

SWEET ALYSSUM

SWEET ALYSSUM

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ONE lazy summer day I sauntered over to the law office of my old friend Judge Howard, hoping to hear a bit of gossip and perhaps a good story or two. Here is one he told me. I have written it from memory.

I've been practicing law for forty years here in Blue River town, with considerable energy and, I hope, all the honesty compatible with success, so quite naturally a great many curious phases of human nature have come my way.

A priest sees penitent mankind, a physician sick humanity, but all the different sorts of men, women and children that have ever

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been created flock to a lawyer's shop with their tales of joy and woe.

Now that I am getting old and easing up a bit in my work, the phantoms of many bygone comedies, tragedies and romances are constantly trooping through my idle brain. Some of them are grotesque as the antics of Harlequin, some of them as dark and grewsome as any mediæval tale, while others are fragrant as the breath of the sweet alyssum, the flower-god of the honey bee, the shrine of the butterfly. All of them are redolent of human nature.

Speaking of sweet alyssum did you ever hear the story of Sweet Alyssum, the Oil Queen of Roger Township? No? Well, it has all sorts of human nature in it, so I'll tell you about her. She brought oil and millions of dollars to Roger Township. Of course I did not see and hear all that I shall tell you, but I'll go ahead and give you the

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story without stopping to explain just how I learned it.

I suppose there never was on earth, nor any place else, anything or any person so beautiful as Sweet Alyssum Brooks. Her name was Elizabeth, but her father, out of a heart full of love, coined the diminutive "Lissem," and later another man, also out of a heart full of love, I believe, changed it to Sweet Alyssum in compliment to the fragrant little flower of that name. And so it has remained, officially, to this day.

And aside from being beautiful, Lissem was also a mascot.

Three or four years after the war, Roanoke Brooks, a splendid type of primitive manhood, came up from Kentucky and rented a small farm in Roger Township, an "outlying" district some ten or twelve miles north of here. Roanoke, himself, is authority for the statement that he was born

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unlucky, and that his ill fortune had continued to grow in virulence until Sweet Alyssum was born. At any rate after he had settled in Roger Township, everything went against him. He and his wife were sick most of the time and his crops were poor all of the time. If by any chance he managed to save a little money, he had to pay it out in fines, for, although a gentle, kindly man by nature, he would fight if anyone called him a "damned rebel." And some enthusiastic patriot was always ready with the epithet whenever Roanoke got a few dollars ahead.

"Blamed if they don't seem to smell my little roll just as soon as I get it!" he said, complainingly, to me, one day, when seeking my services. "And then some fool ups and holla's 'Dem'd rebel!' Then he gets licked and I go broke payin' my fine."

Usually when Roanoke visited my office

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it was with a sad face, but one day he came in radiant.

"My bad luck's all gone, Jedge," said he. "We've got a mascot at ouh house. Come last night. The cutest, sweetest little ge'l baby yo' ever see. Huh real name is Elizabeth, but I'm goin' to call huh Lissem. No mo' fights, no mo' fines fo' me. She brought us good luck, sho's yo' bo'n."

And so she did bring good luck, not only to Roanoke, but to the entire "outlying" township.

By the time Lissem was twelve years old, Roanoke had prospered to the extent that he owned a hundred acres of ground, and lived in a large two-story log house, all cozy and comfortable, and as picturesque as Roanoke himself, which is saying a great deal. There was, of course, a mortgage on his farm which he said he "had only b'en able to heft, not to lift clean off." In after years he

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loved to tell how "Sweet Alyssum h'isted the pesky thing and throwed it clean ovah into the next cyounty i' jacks."

I first saw Lisse—and fell in love with her—when she was two years old, and I've been falling in love with her ever since. From babyhood to womanhood she hardly changed, save in stature, and that her hair took a glossier black and the glow of her great brown eyes became gentler and softer, if that were possible, while the part of Himself which God had given her—the Life of her, so to speak—grew in radiance until, as womanhood approached, she fairly shone with vital luster.

A woman, you know, who retains her childhood, always has mankind at her feet.

During Lisse's unlucky thirteenth year her mother died, leaving her the sole possessor of her father's love, and him the object of her motherly solicitude and care.

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In certain ways her mother's death made a woman of Lissem, who was naturally mature for her years. Roanoke said she was "a bo'n mothah from the time she was a baby."

Near the end of the same unlucky thirteenth year, a handsome stranger of perhaps thirty came to the town of Blue River. No one knew anything about him, but the fact that he was cultured, educated and city-bred was evident even to our rustics. He had little to say to anyone save the county school superintendent, to whom he gave his name as Wyatt—though it was not. At the end of a week he left town and was forgotten.

