

STORY BY
MARY ROBERTS
RINEHART

THE PAPERED DOOR

ACTION—MYSTERY—SENTIMENT

THE small house was drafty. Air currents moved the curtains at the windows and billowed the cheap rug on the floor. The baby had had the croup; it had given her an excuse for being up, for the roaring kitchen fire, and lights.

Early in the evening she had sent over to the doctor's for medicine. The drug store was closed, and a curious crowd had gathered in front of it. The doctor dispensed his own prescriptions and had sent back with the bottle a kindly note: "Dear Molly: If we can do anything let us know. Would you like Ann to spend the night with you?"

The 8-year-old girl had trotted back with a message that she thought she could manage nicely. The thought of Ann's prying eyes made her shudder. Then the quiet night had settled down on them. Some time after 11, moving about the room, she had glanced out of the window and had seen glowing in the darkness a lighted cigar.

She knew what it meant. The house was being watched.

By 1 o'clock the baby was breathing easier. A light snow was falling; frozen hard, it beat against the windpanes with little sharp, cracklings. In the next room the 8-year-old girl was sound asleep, one arm thrown up over her head. She went to the window and looked out again; the man across the street moved uneasily, hesitated, came over and signaled her to raise the window.

"How's the boy?" he called through the snow. She knew him then—Cooper, one of the county detectives.

"Better," the doctor's medicine has helped him."

He hesitated awkwardly. "You'd better go to bed," he said at last. "There is no use of two of us staying up. I guess he won't come back while I am hanging around."

"No," she replied, wearily, "he won't come back. Mr. Cooper. That was the last word he said."

The detective coughed, cleared his throat, spat.

"We are all mighty sorry," he observed, using a carefully conversational tone. "These—these things happen now and then."

"I expect you are right cold out there."

"Well, I am not warm," he replied, cheerfully. "I am burning up considerable fuel, but it doesn't seem to heat much." To show his ease he lighted a fresh stogie. The match flare showed his good-humored face drawn and strained in spite of his tone.

"You wouldn't care to come in and warm your feet, would you?"

He hesitated. The village street was quiet. Owing to its semi-isolated position, he had commanded all approaches to the house from his vantage point across the street. Once inside—

But then again—the house was small and lightly built; one could hear a footfall through it. A man ought to be able to thaw out now and then.

"I don't know but I will for a minute or two, Mrs. Carter," he assented, "if you'll unlock the door."

"How did it happen, anyhow, Molly?" he said at last. He had known her for a long time. "Had he been drinking?"

"I don't exactly know myself." Her tone was dreary. "I had asked him not to carry a gun—but when you ask Jim not to do a thing, he wants to right off."

"It was the girl at Heidelberg's. He's been hanging around her for quite a while. Jim was sociable, you know, and lately, with the baby and the house, I haven't had much time for him. At night I was tired."

The detective nodded.

IN HER nine years in the village she had adopted many of its colloquialisms.

"From what I gather, because with everybody talking at once I got kind of mixed up, it seems that the clerk from the drug store walked into Heidelberg's while Jim was there and asked the girl what she meant by fooling around with a married man. Then he told Jim to come home because his baby was sick. I'd sent over this afternoon for some ipecac. That was the start. The trouble came then."

"Then Jim came home," the detective prompted, "and after that what, Molly?"

"Then Jim came home," she repeated, in a spiritless voice, "and said he was in trouble and he would have to leave town. I gave him all the money I had and got his winter overcoat out. It smelled of moth balls, but there wasn't time to air it. He put it on and went."

The detective sniffed.

"Moth balls!" he said. "That's what I've been smelling. You must have spilled them around."

There was no light in the room or he would have seen the woman grow paler and her hands clutch under her shawl.

wasn't expecting an all-night job."

He threw the end of his stogie into the stove, drew a revolver from his coat pocket and glanced at it, remembered suddenly that the action was hardly delicate, and thrust it back. The woman's mind was working again—a subconscious intelligence that seemed to have been scheming all the while.

"I was thinking," she suggested, "that if I leave the latch off you could come in now and then and get warm. I can leave a cup of tea on the fender. Do you want milk in it?"

"Sugar, thank you, and no milk," he said. "You were always a thoughtful woman, Molly." There was something almost wistful in his voice. Mindful of the sleeping baby, he closed the door cautiously behind him and went out.

MOLLY CARTER went back to the kitchen and lighted the lamp. The room was stifling, but the fire in the range was low now. She put in a fresh piece of wood and set the kettle over it. Then, and not until she did, she went to the wall beside the range and put her lips to it.

"Can you breathe?" she said, cautiously. The reply came with astonishing clearness through the thin wall; even the sound of a body turning in a narrow space:

"I am making another alibi. Go out and see if any chips fall off."

