

# A ROTTEN, FILTHY COWARD

**Tied to Mama's Apron Strings, Yet He Ruined Pretty Nellie Johnson, who Carried a Child Under Her Heart—Ruined Her, Yes, Until She Opened Her Mouth and Spoke Her Piece. And Can Nellie Speak? Read this and See.**

By ADELE HAMLIN

"Nellie, it's Tom, Tom Hill?" it was more of a statement than a question.

Nellie moved uncomfortably in her chair and looked out of the window at the sun sinking slowly. It seemed to her, behind the sky. Of course it was Tom. They knew it was Tom. Everyone knew it was Tom.

"Yes," she said, still looking at the sinking sun, "it is Tom." She had a vision of the first time they had met down to the C.M.A. grocery where Tom was clerk. Their glances and hearts fused. After that they belonged to each other.

"Is—is he gonna marry you?" her mother asked almost fearfully. "I told him. He said he would at first. But I—I guess he changed his mind," the last was hardly above a whisper.

Her mother whimpered and sank down in a chair. Her father groaned. It seemed hours to Nellie before her father finally broke the painful silence.

"Maybe Martha Hill'll talk to

him. We are going over there now."

Nellie shuddered at the thoughts of the scene that would take place there. Mrs. Hill wouldn't talk Tom into marrying her. She had talked him out of it. Mrs. Hill thought she was better than she, Nellie, because she was almost white. She was born out of wedlock just like her baby and Tom's would be if Tom didn't marry her. Oh God, Tom had to marry her! Her baby couldn't be born as Mrs. Hill was.

"Nellie, get ready."  
"Daddy, it's no use to go there. I—I don't want to go. It's—"  
"You aint got nothing to say! Get ready!"

She turned away and went to her room.

Mrs. Martha Hill told Nellie and her parents to be seated until supper was over.

Mrs. Johnson wept silently. Mr. Johnson paced the floor and Nellie stared into space. She did not want to face Tom again.

Mrs. Hill walked haughtily in the room followed by Mr. Hill and Tom. She fixed cold gray eyes on Nellie and with an impatient gesture began.

"Well, Susie, what is the matter with you?"

Nellie looked at Tom. He refused to look at her.

"Well?" said Mrs. Hill.  
"Tell her Susie," muttered Mr. Johnson.

"No," sobbed Susie, "you."

"Nellie! You tell her!"

"I—I," began Nellie, then she turned to Tom for help, but Tom was looking at a picture. She looked back at Martha who was staring at her coldly. "I—I'm to have a baby," she murmured.

Mr. Hill dropped the tobacco he was about to fill his pipe with. Mrs. Johnson wept louder and Tom stared at a lamp.

"Why do you tell me?" asked Mrs. Hill.

"Because it's Tom's!" cried Mr. Johnson, "and he's gotta marry her!"

"You mean my son must marry your daughter because she is going to have a baby?" she asked calmly.

"Yes! It's his baby!"

"Well if it's Tom's, mother—" began her husband.

"Silas I can handle this very well. So you want Tom to marry you?"

"He's gotta marry her!"

"Charles, I'm speaking to your daughter!"

"Oh, Martha, I know you want Tom to do right and marry Nellie!" sobbed Mrs. Johnson.

"Won't you talk to him, Martha? We don't want Nellie disgraced, neither Tom! Martha, please—" her voice rose to a loud wail.

"Susie, for heaven's sake, be quiet. There is no use to make all of this noise. I'll give you money and you can send Nellie away and nobody will know a thing about it."

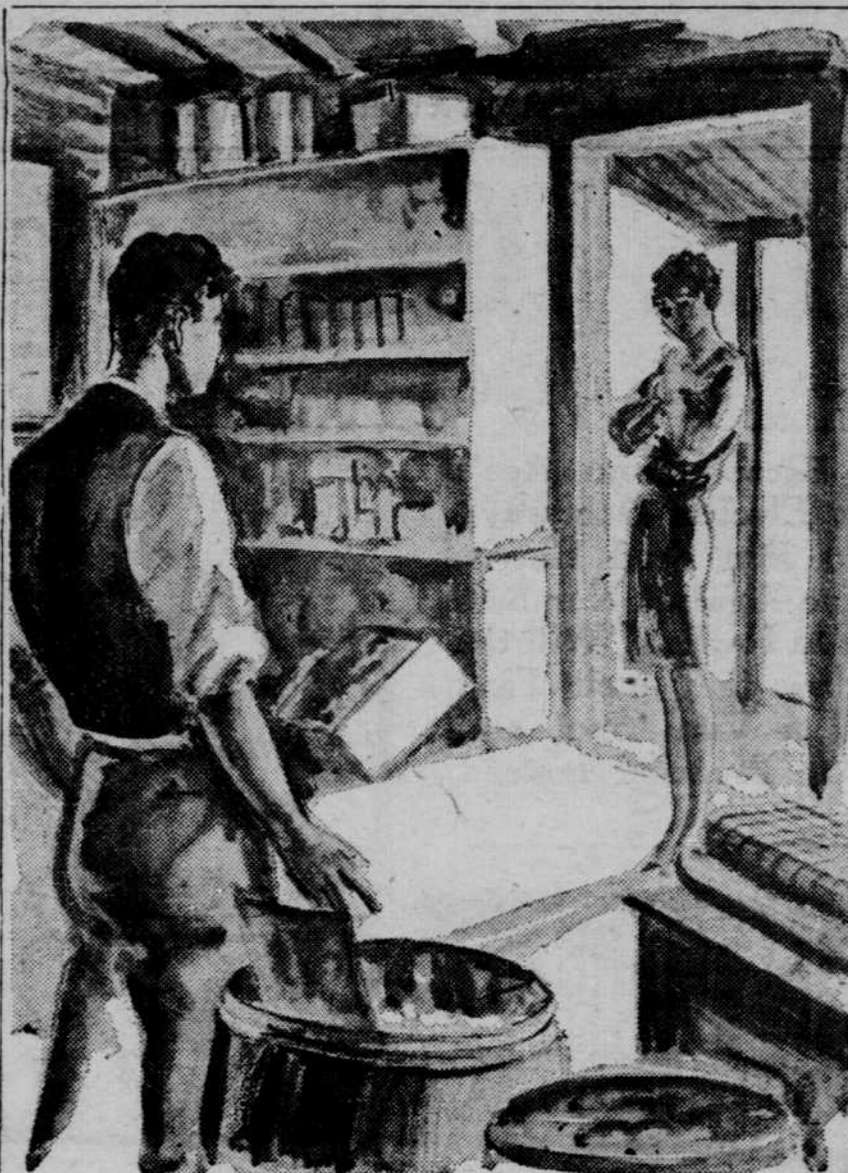
She looked first at Mrs. Johnson who was staring as if she could hardly believe her ears. Then at Nellie who had buried her face in her hands.