A woman's history is usually made by a man. Probably Lissem would have had no history had not the fates and the county superintendent directed Wyatt's steps to her door. He "took" the school she attended and in due course of time—a very short

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course, probably—fell in love with her, as any man who was not a mummy was bound to do whether he would or no. No blame to Wyatt. He couldn't help it, not being a mummy in any sense of the word, but quite the reverse.

One Saturday morning in November, after taking formal possession of the schoolhouse in which his work was to begin the following Monday, Wyatt set out to find a boarding-place. He went to a house near by, which, as a part of Lissem's fate, happened to be her home. Roanoke, to whom the law of hospitality was an eleventh commandment, welcomed the handsome new teacher and "toted" his luggage to the spare-room.

At the time of Wyatt's arrival, Lissem was away from home and did not return till after supper, when she found her father and the stranger sitting before the

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fire. As she entered the room she glanced inquisitively toward Wyatt but as her father did not introduce her, she took her accustomed rocking-chair at the corner of the fireplace where she sat, hidden by the shadow, or illumined by the glow, as the fire shifted its flame.

Waytt had caught only a glimpse of the girl in the full light when she stooped to kiss her father, but it gave him ample evidence of her beauty. A searching analysis was unnecessary in Lisse's case. One who ran might see, and if he were blind he must feel it, so potent was her charm.

The hide-and-seek game she played in the lights and shadows was so tantalizing to Wyatt that he caught himself watching her too intently when the light was on. He tried to check this tendency, knowing that it was bad form to stare at a young girl even in a log house, but he was unable en-

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tirely to resist the call of her beauty, and in truth was almost unconscious of his transgression.

Roanoke was as jealous of men, where Lissem was concerned, as any lover could have been. He knew that up to this time she had never had a lover, nor had ever looked upon a man as other than a mere male of the human family, but he also knew that she had never before seen a man of Wyatt's class. So, when he noticed the stranger's glances, jealousy rose up to do battle with Kentucky hospitality, and he resolved first: that the new teacher should not remain a permanent guest in his house, and second: that Lissem's education was complete.

After the battle in Roanoke's heart had waged for half-an-hour, he said, in a low voice:

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"Lissem, I reckon yo' bettah go to bed. It's late fo' child'en to be up."

"All right, Daddy," answered the girl, wholly unconscious of the attention and jealousy she had aroused, and with a "good-night" which was intended to include the stranger, she went up-stairs.

As Lissem was leaving the room, Wyatt rose, by force of habit in such cases, and by force of an irresistible attraction, involuntarily watched her till the door was closed. Roanoke in turn watched Wyatt. Hospitality had been shamefully overthrown, so when Wyatt sat down again, triumphant jealousy spoke with all the restraint Roanoke could muster, which was not much.

"Thought yo' was goin' to follo' huh."

"Why?" asked Wyatt in natural surprise.

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"Yo' got up as if yo' war."

"A gentleman usually rises when a lady leaves the room," answered Wyatt, instantly recognizing his host's jealousy.

"Lissem ain't no lady. She's a child," answered Roanoke in low tones. "Yo' must 'a' thought huh pow'ful pretty, yo' watched huh so clos'."

"I did not know I was watching her," answered Wyatt, partly in truth. "And if I did so offensively, I sincerely beg your pardon."

"That's all right," mumbled Roanoke sullenly. But after a little respite, hospitality, though still somewhat groggy, got on its feet again and made its devotee ashamed of himself.

In the wakeful hours of the night Roanoke's conscience smote him hip and thigh, and he resolved that the sacred laws of hospitality should never again be broken

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by him because of the deplorable fact that he was "a dem'd fool 'bout Lisseem."

Roanoke had chosen Roger Township as his home because it contained a small settlement and a smaller church edifice devoted to the doctrines of the Southern Methodist Episcopal church. For intensity of devotion and strenuousness of brotherly love, give me every time a small, half-starved congregation belonging to a sect hated by its neighbors and despised by the rest of the world, as this church was at that time in the North. Such a faith is a thing to conjure with.

Earlier in the day Wyatt had noticed on the mantel shelf a book of discipline of the S. M. E. Church, and he knew at once that he had discovered the straight path to Roanoke's confidence and affection.

The next morning, after breakfast, Roanoke said to Wyatt:

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"We-all go to chu'ch nigh all day on the Sabbath. Reckon yo'-all wont get too lonesome loafin' 'round heah by yo'se'f?"

"May I not go with you?" asked Wyatt.

"Yes," answered Roanoke hesitatingly, though pleased. "But I reckon yo' won't ca'e much fo' ouh chu'ch. Fine folks seldom does. What mought yo' chu'ch be, now?"

