

SHORT STORY

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save the world, or at least to help some corner of it, should have married a share-milker, and thus ended the glorious career so hopefully planned . . .

Automatically she glanced at the clock.

"Time's getting on. Dad'll be back from the factory any minute and he'll want a cup of tea. Put the kettle on, Mary, and I'll finish up here. Is Paula's room ready?"

"Even to flowers on the dressing-table. Suggested by all the best magazines in 'Hints to hostesses.'"

Esther smiled. "Well there's no harm in knowing what's the right thing."

She wondered, when Jim came in, what Paula would think of him. This morning, she noticed, he had made himself tidier than usual and for a moment she felt nervous. Was Paula a stranger who would come and criticise? Would she see the shabbiness of the house, the worn carpet, the old couch with the broken springs, the range silvered over to hide its rusty, eaten surface? Or would she come as the old Paula, looking slightly amazed at Esther's thoughts? . . . But of course all that was past and she, Esther, was no longer the daring one. She was a woman in her forties, with a family of five, a husband, and a

greedy farm filling the forefront of her thoughts, and in the background still lay those old lost ideas of being something worth while, doing great works . . . There was nothing more to her now.

When she had given Jim his tea and tidied up the kitchen, she went into the guest room. It looked neat, but there was the torn bedspread which she couldn't mend because it was perished, the faded curtains, the wallpaper, stained and drooping a little, the uneven floors, and there was the brave little vase of flowers which Mary had placed on the dressing-table. But from the wide window which was open, there was the long stretch of grass, clover and buttercup spread, the tall purple rhododendrons and in the distance, mist hung, the pure sweep of the mountain.

After that the shabbiness didn't matter surely.

WHEN Paula arrived, she was different. She was still small and neat, but she had a finished look about her. Her hair which had greyed prematurely, was swept up from her face and was perfectly groomed, her clothes were faultless and her neat little shoes looked absurdly small as they picked their way over the muddy broken ground to the house.

Esther in her flowery print frock felt blowsy and uncouth. How could they ever meet on common ground? It was stupid, reviving old friendships like this. They were strangers.

"You'll think our way of living pretty rough," she said abruptly, "after what you've been used to."

Paula turned to her. "I've been used to such various ways of living. I was in the East you know, when war broke out."

Mary stood at the door and as Esther introduced her to Paula, a quick thrill of pride ran through her. It was something to have a daughter like this, to have John, her son, and the smaller children.

"You're like your mother when I remember her," Paula said to Mary, "And I can see you're full of ideas too."

When Paula was shown her room, she went straight to the window, passing the bedspread . . . reducing Esther's fears to nothing.

"Esther, how perfect." She stood for a moment without speaking, then she turned slowly. "I wonder if you know what coming up here means to me? But of course you don't." She went across to her suitcase and opened it, her face turned from Esther. "Later . . . perhaps I'll be able to tell you. Now, well, I'd just weep."

Esther left her and went back to the living-room where Mary had put out the

best lace cloth and the good tea-set. She looked up as her mother entered, her eyebrows raised in query.

Esther smiled. "We could have had it in the kitchen the same as usual. And you'd better look out a pair of those old walking shoes of yours. You'd take about the same size. Mine . . ." She held up her foot. "Well, they get me round."

* * *

[T was a week later and they had walked, Paula in a frock and shoes of Mary's, and Esther, almost forgetting she was a farmer's wife, across the paddocks, laden with cushions and rugs, to the river and the bush. When they were settled, Paula, breathing a great sigh of contentment, lay back on the cushions and gazed upwards at the towering honeysuckle which spread above them.

"I've been here a week and I feel at peace with the world. It's like magic. I hate going back . . . but I must."

"I wish you didn't have to. I wish we were neighbours."

"We'd most probably get on one another's nerves."

"Perhaps . . ."

"I do envy you Esther."

Esther's voice was surprised. "Me? Good gracious I don't see why. I've got nothing . . . Nothing you couldn't have."

(continued on next page)



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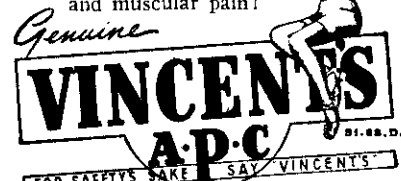
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