

In the Light of the Morning

A Short Story by Elma Cadwallader.

THE kitchen door banged, and Tom dashed out blindly into the peace of the spring morning. He cut across his mother's flower beds, leaving behind a trail of tender young plants, trampled and broken, and ran into the barn to where his horse's head was thrust in greeting to him over the bars of a box-stall. Tom flung both arms about Chub's neck, then the tears came—tears all born of rage, humiliation, and more dangerous passions. The drops fell slowly, dropping off the horse's cream-colored mane into the straw.

"Pa kicked me—awful, this time!" gasped the boy. "He shan't do it again. I'll—I'll get even. I'll—" His hand went to his pocket and touched the knife there, and as his fingers curled round it, the confusion in his thoughts cleared. Suddenly his mind seemed possessed of a definite resolve. He shuddered and the tears dried quickly on his face.

The bars of the box-stall were bent and the horse was taxing their frail resistance. At last Tom took the old bridle from a peg, but before he led his treasure out into the sunshine, he pressed his cheek, with a kind of furtive tenderness, against the warm, velvet-like nostrils.

The farm-house showed white and freshly painted at the end of a short path, between tall stalks of hollyhocks in bloom. Tom dodged around the barn and made for the lower meadow. He would be out of call of his mother's voice there. He dropped astride a rock and allowed his horse to crop the grass near.

After a futile effort to recall details of his fight of the previous day with Ted Cutheral, in the school yard—he could remember nothing but thuds and blood and dust, then being shown the brick he had hurled after Ted's retreating form—he fell to considering for the thousandth time Chub's fine points. A better mood touched him. It neutralized his passion, temporarily, passion that was like physical pain. Wasn't he the owner of the best horse in the county! A horse that was swifter, sounder, smarter than any of which he had ever read or heard! Was there ever such a slender, arched neck, when it was raised like that; and the ears pricked. Then Tom saw what the horse had been quicker to notice. A young man had crept through the bushes bordering the creek, stumbled forward and stopped.

All the morning was peace, yet the man's face showed haggard and dark, with eyes that gleamed like the eyes of a trapped animal. His hair was black, ragged, damp with dew, and the whole of him appeared drenched and torn as if with heavy storms.

Tom came suddenly to his feet. "What d' you want?" he stammered. "Where—where d' you come from?"

There was no answer. The dark face quivered, and there was such overwhelming terror in the eyes that Tom forgot his own.

"Are you sick—hurt? Is somebody after you?" Tom approached a step or two nearer the stranger.

"No. Nobody's after me—not that I know of." The words were uttered uncertainly, heavily, as from a mind bending under a burden beyond its strength. The young man swayed a little, but steadied himself again by a hand on the horse's flank. All the ragged length of him denoted muscular power, yet he was bent, and moved as an old man moves.

"Sit down here," the boy said, quickly compassionate.

The wild eyes shifted to the rock an instant, then returned to Tom's sympathetic face and stayed there. "I can't rest," he muttered. "I'm beat out, but I can't rest. I've walked from Fulton, where I live. It's twenty-five miles—over that mountain at the end of the valley, but I can't sleep nor rest."

"If something's thoublin' you, it might help—to tell," Tom urged. "I tell my horse things. I know."

"I didn't want to tell. I didn't think to talk to you, but maybe I'd better. Feels like I'd go mad if I didn't—tell some one." He seemed driven to speech by a great need, yet held back by some great fear. His breath shook him as he stood, as though he had been running, and he moistened his

lips and moved them again and again before he continued. The words appeared to be wrung from him against his will, yet he spoke with a passionate relief.

"I've—"

"Go on," Tom persisted, in the grip of a fearsome and irresistible curiosity.

"I've killed a man!"

The meadow was very still. The horse stopped cropping the grass to listen to a tinkling cowbell across the valley. From Tom's mind the fog of his recent anger vanished, leaving him in sudden, confusing light. He bent down and carefully removed a beetle from his overalls without knowing what he did. "Why?" he breathed, at last.

But the stranger only repeated, "I've killed a man." He shivered in the warm rays of the sunshine, and as the horse moved he groped his way up till he clung to its mane.

"Did he—hit you?"