"I was brought up a Southern Methodist, but I'll like your church whichever it is," answered Wyatt guilefully, though with the single, kindly-hearted purpose of pleasing.

"A Southe'n—" began Roanoke, greatly moved. "Gawd fo'give me and bless-yo'! We-all are Southe'n Methodists, and I thought of cou'se you was an outlander."

Wyatt almost repented his guile.

"Yo' was askin' yeste'day about bo'd and lodgin'. Yo' have it right heah, my

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deah suh, in my po' house, if yo'll fo'get ouh homely ways fo' the sake of ouh good will."

Thus the fates, who had led Wyatt to Lisse's door, kept him under her roof to his great good fortune, for Lisse, remember, was a mascot. Mascots, however, do not necessarily bring good luck to themselves. Being women, they often help others at their own cost.

As already stated, Wyatt fell in love with Lisse, though for a long time he kept an honest grip on himself, knowing that her youth and lowly station as well as certain matters in his own life, precluded courtship and brought all amorous overtures on his part well within the category of things almost, if not quite, criminal.

Lisse, being a child in heart, at first viewed Wyatt as she viewed all other men, though she found him exceedingly attract-

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ive, and gradually discovered that his attractions grew apace with time.

Except when he went to church, Wyatt never wandered far from home, a fact which would have aroused suspicion in a heart less simple than Roanoke's. He helped with the farm work and the "chores," and, without attempting to be *anything*, soon became *everything* in the humble household.

Lissem was an apt pupil and the good effect of Wyatt's teaching was quickly manifest, especially in her English, though under certain conditions she was still inclined to show traces of her father's idiom in her speech.

Well, two years after Wyatt's advent, Lissem took up the study of Latin, and, being the only pupil in that branch, often remained "after school" to recite. One day, while she and Wyatt were going over the

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lesson—they had but one book and sat together during recital—Wyatt, quite by accident and wholly without purpose, allowed his arm to fall about her waist. Instantly Lissem grew pale and began to tremble. His touch had awakened her womanhood and had opened her eyes in one luminous instant to the true meaning of his ever increasing attractiveness. She seemed to have been struck blind, to everything else, mentally and physically. The printed words were a blur, and Wyatt's explanations were all fog. She could feel only thrill upon thrill, and was conscious of nothing in all the universe save that a Man had come into her life—the One Man in all the world. She knew that she had never before lived, and whether to live meant joy or pain she could not tell. But, be it either or both, life was welcome to her as the

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spring sun to the greening fields, as the south wind to the nesting bird.

"What is the trouble, my child?" asked Wyatt, observing her pallor. "Are you sick?"

"Yes," answered Lissem. "I want to go home."

After a week of neglected Latin, Lissem intimated somewhat shyly that she was ready to take up her recitations again. When the other pupils had gone, Wyatt took his place on the bench and Lissem sat down beside him, though at a little distance. Her breathing was noticeably difficult; her nostrils dilated exquisitely with every respiration; her eyes shone with a glow that was almost red on their background of soft and melting brown; her clear, dark cheeks seemed to be on fire and her lips appeared ready to burst with their blood. Wyatt had

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hardly time to notice all this glorious coloring till it changed to a pallor that frightened him.

"Lissem, are you ill again, my child?" he asked in deep concern. "You must not remain if you are not feeling well. The Latin can wait."

"I'm not sick," she answered, recovering part of her color; "and I want to tell you something." The color all came back, then, in a flash and a flood.

"What do you want to tell me?" Wyatt asked.

After a long pause, she answered: "One thing I want to tell you is that I'm *not* your child. I'm not a *child* at all. I'm a woman, inside and out,"—a short pause and a rare smile—"especially inside."

"Since when?" asked Wyatt, laughing, though half-regretful that the Latin had

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been resumed, for he could not help feeling that her beauty was more irresistible than it had been before.

"Since our last Latin lesson," answered the girl, hanging her head.

"What had the last lesson to do with the change?" inquired Wyatt, still greatly puzzled, for he had forgotten the incident of his arm and the girl's waist, if, indeed, he had been conscious of it at the time.

"I wasn't sick then, either. I told a story when I said I was."

She looked into his face for a moment but flinched before his inquiring gaze, and the long black lashes made two long black crescents on her cheeks. She was about to continue and took a breath for the words, but halted before speech.

"The mystery deepens," said Wyatt gently. "Tell me all about it, Lissem."

He did not know what was coming or

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he would not have invited her confidence. As already intimated, he was honest with the girl, partly because he loved her better than he loved his own life, and partly because he was the right sort of man and wanted to continue so. He fully realized that his love was a constant menace to her and knowing her danger, was forearmed to protect her.