Susie and Charles Johnson realized the terrible truth. Martha did not want her son to marry their daughter! Why? Their daughter had graduated from high school and she was going to college in the fall. She had never had a lot of boys hanging around. Tom had been her only beau. They couldn't believe the Hills any better than they were. They couldn't be! How could they?

"Martha, you—you—don't want Tom to marry Nellie?"

Martha looked around the room at her husband, Mr. Johnson, Nellie and Tom.

"No," she answered, "I don't."



She had a vision of the first time they had met down at the Colored Merchants Association grocery. Their glances fused. They belonged to each other.

Silas stared at her with his mouth open. Susie moaned and Tom did not take his eyes from the wall.

"Why?" Mr. Johnson finally demanded.  
"How does Tom know it's his?" she sneered.

"This caused even Tom to move."

"Martha!"

"Martha you know Nellie wouldn't lie!" Mrs. Johnson was now angry.

"Yes! How does he know it? Do you suppose I'd let Tom marry her?"

"Martha Hill! Tom is going to marry Nellie if I have to take him to court! He can't get out of this!"

Court! Would they have to take him to court to make him marry her? No, they wouldn't, because God would change his mind.

"Oh God," she prayed, "don't let them have to make him marry me."

"I'll fight you every inch of the way! I have better things for my son to do! I won't let him marry your Nellie! Send her away! Go to court, anything! But he won't marry her!"

"You're not a Christian woman!"

"Shut up Susie! We're taking Tom to court! The court will make him marry her!"

"If the court makes him marry her, he won't stay with her! Not one day! Do you think I want Tom ruined?"

"You think because you was a teacher you—"

"But look at Nellie, Martha. We want her to be a teacher. If Tom don't marry her she'll be ruined. She—"

"I don't care about Nellie!" shrieked Mrs. Hill. "She should have had better sense! Who is she? She's nobody! My Tom is everything! He is not going to marry Nellie!"

"The court will make him!"

"He won't stay with her!"

"He won't! He won't! He—"

"Stop!"

Nellie was on her feet, her eyes blazing with anger. They looked at her in surprise, even Tom.

"You don't want Tom to marry me because you think he's too good for me! Well I wouldn't marry Tom because he isn't good enough for me! A coward isn't good enough for anyone!"

"Nellie, don't you—"

"Shut up, Martha Hill! You've said too much already! When you said I was lying and Tom didn't

say anything I knew more than ever that he was a coward. Nothing but a cheap, common, coward! Do you think I want my baby to grow up with a coward hanging around?"

"Nellie, we—"

"Never mind, daddy. I wouldn't marry him if he was the last man on earth! And you talking about taking that—that thing to court to make him marry me! Why it's funny!"

"Listen here—"

"I told you to shut up once, Mrs. Hill! You needn't worry, I wouldn't marry your precious son, your baby, your darling because he isn't good enough. I'll bring my baby up just like your mother brought you up. I'm going to work my fingers to the bone so that he'll be able to look down on his father! I'll tell him his father was no good! He was a dirty, rotten, filthy coward! He was afraid to use his own mind! That's what I'll tell him, and he'll laugh and laugh and laugh at you because you'll still be tied to your mama's apron strings. And you call yourself a man! A man! You're not a man, you're a coward! A coward!"

"Nellie!"

Tom was now on his feet, grasping Nellie's shoulders.

"You're not going anywhere! You're going to stay right here and marry me! I'm not a coward! I have just as much right to work for the baby as you have!"

"Tom—"

"Tom, if you marry this girl you can't stay in my house!"

"Martha, this is my house! My son can come here with his wife!"

"You told the truth Nellie, I was a coward! I was until I heard you call me. I—"

"What about college!"

"To hell with college! I didn't think about it then and I won't think about it now!"

**AFRICANS SAY:**

"Africans have much in common with us as wit and wisdom expressed in their proverbs show. It is time for us to get away from the notion that they are in an inferior and barbaric state. In more than one sense, we Americans are less civilized and more barbaric than they." — J. C. BENDER.

If you are in the company of frogs, then do not ask for a stool. (Howl with the wolves).

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