"I can't, Jim. Chester Cooper is across the street. Did you hear what he said? They are both dead."

There was no reply to this. In the silence she could distinctly hear the bit as it worked its way through the outer wall.

"Jim, did you hear what he said?"

"I heard," he said, sullenly.

Beside the range there had been a small, unlighted closet, with a flat wooden door that fitted close without a frame. Long ago the door had been papered to match the kitchen. It had been the work of only a few moments to take off the lock. After that he had gone inside and drawn the door to behind him, shutting out from her sight, to her relief, his shaking hands and death-colored face. Half distracted, she papered anew from the ceiling to the floor over the little door and built a fire in the range to dry the paste. In the lamplight the unfaded strips did not show against the old ones. Daylight would reveal them cruelly. If she could only keep the neighbors quiet. They knew the kitchen. Even at that she had gained a night.

She made the tea, crossing and recrossing the little room cautiously. When she came back from placing the cup on the fender of the parlor stove, the querulous voice was speaking from the other side of the partition: "What the devil do you mean by bringing him in here, anyhow?"

"I thought it looked as if I hadn't anything to hide, Jim. He'll never think you are here now I have left the latch off, so he can go in and out when he likes."

"Well, you'd better see about those chips. Wait until he comes in the next time and then slip out the back door."

"The snow will cover them, Jim, there's a thousand dollars on you!"

"Well, why don't you sell me out? I haven't been worth much to you living; a thousand dollars dead wouldn't be bad."

Her lip quivered, but she made no reply. That was what the detective had said.

"If I could get to the barn," he grumbled, "I could work around behind Schultz's fence and get to the railroad siding. Where is that fool standing?"

"He's just across. You can't get to the barn, Jim, is that sleeping stuff of yours bitter?"

He gathered the meaning in her tone and came close to the papered door.

"Yes, Why?"

"Would you notice it in a cup of tea?"

"I don't know. Not with sugar, maybe."

"Have you got your knife?"

"Yes."

"I thought this way, Jim. If he comes in to get warm and goes to sleep by the fire, will you slip three times lightly. You'll be listening there, will you? You won't go to sleep?"

"God in heaven! Do you think I am sleeping tonight?"



SHE ESCAPED WITH HIM, WENT DOWN ON HER KNEES, GREW HYSTERICAL FINALLY, AND HAD TO BE TAKEN IN HIS ARMS AND QUIETED.

talle ring. It was a very old clock, with flowers painted on the dial. It had marked in its time death and birth, and giving in marriage. But never, perhaps, had it marked so tragic a night.

Two o'clock.

She went back to her chair and sat listening. The blizzard had come now. Wind whipped the window sash and roared about the house corners. Beneath the ill-fitting frame a fine line of snow had sifted. She was painfully alive. Every sense ached with waiting.

More than once she mistook a slamming shutter for the closing of the front door, only to be disappointed. But it came an hour later, when the clock with the painted dial was striking three. The bolt of the unlatched door and the glow of the base-burner through the parlor window had caught their victim.

COOPER had compromised with his conscience by making a careful round of the house. At one place he stopped. In a lull of the wind, it seemed to him that there was a curious, grizzling sound. Then the gale rose again, caught his hat and sent him running and cursing. When he came back the noise, whatever it was, had ceased.

He stamped cautiously on the low porch and opened the door. A homely odor of tea met him, mixed with comforting warmth. He turned up the lamp and took off his overcoat. It was his best overcoat and shabby at that. If he had any luck and the storm drove Carter back, he'd be able to buy a new one. He dusted it off with his hands before hanging it over the back of a chair to dry. On his shoulder a few grains of sawdust caught his attention. He looked at them with speculation, but without suspicion. He had a sense of humor.

"Hat!" he said to himself. "Even the sky has gone in for adulteration. Sawdust in the snow!"

He smiled at the conceit and sipped the tea. It was not very good, but it was hot. Overhead he could hear the slow rocking of a chair.

"Poor child!" he said. "Poor little girl—all this for that damned skunk!"

He affected a further compromise with his sense of duty by getting up every few minutes and inspecting the street or tiptoeing through the kitchen and pulling open unexpectedly the back door. Always on these occasions he had his hand in his revolver pocket.

Three-thirty.

The storm had increased in violence. Already small drifts had piled in sill corners. The glow of the base-burner was dull red; the rocking overhead had ceased.

Cooper yawned and stretched out his legs.

"Poor little girl!" he said. "Poor little girl! All for the sake—all for the sake—"

He drew a deep breath and settled lower in the chair.

detective had come in and she had not heard him go out. It would not do to descend too stealthily for fear he were still awake. As an excuse she took down a bottle of the baby's to fill with milk.

Cooper was sound asleep in the parlor, his head dropped forward on his breast. There was a strong odor of drying wool and his overcoat steamed by the fire.

