

# Close to the Ground.

By FRANK H. SWEET

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SEEMS now like it's going to be a good crop year. Well, weather an' just rain nough to keep the ground from bakin'. If it keeps on like this, we can surely pay for the land come next crop an' maybe have some left for a mule.

"An' what's it all good for?" asked Looly. The girl spoke indifferently and with the slow drawl peculiar to the Georgia cracker. "You work hard an' may round here, harder'n the plantation niggers themselves. An' what does it 'mount to? They have spendin' money an' go to circuses an' have store truck to eat, while we all just stick to corn pones an' grits an' work."

"But it's to pay for the land, Looly," said the old man eagerly. "After that's done paid for we can have more spendin' money. There'll be no more rents nor shares. An' we're the only poor fambly round here that is aint' to own land just like quality folks. I'm workin' for you all more'n for myself, Looly, for you an' Betty an' Molly. I'd like to have you equal to the best of 'em. But it would be more pleasant like to have store things. We might spend some o' the land money that a-way."

The girl made a quick, impatient movement.

"That's the store things I care for," she said sharply. "I ain't after speck truck. But I 'low I have everything around here, it's so triffin' an' no 'count. We all are poor, ignorant crackers, an' we can't help ourselves. Gettin' land ain't goin' to make us no quality. We must have learnin' an' manners an' know about things. But we all can't learn, for there's no school here; an' nobody to show us." She paused and dug her bare feet in the sand. After a few moments she went on more slowly and with a side glance at her father: "You an' Betty an' the neighbors 'low as I'm lazy an' triffin' 'cause I don't help in the flie' an' rum' the house. But I don't care. I don't care for the land. I don't care for work, an' I 'low I don't care for anything else any body."

"You're out o' sorts, Looly, an' need more 'stractions. S'pose you go down to the settlement 'long o' Betty an' me an' help carry eggs. Maybe it'll make you feel more peart."

But she shook her head decidedly. "I hate the settlement. The boys call me wildcat an' cracker comet an' fling things after me. But I 'low



SHE MOVED WEARILY TOWARD THE CABIN. I gener'ly fixes 'em. An' she gave a harsh little laugh in which was a trace of exultation. "You all can tote the eggs. I reckon I'll go fishin' down the creek."

It was late in the afternoon when Looly returned from the creek. As she approached the cabin she saw a strange team move away, and one of the two men who occupied the wagon she recognized as the settlement doctor. Hurrying forward, she almost stumbled over Betty, who was lying on the floor sobbing bitterly. But Looly scarcely noticed her. She was looking at the motionless figure on the bed.

"What is it?" she asked in a sharp whisper. "Pap's done amash' 'twain' wailed Betty. "What shall we do? What shall we do?"

The figure on the bed turned slightly and tried to raise itself, but sank back with a groan. In an instant she was by his side.

"What is it, daddy?" she asked softly as she smoothed the gray hair back from his forehead. "Can I help to raise you or—anything?"

"You mustn't be scared, honey," he gasped. "I ain't nothin' 'cept for the pain an' for losin' the crop." "But what is the matter, daddy? How's you hurt?"

"It's just the foot," he said, with a grimace. "Molly due. But the doctor 'lows it's plumb bad an' that I'm to truckle right here on this bed for the Lord knows how long."

"Pap was a grabbin' for—a plect-

ny that was crawlin' in the road," said Betty between her sobs. "An'—an' the runaway horses stumpt him. Niggers shouldn't be 'lowed to have 'toting uns in the road."

"Was the plectan'ny saved?" asked Looly eagerly.

Her father nodded.

"The child wa'n't to blame," he said. "An' I couldn't help a-grabbin'. An' surely the young un's worth more'n it's cost me. I ain't a-mutterin' agin the hurt, but I do most 'plinty hate to lose the crop an' not have money for the land. If only I could have the hurt an' be able to work just the same."

