her own care, but she had been so sure that Althea and her great hope would rouse and cure him. And he had given just one understanding, terrified look and shuddered away.

"Don't let her come in here," said Joe. "But tell her—you tell her—that—that I didn't know. I thought it was right to love."

"It's the most right thing in the world, little son. You did no wrong."

But he had only moaned and hid his face, saying again: "This is no place for women."

It was hard not to plead and argue against this terrible conviction of his. At first she had tried, but it only brought on that terrible shuddering silence—worse even than the outbreaks of cursing. So, as the doctor advised, they were all agreed now, to wait for that person who was on the way, whose journey was nearly done—who might come at almost any minute now, for though, as the doctor had promised, time would cure all by itself, the one who was coming might take the matter out of the hands of time. He had seen such miracles worked before by such tiny persons.

Joe shut his eyes and turned his head away. She would have stayed, but she was alert about her other nestling this stormy night. Besides, there was the furnace to see to, and the question of food, and she was only one mother to do everything—everything.

As Mrs. Mack stood for a moment in the doorway, smiling back at Althea, the girl thought once again how safe and cared for she was, here with Joe's mother, and she wondered at the older woman's fortitude, hoping humbly that when

she should be 50 and had troubles she could stand as straight and calm under them. And yet—how little gray there had been in her hair when Joe went away, while now—it was white. Not the white that is said to come with spectacular suddenness, overnight, but a swift, steady, unrelenting storm through the months, the result seeming complete tonight, and matching the white of the frosted pane and the drifts beyond it.

For an instant, as realization of this change came to Althea, she caught at the tears, and had a battle with them, before she could smile back calmly, and take up her knitting with a placid face.

But perhaps if she could have seen that other face as it turned away her stitches would have set less smoothly. And perhaps if there had been any visible watchers just then—if, for example, the Purple Lady of Althea's attic dream had been a little restless that night with whatever old anxiety called her back to wander through those rooms once so familiar and dear to her, and if in those wanderings she had come upon that face as, in turning away from Althea's door, it changed—she must have cried out and fled back to her own world.

Haggard, fierce, threatening, old—50? This woman was 70 or more. Her eyes were the eyes of a deer with the hounds slashing at its flanks, or of a woman in Belgium seeking escape and finding none; but not giving up, no, not giving up! Merely, just for the moment, unmasked of that show of courage which must be assumed if others are not to despair also. Not needing for a little while to pretend to be unafraid.

And yet, you know, she was merely going down to see about the furnace and to plan the morning's breakfast. That was really quite all she had in her mind at the moment; at least, all except her constant anxiety about the wounded mind and body of her son, and her knowledge of that which was waiting for Althea—waiting to torment and rend, perhaps to slay.

Her only light through all that dark part of the house was one candle, though in Althea's room a pink shaded lamp burned cheerfully. The house was wired for electricity, but there was none in use. She had given Althea to understand that this was not only because of the poor quality of service supplied by the town, but because she really liked candles and old-fashioned lamps better. Althea never had the slightest hint that the meter had been taken out because the bills had not been paid. And when, at intervals, she heard her mother-in-law handling saw and ax in the cellar, and knew by the smell that the furnace was being fed with wood instead of coal, it never occurred to her that they were enduring a sharper coal famine than other families in town; that carload after carload of coal had come in, but that they had had to let their allotment go because they had no money to pay for it. Nor did Althea know of the mortgage, and how the money from it had all been licked up by old debts so quickly that there had been barely enough to finance that terrible journey after Joe.

No—although Althea knew of plenty of trouble, she was carefully uninformed concerning the wolf which was not only at the door, but, as it seemed to Mrs. Mack on this night, fairly past it—as if it met her, intangibly fearful, in those dark rooms, and padded after her wherever she went, sniffing at her heels. But so far she had kept it from those two doors, and somehow—somehow—she would continue to keep it from them!

When she had fed the furnace with four foot lengths of stout oak planks for the bins like the rest of the old house, were solidly and honestly built, Mrs. Mack listened for a minute at the foot of the stairs to make certain that there was no sound of need from above, then lifted an inverted box and took from beneath it a hen which had been indignantly awaiting her fate since morning. She was the last—the last—of a flock of 50, and a pet. Mrs. Mack gave a short sigh, but did not falter. What must be, must.