Still holding the bottle, she crept to the kitchen and tapped lightly three times on the papered door. There was no reply. Her heart almost stopped, leaped on again, raced wildly. She repeated the signal. Then, desperately, she put her lips to the wall.

"Jim!" she whispered.

There was absolute silence, save for the heavy breathing of the detective in the parlor. Madness seized her. She crept along the tiny passage to the parlor door, and working with infinite caution, in spite of her frenzy, she closed it and locked it from the outside. Then back to the kitchen again, pulses hammering.

The bottle fell off the table and broke with a crash. For a moment she felt as if something in her had given away also. But there came no outcry from the parlor, no heavy weight against the filmy door.

She got a knife from the table drawer and cut relentlessly through the new paper strips. Then with the edge of the blade she worked the door open.

Jim half sat, half lay, in the bottom of the closet with closed eyes. Drink and fatigue had combined with stifling air. She reached in and shook him, but he moved under her hand without opening his eyes. With almost superhuman strength she dragged him out, laid him prone on the kitchen floor, brought snow and rubbed it over his face, slapped his wrists with it to restore his pulse—the village method.

He came to quickly, sat up and stared about him.

"Hush," she said, for fear he would speak. "Can you hear me, Jim? Do you know what I am saying?"

He nodded.

"Cooper is locked in the parlor, asleep. You can get away now. My God, don't close your eyes again. Listen! You can get away."

"Away from what?" he asked, stupidly.

"Away from the police. Try to remember, Jim. You shot the clerk from the drug store and—the girl at Heidelberg's. The police are after you. There's a thousand dollars on your head."

That roused him. He struggled to his feet, reeled, caught the table.

ing more himself. He was a handsome fellow, with heavy dark hair and dark eyes, a big man as he towered above her in the little kitchen. His face did not indicate his weakness. There are men like that, broken reeds swaying in the wind, that yet manage to convey an impression of strength.

His wife brought the overcoat and held it out for him.

"By Schultz's fence, you said, Jim, and then to the railroad. There's a slow freight goes through on toward morning, and if that doesn't stop, there's the milk train. And—Jim, let me hear about you now and then. Write to Aunt Sarah. Don't write here, and don't think once you get away that you are safe. A thousand dollars' reward will set everybody in the country looking."

He paused, the overcoat half on.

"A thousand-dollars," he said, slowly. "I see. When I'm gone, Molly, how are you going to make out?"

"I'll manage somehow, only go, Jim. Go!"

"I don't know about this going," he said after a moment. "They'll grab me somewhere. Somebody'll get that thou—you'll manage somehow! What do you mean by 'somehow'? You'll bet married again, maybe?"

"Oh, no; not that."

He cared a little then—in spite of the girl at Heidelberg's!

If he would only go! This thing for which she had schemed the whole night might fall now while he talked.

"You can't stay here," he said, slowly. "You can't bring the children up where everybody knows about their father. They can't run any sort of a race with that handicap."

For answer she held out his overcoat. But he shook his head. Perhaps it was his one big moment. Perhaps it was only a reaction from his murderous mood of the afternoon. For now quite suddenly he put his arms around her.

"I am not worth it, Molly," he burst out. "I am not worth a thousand dollars alive or dead, but if they're offering that for me, if you had it you could go out west somewhere and nobody would know about you. You could start the kids fresh. That's about the only thing I can do for you—give you a chance to get away and forget you ever knew me."

She did not understand at first. When she did she broke into quiet sobbing. She knew his obstinacy; the dogged tenacity of the weak. Now when every second counted to have him refuse to go!

She pleaded with him, went down on her knees, grew hysterical finally, and had to be taken in his arms and quieted, as he had not quieted her in years. And still there was no sound from the parlor.

"They'll get me somehow," he repeated over and over. "And I—I would like to feel that I had done one decent thing first. That red-eyed ferret in the parlor will get the money if you don't. For the children, Molly; they've got a right to ask to be started straight."

THAT was the argument that moved her finally into a sort of acquiescence. There seemed nothing else for her to do. He even planned the thing for her. He would hide in the barn in the loft. The swift snow would soon fill the footprints, but in case she was anxious, she could get up early and shovel a path where he had stepped.

When Cooper awakened she could say she thought the thing over; that she needed the money; that she would exchange her knowledge for the reward.

"Only you get a paper for it—get a paper from Heidelberg. He'll bluff it out if he can. He was stuck on the girl himself."

"Jim, did you—care for that girl so much?"

His face hardened. "I thought I did; for a—for a little while. She made a fool of me, and I—showed her! But all the time I loved you, Molly."

He kissed her solemnly, as she half lay in his arms, and went toward the door.