"Never mind, daddy; it'll come roun' all right," she said quietly. "Just you rest easy an' don't worry. We all can look after things."

"An'—an' you don't feel hard on me for gettin' hurt? I was studyin' how to make things more pleasant-like, an' here I've done made 'em worse. It'll be more work, Looly, honey, but I reckon you'll have to help Betty now an' ag'in. There'll be the hens an' pigs to look after an' the housework an' the tendin'. We'll have to be close, but I reckon the hens 'll 'bout give us a livin'."

"I done told you not to fret, daddy," she said softly. "Just you rest easy an' 'pend on we all to look out for things. As for your hurt, a slight flush creepin' into her face, "I'm glad of it. That's worth all the land an' the crops in the world."

As the night came on his foot grew more painful, and at times he was delirious. Looly remained with him until after midnight, when, as he grew more quiet, she called Betty to take her place. Soon after the old man sank into a quiet sleep.

It was late in the forenoon when he awoke. Betty was working about the room, and he could hear the voice of little Molly outside calling the chickens.

"Where's Looly?" he asked. "I don't know. She done took some pone an' bacon an' left fore sunup. She 'lowed maybe she'd be back 'fore night an' maybe she wouldn't. I asked her to help me first, but she 'lowed Molly an' me could look after the chores an' housework."

The old man sighed. He had been hoping for better things from Looly.

Meanwhile Looly was toiling slowly back and forth across the tobacco field. The rows were long and the work hard and laborious, and the girl made little apparent progress. But gradually as the hours went by her position shifted from one side of the field to the other. All through the long, hot day she worked, not pausing to eat or rest and only stopping when the shadows made it hard to distinguish the ground between the rows.

Then she looked back at her work. "Six rows done hoed," she said aloud. "It's a good day's work. But I'm plumb tired."

Throwing the hoe across her shoulder, as she had seen her father do, she moved wearily toward the cabin. On entering she found Betty in the act of setting the supper of grits and molasses upon the table. Her father looked up quickly as she came in.

"You've been a long time," he said. "We've been lookin' for you right smart."

"I was busy," she answered, "an' couldn't spare time for dinner. After this I'll try to be roun' come noon. But how've you been all day, daddy?"

"Toler'ble peart." Then as she sat down beside him he reached out and took one of her hands in his and looked up into her face. Her eyes were clear, and she met his gaze with a little smile. "What did it mean? Had he been judging her too harshly? He drew her hand closer and noticed that it trembled as though with pain. He raised it to the light.

"Why, Looly," and there were wonder and dismay in the voice, "your hands are all solid blister!"

"It's only 'cause they ain't used to the work," she answered hastily. "I've been that lazy my hands are act'ly gettin' soft. A few days in the field an' they'll be good hands for work."

"An'—an' you've been workin' in the field all day," he said slowly, "an' I a-lyin' here an' misjudgin' you! But you mustn't do it, Looly, honey. It's too hard. If you 'low on helpin' you might look after the truck patch."

But Looly shook her head. "I'm the oldest," she said, "an' must look out for the man's work. If Betty an' Molly have time from the housework they might help in the truck patch."

As the weeks went by Looly's hands became accustomed to the work and the blisters disappeared. When she had finished hoeing the tobacco she went to the cotton field. From there she went to the melons.

One day Looly came in with a glowing face.

"The melons are ripenin'," she said, "an' there's goin' to be more'n we all ever had before."

A few days later Looly reported that they had entered the field the night before and taken some of the melons. That night the theft was repeated. Several days passed, and more of the melons were missed.

"I wouldn't care if they wa'n't no pertic'lar," said Looly, "but they just pick the biggest an' best."

Late that night she was awakened by a small figure at her bedside.

"What is it, Molly?" she asked drowsily.

"I've done 'cotched 'em," was the startling answer. "After you all was 'sleep I just crept out the cabin an' hid 'mong the melon vines. It seemed most a year 'fore they came, an' I was plumb sleepy. But I just pinched myself, an' when they did come I up an' told 'em 'bout we all 'warkin' an' 'bout the land an' pap 'lowin' sick an' 'bout you 'lowin' they might take the small melons an' leave the big ones."