"I'm not sure that I should tell you," she answered, smiling and hanging her head. Do—do you suppose I should?" Then laughing softly: "I might tell you what it is, and then if you say I must not tell you, why—I won't."

"I don't know, Lisse," answered Wyatt, catching an alarming hint of what she wanted to say. "You may trust me, I—I believe. But,"—here he paused and took her hand, as he had done hundreds of times before, "—it all depends. There

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might be some things you should not tell me."

She gripped his fingers tightly, drew a deep breath and answered with a little cry—the cry of the primitive, the voice of compelling Nature.

"Ah, that's it! That's it!" Her bosom rose and sunk piteously, her breath came warm up to his face, and the escaping, fluffy shreds of her hair brushed his cheek with an electric tingle.

"What, Lissem? Ah, my poor, sweet child, what is it?" he asked, irresistibly driven by his love. Although frightened at what he saw the girl was going to say and do, he could not muster the strength to check her.

"Ah, the thrill of your touch! I thought I knew what it was the other day, but I wasn't sure, so I wanted to try it again. It was so new to me. When you put your

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arm about me I—I thought I was going to faint or go to sleep, Mr. Wyatt. Never before did I know what it meant, but I learned in an instant!" Suddenly she came close to him and with a quick movement brought his arm about her waist. "There! There! Ah, leave it there, Mr. Wyatt, while I tell you—while I ask you all about it. What has come over me? I am all dazed and things seem unreal. A week ago I loved Daddy better than anyone else. Now it's changed and there is but one man in all the world. I'm sure I've turned bad, Mr. Wyatt, and I'm afraid you'll hate me when I tell you that I just know I should not grieve enough if Daddy were to die so long as—if I could have you—you—always. Now, now, you know. Ah, don't despise me. I had to tell you. Had you been any other man I could not have done this to save my life. But you are you and I was

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driven to tell you. It seemed that I had to do it to save my life!"

Wyatt was helpless. Her love seemed to pervade the entire span of his life and to condense all the years into one little moment of ecstasy. Wyatt, as I have said, was not a mummy. And a veil is the only proper treatment of the ensuing scene.

It was a bad scene, however, for Wyatt's manhood soon came to the rescue of the man, and he released the girl from his embrace. When he did so her form grew limp, her head fell back on the bend of his elbow and her eyes closed as if in sleep. She lay for a moment, her face lighted by a dim smile, then she opened her eyes and the manhood that was in him spoke:

"You must go home, Lissem, and—and hereafter you may recite Latin during school hours."

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"Then I'll drop Latin," she answered.
"And I'm not going home just yet."

She laughed nervously, but there was spontaneous determination in her words. Wyatt's good resolutions had not been spontaneous. One might almost call them artificial, for they had been summoned by an effort of his will and were shamefully reluctant to remain. So he did the best he could and sat in passive, troubled joy.

After a little time, Lissem looked up to him, tried to speak, but failed; looked again, tried again and—succeeded:

"Perhaps we had better not tell Daddy yet awhile?"

Love's running mate, cunning, had also entered her heart.

"No," answered Wyatt. "You are only sixteen, and—"

"Going on seventeen," interrupted Lis-

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sem, proudly. Sixteen was infantile. "Going on seventeen" was womanly.

"When you are eighteen, I'll ask your father to give you to me, and—"

"Oh, that will be nearly two years," again interrupted the girl complainingly.

"Yes," continued Wyatt, almost inaudibly. "And—you—shall—be—my wife if—if—it is possible. My wife! Ah, girl, I dare not hope for happiness so great." And then, of course, more or less of a demonstration inevitably followed.

"Yes, you dare hope," she answered softly. "Daddy or no Daddy, I'll be yours whenever you ask for me. I have no shame, have I?"

And the recital of the first conjugation occupied them till dark began to fall.

After a very short long time, Wyatt, who had been honestly abstemious, insisted that

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Lissem should go home and give him time to sweep out the school-room before dark. As she started toward the door she turned and asked him shyly, half saucily, all longingly: "Do—do you suppose I'd go to sleep again if—if—"

No, she would not go to sleep, nor did she. Then Wyatt swept out the school-house, all unconscious of dust or broom, for he was thinking of his great joy and his greater pain.

And the evening and the morning were *their* first day!

Of course, not being a wizard, I don't know all that happened during the next year or two, but I believe that Wyatt acted the man and that his love of the girl was as honest as it was deep. He seldom allowed himself the joy of being alone with her, a

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bit of honesty which, to tell the truth, Lissem did not always appreciate at its full value.