"Good-by and God bless you," he said. "And kiss the—"

He choked up at that and made his way out through the drifts on the porch to the little yard.

She closed the door and fastened it behind her. Then very carefully she unlocked the parlor door and opened it. Cooper was still in his chair, sunk a little lower, perhaps, and breathing heavily, the overturned teacup on the floor beside him.

She went back to the kitchen and filled a fresh bottle for the baby.

As before, it served as an excuse for her presence; with it, on the table near at hand, she trimmed carefully the rough-cut edges of the papered door. The inside of the closet was a clear betrayal. Still listening and walking softly, she got a dust brush and pan and swept up the bits of wood and sawdust from the floor. The bit she placed on the shelf, and, turning, pan and brush in hand, faced the detective in the doorway.

He made a quick dash toward the closet.

ded from the man's eyes. He vaulted again, stretched, compared the clock with his watch.

"It's been a long night," he said. "Me for the street again. Listen to that wind. I'm sorry for anyone that's out in the mountains tonight."

HE went into the parlor and, putting on his overcoat, stood awkwardly in the little hall.

She faced him, the child's bottle in her hand.

"I guess you know how I hate this, Molly," he said. "I—I—this isn't the time for talk and there ain't any disloyalty in it, but I was pretty fond of you one time—I guess you knew it, and—I am not the changing sort. I have never seen anybody else I liked the same way. It don't hurt a good woman to know a thing like that. Good night."

Before she went upstairs she took a final look out the back door. Already Jim's footprints were effectively erased by the wind. An unbroken sheet of white snow stretched to the barn. By morning, at this rate, the telltale marks would be buried six inches or more.

"She blew out the kitchen lamp and went slowly up the stairs."

The baby cried hoarsely and she gave him his bottle, lying down on the bed beside him and taking his head on her arm. He dropped asleep there and she kept him close for comfort. And there, lying alone in the darkness with staring eyes, she fought her battle. She had nothing in the world but the cheap furniture in the house. Her own health was frail. It would be a year perhaps before she could leave the children and seek any kind of employment.

The deadly problem of the poor, inextricably mixed as it is with every event of their lives, complicating birth, adding fresh trouble to death—the problem of money confronted her. Jim had been, in town parlance, "a poor provider," but at least she had managed. Now very soon she would not have that resource.

To get away from it all! She drew a long breath. From the disgrace, from the constant knowledge in every eye that met hers that her husband had intrigued with another woman and killed her. To start anew under another name and bring her children up in ignorance of the wretched past—that was one side.

But to earn it in this way—that was another. To sell out to the law! All her husband's weaknesses and brutalities faded from her mind. She saw him—with that pitiful memory of women which forgets all but the good in those they love—only as he had looked in the one great moment of his life an hour ago. Once again he was her hero—her lover; once again he held her in his arms. "I would like to feel that I have done one decent thing."

The battle waged back and forth. She no longer cried. There are some tragedies to which the relief of tears is denied.

Four o'clock.

She slipped the baby's head from her arm and got up. Cooper was still across the street, huddled against a house, stamping to keep warm and swinging his arms. In an hour the milk train would come in and wait on the siding for the express. That would have been Jim's chance. If he could get away, he could start all over again and make good. He had it in him. He was a big man—bigger than the people in the village had ever realized. They had never appreciated him—that was the trouble. Why should she have a fresh start? It was Jim who needed it. She moaned and turned her face to the pillow.

Five o'clock.

The milk train whistling for the switch. It was still very dark. She crept to the window and looked out. It was a gray dawn with snow blowing like smoke through the trees. The cold was proving too much for Cooper. He was making his way cautiously across the street through the snow toward the house.

Once in the parlor again, she could get to the barn. The freight would come on the siding 10 minutes sometimes, and tonight, with the snow, it might be longer.

She leaped off the bed and hurried down the staircase. Just before the front door opened to admit the detectives, the kitchen door closed behind her. She was out in the storm.

She stumbled along, sometimes knee deep, holding up her thin cotton wrapper.

THE barn door was open and she slipped in.

"Jim," she called. "Jim!"

She was standing at the foot of the loft ladder, all her heart in her voice.

"I can't do it, Jim. I can't sell you out, even for the children, Jim!"

There was no sound from above. She climbed up, trembling. The loft was dark. She would not believe the silence, must creep around to each corner.

"I can't do it," she said over and over. "I can't do it, Jim!" He was gone.

She felt her way down through the darkness and staggered to the door of the barn. Cooper was standing there, quietly waiting for her.

From the railroad came the whistle of the express as it raced through, and the slow jangle of the milk train as the engine took up the track.

"He's gone, Molly," said the detective. "He went out by Schultz's at a quarter to five. I guess he'll make his get-away. There was shame and something else in his eyes."

The freight gathered way. As they listened it moved but on the main track.

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