She had become skillful since first, for love's sake, she had learned how to slay a living thing. Probably no butcher was ever more merciful or quick, and no protesting squawk troubled other ears.

Then came the scalding and tedious picking, but since bringing herself to this sort of task she had arranged things efficiently in her little cellar abattoir. The hot water of the furnace was at hand, and the wet feathers were soon added to the others in the barrel, to be buried under the grapevines when spring came, while what was left was just chicken—no more depressing in its aspect than any fowl you might buy of a respectable butcher.

But it was the last—and now, what?

As she mounted the cellar stairs with the candle in one hand and the chicken dangling from the other she almost smiled at a swift grotesque vision of herself making use of her knowledge of her neighbor's hen roosts; roosts which had not been depleted. Yet—was it so impossible? Was there anything in the wide world that she would not do for those two upstairs if it was possible—and safe? she had always sworn she would never get into debt—but she was in debt; that she would never, under any circumstances, mortgage her house—yet how quickly she had done it when it was a question of getting Joe home.

How would being a chicken thief be worse than being so in debt to one's grocer that credit had at last been refused? And in her imagination that figure persisted, slinking, witchlike, stealing through the moonlight, calming the dogs that knew and loved her, and quietly, skillfully obtaining food like any other wild mother—loping safely home with it.

As she entered the kitchen she had a moment's glimpse of her reflection in the black circle of the kitchen window, as yet uncovered by frost, and her heart leaped. It was so like the evil face of famine itself peering in!

Yes—if the Purple Lady had been invisibly present and had seen that face one can fancy she would have fled. Or—being who she was—would she have only peered the closer, tried to gather that white head to her bosom, kissed it, soothed it, kept near, step by step, through all the sordid agony? Would she have been trying to help, going from Joe to Althea, from Althea to Joe, relieving the other from sentry duty while those necessary things were done in the cellar and kitchen—from Althea to Joe and then back again to touch the white hair yearningly?

Mrs. Mack hung her fowl upon a nail and went the rounds of the kitchen. There was a little rice, a bit of dried codfish, perhaps half a dozen jars of jelly. (She had sold off her great store of fruit and preserves long ago—at a loss—to more prosperous neighbors.) And there was a little fat left over from her last cellar sacrifice but one. How strange, how unbelievably strange, that there should be no more credit from the grocery where she had traded 30 years! How cruel people could be to each other, she reflected, calling to mind the smug, fat face and near-set, bleared eyes of her creditor. She could not remember that she had ever been cruel, or unjust, or ungenerous. But perhaps she had, unknowingly. Sometimes she had been rather grudging to beggars and peddlers who came and bothered her at her back door; but only when their faces had betrayed them as slimy, shiftless, idle creatures who ought not to be encouraged. Well, perhaps that was the way her grocer and coal dealer and the man who held the mortgage judged of her.

At any rate, sufficient unto the day. Rice, chicken, jelly—that would see them through tomorrow. Perhaps she could bring herself to lay the case before Dr. Robson if she must. He would not let Althea suffer—surely not! And, in time, the government would send Joe's pay—some day. And when Althea was all safe, why, then—then there were all sorts of work one could do.

And so she smoothed her face, straightened her shoulders and went to look at the children again.

Joe was asleep; really asleep. After all, this was not so different from that time she had so nearly lost him with scarlet fever. He had been delirious then and her heart had died within her. This was only the same agony on a larger scale—what else? She had had the same aching ganglion under the heart then, and had been younger—less able to bear it. If one could only believe that his dreams were calm! But in the half light she could still see the knotted forehead, the clenched hand, so white against the black bearskin.

She stole out and went to look at Althea. But that wise child had gone to bed and was asleep also. Here, to, Mrs. Mack paused. So austere lovely—so childlike still. Rough fate must surely turn aside from that!