When Lissem was "going on eighteen," she began to drop shy little hints about Daddy and the future, though what she said was modest and above all was fraught with entire trust in Wyatt's superior knowledge of what was best to be done or to be left undone. She was very happy and at least partly content to live in the sun of his presence and to drink in the air he breathed. Air? Nothing of the sort! It was an elixir!

But Wyatt, who had grown thin and seemed to be in ill health—due to malaria, he said—told Lissem with truth that was all too true, that it was better to defer speaking to "Daddy" for another year, and Lissem, with a smile and a sigh, was sure that he was right.

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It was early in the second year of Lisse's waiting that the oil excitement of the Middle West sprang up. Stories of poor farmers who had become rich, all in a night as it were, floated about the country, and at last reached Lisse in her "outlying" township. Hearing so much about oil it was natural for her to dream about it and Lisse, you know, believed firmly in the prophetic quality of dreams.

One day Roanoke and his daughter came to my office. I was delighted to see them, for to tell the truth, I was mad about the girl's beauty. To see her was like feasting one's eyes on a great masterpiece of art.

After discussing crops and family health, Roanoke said: "Lisse has something to say to yo'. She's b'en pesterin' me fo' mo'n six months and now I've brought her in to pester yo'-all."

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"She can't pester me too much," I rejoined, wasting a rare Blackstone-Kent-Story smile on the all unconscious girl. Apollo himself might have smiled in vain; she would not have seen. What was Apollo to Lisse or Lisse to Apollo? The god Wyatt was temporarily on earth!

"It is this way," she began, smoothing out her skirts a bit nervously. "Nearly six months ago I dreamed that we sunk a deep well on our farm over by the creek, you know, and that we struck oil. You-all don't believe in dreams, I suppose, but—" Here there was a little smile of charity "—a man can't know everything even if he is a lawyer."

"True, true," I answered, "but I do believe in dreams—and in witches, too."

Another surprised little smile came to her face—just enough to show a gleam of ex-

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quisite pearls set in coral, you understand—as she answered:

“I’m glad to hear you say so. It shows that you have imagination, and no matter how wise one may be, if one hasn’t imagination there are many things one can’t understand. Well, I want Daddy to borrow six hundred dollars and sink a deep well. You know we have a mortgage now and he doesn’t like to put another on the place, but I say we’ll lift them both and to spare if he ventures the second. What do you think?”

“I think I should try it,” I answered. So I put them in the way to borrow the money and Lissem proved a true prophet, for shortly after her eighteenth birthday Roanoke Brooks struck oil and soon was a rich man along with many of his neighbors. Roger Township was no longer “outlying”; Lissem had brought it within the pale.

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Then it was that Wyatt crowned her "Sweet Alyssum, the Oil Queen of Roger Township."

Wealth made little change in Roanoke and his surroundings and, as he told me in speaking of Lissem, "It didn't stick huh up a bit that anyone could notice." A few comforts and luxuries were added, but Roanoke, Lissem and Wyatt continued to live modestly, cozily and oh! so happily in the big log house under the drippings of a new S. M. E. sanctuary built of oil, as many another sanctuary has been built since—oil being a potent means of grace nowadays.

Wyatt could have changed all this modest way of life by a word to Lissem, for now she was truly the Oil Queen and her word was law in the household, but he opposed rather than encouraged innovations.

"I never saw a marble hall such as the gipsy girl dreamed and sung about," said

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Lissem one evening, while sitting on the edge of the porch with Wyatt, "but I wouldn't exchange this old log house for a jasper palace so long as you are content to remain. If you wanted to live in a balloon—" she paused, laughed softly and took his hand—"why a balloon would be my choice." Another long pause followed, during which she pressed his hand to her heart and sighed gently three or four times. Then the long lashes fell and the dark cheeks took a rosier hue as she continued almost inaudibly: "I'm past eighteen now—going on nineteen and that's pretty old."

After a moment's internal struggle, Wyatt gently withdrew his hand from her clasp, rose, stooped over her and imprinted a kiss on her forehead. Then without a word he left her sitting in the dark and fairly ran to his room. The night was one of struggle and anguish for poor Wyatt, but

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the battle was hopeless, for his mighty antagonist was love.

The next evening after dark, much to Lisssem's joy and surprise, Wyatt asked her to walk down the road a short way with him, and when they returned they went straight to Daddy.

"My Gawd!" exclaimed Roanoke, and lapsed into silence.

It looked ominous, but Lisssem knelt beside her father's chair and said pleadingly, though not with exact truth: "Daddy, I'll not marry Mr. Wyatt if you object, for we can go on living happily just as we are, but I know God has sent him to me and I'm afraid I should die if I were to lose him. I'm getting pretty old, you know, Daddy—almost nineteen. You don't want me to be an old maid, Daddy, and never know the joy you and mother knew when I was born, do you, Daddy?"