"No. It wasn't that. I've a mad temper. I struck in blind, crazy rage, before I knew. He was my step-father, but he'd always treated me square. 'Twas about money that we quarreled—money my mother left him. He'd earned the right to it, workin' on the ranch for more'n ten years, so as the mortgage could be paid off. He done splendid by the old place. Maybe if I hadn't got to care a lot for him—a lot more'n I thought—I wouldn't feel like this. People don't know how much they care till something happens to show 'em."

Tom drew a long breath.

"I've been runnin' since yesterday noon—seems like I'd been runnin' for weeks." His hand went to his bare throat. "I was afraid of the woods. The face was with me, his face and the eyes, after I'd struck. I was afraid of the shadows under the trees in the woods, and—the nights, and the wind in the canyons. I can't stay alone. It's awful to be alone with thoughts. I had to come back—to see people. Yet I'm afraid to talk against my will, as I'm doin' now. I'm afraid to see men comin' to take me, and the women's scared faces, and children followin' to watch. When I saw you and your horse I came out. Perhaps he'll help me get away, I thought."

Tom brushed his clean shirt sleeve across his eyes and clammy forehead, and under the shirt he felt a chill creeping and perspiration bursting out over arms, and neck, and body. "Help you get away," he echoed slowly.

"That's it. I gotta. The horse might—you see I'm weak." A flash seemed to pass over the dark face, and the black eyes wavered and shifted from Tom's white face.

There was a silence, then the boy put his arms around Chub's neck and held it pressed against his heart, which was thumping hard. "You mean you want the loan of my horse?" he cried. "But you shan't have him—not to run away! Why—why don't you go back? You ought to go back." It was a thought that shook them both, and they stared into each other's eyes for a long, frightened, speechless half minute.

"Go back!" the young man whispered in a dull key of incomprehension. He turned his head aside, then suddenly hid his face in his hands.

Tom stood motionless. When the face was raised it had changed. "I'd not thought of it," he said, with all a child's simplicity. "If I go back I can rest. It will be good to rest—anywhere—not to be afraid. Yes, I'll go back." He made the announcement with the blank, unreasoning yielding of an exhausted child. "I'd walk back, only I'm weak—it'll take a long time."

A suspicion of the man's good faith flashed before Tom's mind, then he put it from him with shame and a fine pride, and led the horse up close to the rock. "You can have him" he said, "for today. Nobody ain't ever ridden him"—he choked over the words, all that they meant to him—"but me. He'll carry you over the mountain by noon, then you can turn him loose and he'll come home, 'cause he's awful fond of me. I raised him. No one can catch him, either, when he's loose, but me. That's it—leave the reins easy, 'cause his mouth's tender.

It ain't ever been hurt, or jerked."

"It's good of you," the young man faltered, "and it's awful good of you to—trust me."

Tom made a gesture of dissent. He couldn't speak just then.

The horse started forward. The man did not look back, but Tom heard him sobbing, first in great fugitive gasps, then more gently till he had left the meadow and turned the bend in the road toward the old stone bridge.

At sundown, a small figure, disheveled and dust-stained, sat huddled in the ditch by the roadside. Tom's knees were drawn up and his arms locked round them, and the blue eyes, softened, but dulled with watching, stared toward an expanse of country road in the distance. All his defiance and anger of the morning, the bravado and swaggering self-assurance of him, were gone utterly. His chin trembled occasionally as he noted the shadows deepening, turning day surely into night under the great oaks.

Then a horse appeared. It was dimly outlined against the light patch of road, but it was riderless and coming in his direction. Tom lifted his head. Crab! It must be—it was Chub, his own horse! He did not shout, er

whistle, or throw his straw hat up in the air. Instead he rolled over on the grass, face downward, and hid his eyes in the bend of his arm. He was tasting of the bitterness of repentance mixed with his great joy. His father had praised him that day, and the words seemed to be pricking their way now, like hot needles, into his heart.

In the midst of it all there came the dark, wild face of the young man, with its forever unforgettable marks of suffering. Tom felt suddenly humbled, and very tender toward every person in his small world. He was grasping something of the meaning of the brotherhood of man, since temptation had, for a while, found him, too, capitulating to its call.

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