"Molly!" And Looly sat upright in bed. She was wide awake now.

"Ain't you yarin'?"

"I reckon not," confidently, " 'cause I've got 'bout 22 one of the young men gave me for the melons. They's nice men an' 'lowed they'd be roun' an' see you tomorrow. They's campin' over to Long pond."

The next morning as Looly was on her way to work she was met by several young men.

"Miss Louise, I suppose?" said one of them, raising his hat.

"Looly they call me," was the quiet answer.

"Well, I—suppose that queer sister of yours has told about our raidin' the melon patch?" hesitating and coloring a little as he spoke. "But I assure you we meant no real harm. If we had known the facts in the case we would never have entered the field. Somehow melons and apples have always seemed different from other property. However," a quick, frank smile coming to his face, "that isn't what we're here for. We wish to apologize and to make some arrangement



"MISS LOUISE, I SUPPOSE?" SAID ONE OF THEM.

for the future. You see, we are very fond of melons, and we have decided not to pick any more after dark. We might go to the settlement for them, but that would be a long walk, and the melons would not be fresh. Besides, we have acquired a taste for yours. Now, if you are willing to trust us we will cut fair and square and pay you for every one we take. We shall want a lot, and there is another crowd of young fellows coming down from Augusta next week."

"Augusta?" looking up quickly, "I 'low that's where they have schools for girls, I mean?"

"There are several good ones, I believe," he answered. "Do you think of going?"

"N-no. I just asked. I reckon you can take what melons you want. We all are glad to sell 'em."

Before the melons were gone Andy's foot had so improved that he was able to hobble out to the fields. Leaning on his cane and assisted by Looly, he went slowly from one field to another.

"It's a good crop," he said, "as good's I ever raised myself—corn mostly eared, tobacco good, an' sca'cely any bumblebee cotton in the whole field. I can hardly b'lieve that one gal did it all."

One afternoon a few months later Andy called the girls into the cabin. Going to his strong box in the corner, he took from it a bag that was heavy with silver and small coins. These he emptied upon the table and divided into two piles.

"It's the most crop money we all ever had at once," he said, "if it was made by a gal. Now, this," pointing to the larger pile, "is for the land. It will pay it all up clear. An' this," touching the other pile, "is for Looly to go to school up in Augusta. I had a talk 'long o' the boys that bought the melons, an' they told me 'bout Looly askin' after the school. An'—an', Looly," looking at her wistfully, "one of 'em—the one that talks—said as how he'd asked you to marry him, an' that you answered no, you wa'n't it, but that if ever you had a chance to get learnin', so you could get like quality folks, an' be should wait, then he could come an' ask ag'in. He said he felt it a duty to tell me an' that he should wait if 'twas a whole lifetime, for you was the noblest gal ever was an' the only one he could ever care for. He seemed a nice boy."

A soft color had been stealing into Looly's cheeks, but her gaze did not fall.

"Yes, he's a nice boy, daddy," she answered, "but I told him not to wait, for it would be years an' years even if I ever got a chance. He said he wouldn't take that answer, though, an' kept beggin', so at last I said if he did wait he could come an' ask ag'in some time. He's a foolish boy, but he—he is nice."

"An' you're nice, Looly," said old Andy simply. "Well, after the talk I went down an' saw the storekeeper to the settlement, an' he gave me 'plints. This money 'll pay for schoolin' till next crop, an' by that time there'll be more. Looly can board 'long o' her Aunt Lizy, who 'lives in Augusta. If I'd found 'er 'twas schoolin' you wanted so bad I might 'll helped you before, Looly, honey."

The girl had listened with a growing wonder in her face. Several times she essayed to speak, then rushed from the cabin.

"Poor little gal," said the old man, "I didn't know as she cared so much."

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