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Tears came to the old man's eyes as he answered: "I knew it would come to this. I find no fault with Mr. Wyatt. He's all I could ask a man to be—honest, upright and a Southe'n Methodist, but he'll take yo' away from me, and then *I'll* die." Here he broke down and covered his face with his hands.

"No, he won't, Daddy," pleaded Lissem. "Will you, Mr. Wyatt?"

"Never, never," answered Wyatt, placing his hand on the old man's shoulder.

After a long minute of burrowing pain, Roanoke took Wyatt's hand, paused to gain strength for the final effort, slowly brought Lissem's hand from around his neck and joined the two in holy clasp over his aching heart. And, as it was in the beginning and ever shall be, Age gave its all to Youth and groaned and gloried in its own sorrow.

One day while driving past Roanoke's

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house I stopped and experienced a distinct shock of jealousy when he told me that Lisse had left home a fortnight before to be married, and was expected back that evening with her husband.

"Who is the lucky man?" I asked.

"His name is Wyatt," answered Roanoke. "He's a mighty fine gentleman. I reckon you-all don't know him. He's our school teacher—b'en livin' heah with us nigh on to five yeah and hasn't been a mile from the house in all that time."

I did not remember the name nor the man, but when I stopped on my way home that evening I was rendered almost speechless on recognizing the stranger who had spent a week in Blue River four or five years before.

I stayed for supper and while driving home that night I could not help saying to myself: "Poor Lisse! Poor Lisse!"

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though I could have given no reason for my forebodings, as Wyatt had made a good impression.

There is always a beaten path to gold, so Roger Township soon had many visitors, brought there by Lisse's dream. As has been intimated, however, a mascot does not always bring good luck to herself.

Nearly two years after Lisse's marriage I again saw Wyatt. He came to my office in the custody of the sheriff and asked for a private interview. I took him to my back room and offered him a chair. Poor devil! I pitied him, but my heart was sorest for Sweet Alyssum.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"I have been arrested," he answered, leaning his elbows on his knees and burying his face in his hands.

"On what charge?" I inquired.

"Bigamy," he replied hoarsely.

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"That's only a penitentiary offense," I retorted. "You ought to be hung!"

"I know it," he replied. "Do you want to hear my case, or shall I go elsewhere?"

"I'll hear you," I answered, after a moment's consideration.

He waited fully three minutes and began: "My name is not Wyatt. It is Garlan. I was cashier of a New York bank. A hundred thousand dollars were lost through no criminal fault of mine, for I lost my entire fortune in the same investment. I was sentenced to Sing Sing. I escaped and in an unlucky hour came here. While in the Tombs in New York I was served with notice of divorce proceedings instituted by my wife. When I married Lissem I thought—I thought I was divorced. I was wrong."

"Ah, that changes the case!" I responded joyfully. "If you had good reason to be-

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lieve that your wife had procured a divorce, it is at least a palliating circumstance."

After a long silence he continued: "I lied when I said that I believed my wife had obtained a divorce. A few days after my escape I saw in a New York paper that the case was about to be dismissed. I was madly in love with Lissem. I fought desperately for five years. I tried to turn away, but she clung to me so piteously, and then the time came when I could not leave her. I thought I could remain hidden by her side all the rest of my days. You know Lissem and can judge of my temptation. But the oil drew visitors. I was recognized by one of them and here I am. A pitiful story of man's weakness! What contempt a lawyer must have for humanity!"

"You are honestly married to Lissem?" I asked.

"Yes, it was all regular. I am not bad

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enough to have had it otherwise. Lisse has the certificate all blurred by her kisses," he answered, turning his face from me for a moment.

"You are not so much to blame as one might suppose," I answered. "I'll procure bail for you and then we'll prepare for the defense."

"If we defeat this charge, there is the old sentence in New York!" he said gloomily. "I see no way of escape. I understand that representatives of the bank are here now arranging for extradition."

"They can't extradite you so long as this charge is pending," I suggested. "We'll take one at a time."

Early that afternoon Wyatt was at liberty on bail, and it was arranged that I should go at once and undertake the awful task of telling Lisse and Roanoke, who knew of the arrest but not of the nature of

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the charge. Wyatt wanted to go with me, but at my suggestion consented to follow in a short time.

When I reached the big log house I found Roanoke on the porch in a rustic armchair, and Lissem sitting on the lowest of the three front steps holding a sweet little copy of herself, perhaps a year old. The baby was cooing in the sunlight, but the mother was weeping gently in the deep shadow of her grief. Roanoke, too, though usually immovable, was almost overwhelmed by his distress.