She lifted her clenched hands and held them against her dry eyes for a moment as she turned away; then, seeing the gay, expectant garments still airing before the drying fire, she took up her candle once more and went up the garret stairs. She could do that much. Though, of course, there would be nothing. She had promised.

What an odd suggestion of flowers in the air! A breath of the sachet Althea had used for her pretties, no doubt, but for the moment Mrs. Mack would have said she smelt a clove pink.

The garret's time-darkened rafters gave back no light at all from her candle flame; only the remote

square of the tiny window flung back a spark as dim as her own, one small flash of greeting as she passed. It was by that window, Althea and Joe had played with their paper ladies and animals. Indeed, had she cared to search them out, Mrs. Mack could have found their faded fragments still in a box of toys that stood there. Even the Purple Lady, not much different in appearance from that other day, although gone a little spider webby and dusty, still pointed her one graceful toe, and showed a trace of her smile under the smudge left by Althea's greasy finger.

The machine was not perceptible until she brought her flame almost against its dark skeleton, but she knew it well—could, indeed, have almost gone about this business blindfold. She hoped as she set her candle down and laid hold of its dragging would not reach her sleepers. But perhaps the rush of wind, the sharp rustle of the snow thrust against the windows was loud enough to cover in whatever she had to do.

The trunk was locked, the key forgotten and lost long ago. She prized the old hasp open. Poor, patient old drawings! There they lay. So many years of a man's life—so much hope, so much skill—so much rubbish! She had no knowledge of mechanics to enable her to follow and understand the purport of those careful, careful lines, but the time, the labor, the hope, the ultimate failure—there was no misreading these.

She laid the drawings gently at one side. Under them were boxes. The first she lifted out was heavy. She knew what it must be, but lifted the cover to make sure. Yes, these were the disjointed parts of a small model of the machine. Exquisite bits of polished wood and carefully wrought metal, all arranged in order like a child's building blocks after a day of play. She put this box on top of the drawings and lifted the other, a large one, sitting the bottom of the trunk like a tray. If—there were anything in Althea's vision this must be the right box. It came up with such a different feel from the other box, so light, yet full! Her hands trembled. She lifted the pasteboard cover and touched the yellowed tissue paper.

"Mother!" she whispered, "Mother!"

And then, just as she would have looked further at the contents, she heard herself called in a soft, guarded voice, and there was that in the call which turned her blood to ice. O God! On a night like this—now?

Still holding the box and the candle, she darted to the stairhead and saw—as she knew she should see—Althea's face looking up at her. Althea also held a candle, and she, too, was as white as the drifted snow. Her forehead glistened, her eyes were wide and black, but a smile fluttered upon her lips.

"Coming at once, my darling," Mrs. Mack sped down the stairs like a swooping bird. "Back to bed. Don't be troubled. It will be all right—all right—all right!"

"Now I must telephone."

"How ever can the doctor get through!" gasped Althea. "Isn't it drifting terribly?"

"O," said the other serenely, "you don't know doctors. He won't try to use his sleigh. He'll just get on his little black cob. I've seen them going about in worse weather than this."

"The wires may be down."

"They won't be."

"I wasn't—worrying—I only meant—if they should be—don't worry. We can—get along. Other women have." Then he shut her lips tight on a cry that almost came. But neither that wail nor any other passed her lips during that long night. For the sake of Joe, dreaming terrible things in the next room; for the sake of Joe who had heard, God knows what cries! and so could bear no more, she kept silence—silence!

The wires were not down, but a colder thing than storm thrust her back when Mrs. Mack sent her call into the night.

"We can't take any more calls from you," came back sharp and fine—with a cruel edge of satisfaction in the underbred voice. "The service is suspended for nonpayment of the last three months' charges."

"Really?" said Mrs. Mack. "How careless of me. I'll see to that tomorrow. But I must ask you to take this call, because—" and she went on confidently to explain. But she found neither understanding nor pity in the only ear her voice could reach. Surely that could not be a laugh! Some sound of the storm, breaking in. No human creature could laugh. "Orders is orders," decreed the voice. And central answered her no more.

But there was no time for anger. The nearest neighbors—but the nearest house was closed for the winter; the house beyond that had no phone, nor any one able to

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