When Lissem saw me she came running down the path, having almost tossed the baby to the sod, where it lay smiling and cooing in sweet forgiveness of its unnatural mother. Lissem, though outwardly calm, was almost wild with grief, and even the child was forgotten in her anxiety for its father.

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"What is the matter?" she cried. "Why did the sheriff take him?"

A bad story is better told quickly, so I said: "Mr. Wyatt has been arrested on a charge of bigamy—another wife in New York. He's out on bail and will be here soon."

Lissem turned and resumed her seat on the step, lifting her baby from the ground as she did so. Roanoke rose, looked at me for a moment, went into the house and presently returned with his old long-barreled rifle, which he leaned against the porch post.

"Now, I'm ready to heah it all," said he, calmly resuming his chair.

"I have told you all," I answered. "He has another wife in New York and will probably go to prison for having married Lissem."

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Lissem looked up quickly at me, then back to the baby.

"He'll nevah go to prison," remarked Roanoke, glancing towards his rifle.

A long silence ensued, Lissem watching her baby, and kissing it softly now and then as it cooed and smiled up into her face, all unconscious of the awful part it was soon to play.

Presently Lissem asked in her soft tones: "Will they send him to prison because he married me?"

"Yes," I answered. "There would be no crime if he had not married you."

"Oh," murmured the girl, deep in thought. There were no tears now, no evidence of grief. She was thinking, and automatically kissing baby every few seconds.

I could think of nothing to say, so I waited for her to speak. I was standing

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in front of her with my back to the road. Suddenly I noticed her looking toward the gate. I turned and saw Boles, the State's Attorney, coming up the path. I introduced him and explained that he was the man who would prosecute Wyatt. Roanoke invited him to the porch and gave him a chair. Lissem did not look at Boles, but remained seated on the steps, kissing her baby and thinking, thinking, thinking.

After a few words about the weather, Boles drew a notebook from his pocket and addressed Lissem:

"Mrs. Wyatt, you probably know why Mr. Wyatt has been arrested?"

"Yes," she murmured, without looking up.

"Well, I'd like to ask you a few questions preparatory to prosecution." No response from Lissem, so Boles continued:

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"Tell me, please, when and where you were married to Mr. Wyatt."

A long pause. Lisse's eyes were cast down, intently watching the baby.

"I never was married to him at all," she answered, lifting her eyes and looking Boles straight in the face, without a quiver of hesitancy.

At her reply Roanoke sprang from his chair and his eyes fairly burned as he gazed at his daughter. A long silence ensued. Lisse's statement had dumfounded the prosecutor as well as her father, though it had not so greatly surprised me. It was the sort of thing I knew she could do.

After Roanoke had gazed at Lisse perhaps a minute, I noticed him look towards the road, straighten up and reach for the rifle. I turned and saw Wyatt hitching his horse.

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"Go stop him," whispered Lissem, glancing up at me.

I hurried down the path and met Wyatt at the gate.

"Don't come in," I whispered, "Roanoke will shoot you."

"I don't care," he returned, evidently meaning just what he said. "How does Lissem take it? Does she hate me?"

"No, she could not hate you if she were to try, and she doesn't want to try. She seems to be stunned, but she has shown no emotion of any sort except a cry or two when I first came. She just now told the prosecutor that she was never married to you."

"She did it to save me," he replied, half choked by emotion. "God made but one of the sort and gave her to me. We were married truly enough. She has the certificate. I'll soon put her right with the world on that score."

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"If you want to consider her happiness and your own welfare, take my advice and allow her statement to stand, at least for a time," I suggested.

He did not reply, but passed me and started toward the house. Roanoke stood on the porch with his gun half lifted. Lissem remained seated on the lowest step, holding the baby and watching Wyatt. Roanoke, being above and behind her, she did not see him. When Wyatt passed me I was sure he would never reach the house alive, so I ran ahead of him hoping to pacify Roanoke. When I was within ten feet of the porch, I heard Wyatt, who was perhaps twenty feet behind me, cry out:

"Fire, Father Brooks! Don't hesitate!"

Lissem turned quickly and saw that her father had his gun to his shoulder. She tried to place herself between the gun and Wyatt, but her father being above her, she

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was not tall enough. The whole terrible incident occupied only a few seconds, but even at this distance of time it seems that I stood for hours in agony. When Lissem saw that she could not interpose her own body and receive the bullet intended for Wyatt, without an instant's hesitation, she held her baby above her head and thrust the little body before the muzzle of her father's rifle. A look of terror, such as I had never seen on the human countenance, came to Roanoke's face. His great love for Lissem had been intensified to worship of the baby. I closed my eyes and heard the sharp crack of the rifle.

Lissem, whose head was bent down between her arms so that she could not see, stood for perhaps five seconds holding up the baby; then, without looking at it, she quickly placed it on the sod, turned to Wyatt, who, by that time, was behind her, and with

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a cry that I shall never forget, threw her arms about his neck, drew his face down to her's and kissed his lips in an ecstasy of love, such as I, in my poor ignorance of woman-kind, had never before dreamed was possible.

The rifle fell from Roanoke's hand to the ground. He stood for a moment dazed, then started down the steps toward Lissem and Wyatt. I thought he was going to attack him, so I interposed, saying:

"No, you don't, Brooks! You'll whip me first!"

"Gawd! I don't want to whip nobody," he answered faintly, tears falling unheeded over his cheeks, "I jest want my li'l ge'l."

I saw that his anger had vanished, so I allowed him to proceed. He put his hand gently on Lissem's shoulder and spoke her name in tones of love and fear and tenderness that brought tears to my eyes. I

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noticed that Boles, too, had his handkerchief out.

With her arms still about Wyatt's neck, Lissem turned her face to her father.

"Don't touch me," she said quietly, "or you will make me want to kill you."

Roanoke turned and sat down on the steps, covering his face with his hands.

"Go to your father and ask him to forgive you," said Wyatt, gently, but with a note of command.

"He would have killed you. He did kill my baby," she wailed.

"No, he did not," said Wyatt. "I saw him lift his gun."

And just then a plaintive little cry, half coo, half scolding, came from the baby on the grass.

Instantly Lissem sprang from Wyatt's arms, knelt beside the baby, snatched it from the ground, and in less time than you

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could count three, tore off its clothing and examined the little body from head to heels. When she found that it was unhurt she pressed it to her breast and began to kiss it, gently, softly, as a mother bird feeds its young.

After a minute or two Roanoke went to Lissem, still kneeling on the ground, and spoke to her pleadingly:

"My Gawd, child! Do yo' love the man like that? Mo' than the baby?"

"A thousand times," she answered without lifting her head.

"Come into the house, Mr. Wyatt," said Roanoke. "We'll stand by you, right or wrong. When a woman loves a man that-a-way, she sanctifies him."

"Ah, Daddy, forgive me," cried Lissem, looking up to Roanoke, whereupon he fell to his knees beside her and folded mother and baby in his mighty love.

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Boles, who had been standing on the porch, took me to one side. There were tears in his eyes as he spoke. "Look here, Howard!" he said, "I'm not going to prosecute this case. To tell you the truth, the charge of bigamy was made only for the purpose of holding Wyatt until extradition papers could be procured to take him back to New York where he was convicted several years ago for looting a bank. Representatives of the New York bank are in Blue River now. It seems that they had reason to believe that Wyatt did not know his wife had obtained a divorce and it is my opinion that if the money lost, which was only a hundred thousand dollars or such a matter, were paid back, the whole thing would be dropped. I believe it is all a scheme to collect the money from Brooks, who is able to pay it. Wyatt's New York wife obtained a divorce shortly after his

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conviction, so there would have been no bigamy even had he married this girl."

Then I went crazy and began to shout. I was so excited that I couldn't tell Lissem, Brooks and Wyatt, so Boles told them.

"Pay it? Gawd! Of course we'll pay it, if it takes ouh last cent, won't we, Lissem?" said Roanoke.

"Yes, Daddy," softly answered Lissem, rising and going to the top step of the porch, where she sat down, still hugging the naked baby to her breast.

"Yo' tell the New Yawk men I'll be in town to-night and pay them every dollah," said Roanoke. "Thank Gawd fo' the oil an' Lissem's dream!"

"To-morrow will be soon enough," answered Boles.

After talking a moment longer, we said "good-day" and started down the path. When half way to the gate we turned to

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wave a last farewell and saw Lissem sitting on the top step of the porch, the whole scene bathed in the radiance of her joy. She was dressing the baby, while Roanoke and Wyatt sat on either side watching her, each with an arm about her.

"Wait a moment, I have something to say to them," said Boles, turning to me.

We went back to the porch and Boles spoke to Wyatt: "The only condition I make in promising not to prosecute you is that you shall marry this girl at once."

We all looked toward Lissem. She smiled up to Boles, as if pitying one so gullible, and spoke for Wyatt:

"Lawd! Don't you-all worry you'se'f about that, Mr. Boles. We-all were married true enough in Cincinnati."

"Well—I'll—be—damned!" said Boles.

THE END