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MARGERY LAND MAY

Illustrations By
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JIM GLENN, who was a general practitioner in Linsdale and Aunt Martha's nephew as well, often said that whereas he was a doctor for people's bodies, Aunt Martha was a doctor for their souls. "And sometimes," he would add with his genial, reassuring smile, "I'm jiggered if I don't believe it's the souls that need doctoring the most."

Thus, frequently when he had a case which his tonics and pellets had failed to cure, the lank, long-legged medical man would climb into his hard-run coupe and chug up to the zinnia-bordered cottage of the sage of Whipple Hill.

There was, for example, the listlessness, the deepening pallor, the gradual falling off in weight which he had observed in Mona Richards.

"Tired all the time, eh? No appetite? Can't sleep? Hm, well," filling out a prescription blank, "that's not so serious. What you need is a little alkali in your system. A teaspoonful of this three times a day ought to put the color back in your face, I think."

But though he spoke with his usual encouraging heartiness, he was worried about the slim, sweet-eyed girl sitting in the chair before him. He did not like her fragility—her look of inner illness which was, he well knew, so far beyond the reach of anything that came in jars or bottles.

All that day he thought about her, with a disturbed expression on his kind, weatherbeaten face. "I don't like it," he kept thinking, and that night he drove himself and his worry up the hill to Aunt Martha, who was as famous for her wisdom as she was for her pies.

WHEN supper was over and they were sitting on the porch in the cool, honeysuckle-fragrant air, he began:

"Mona Richards was in my office today. She looks bad. Thin and pale and run down. I'm worried about her. But I can't help her."

With the alert, warm interest she felt for any distress, Aunt Martha leaned forward in her chair.

"Can't help her? Why not, Jim?" she asked.

He frowned. "Because what she's got is a heart-sickness. There isn't a thing in the world the matter with that child but that confounded Tom Andrews," he said.

Aunt Martha protested. "Why, Jim Glenn, ain't you ashamed of yourself? Tom Andrews is one of the steadyest, cleanest boys in this town."

For a moment, while a rapturous mockingbird flung a note of gold, Glenn puffed his pipe in silence. Then he spoke:

"Well, that's just it. He is. Mona knows it, too. She's daft about him, poor child. Been so for years. But now she's beginning to be afraid that she's never going to get him."

Aunt Martha clasped her plump, capable hands on her pink gingham lap.

"You mean he hasn't asked her yet?" she intoned.

Glenn nodded. "I mean I don't believe he's ever going to ask her."

AUNT MARTHA'S hand flew out in a short gesture of disbelief.

"Shucks, Jim. He's just slow about it. Some are, you know," she chuckled. "My Joe, for instance. I thought my Joe would never pop the question. Gettin' a proposal out of him was like gettin' a dime from a Scotchman," she said.

But Glenn did not share her view of it.

"Tom isn't the timid kind. He's young, successful and good-looking. He has everything to offer a woman, and he knows it. But he's got a home. His sister, Helen, spoils him to death and those two little boys of hers think there's no one in the world like their Uncle Tom."

"But," Aunt Martha protested, "that ain't marriage."

He was worried about the slim, sweet-eyed girl. . . . He did not like her fragility, her look of inner illness which was, he well knew, so far beyond the reach of anything that came in jars and bottles.

"No," Glenn agreed meditatively, "but comfort and companionship and kids are a big part of marriage. Fact is, they're the main part of it. And when a man is already enjoying most of the assets of marriage with none of the risks and responsibilities that the actual state entails, he isn't so quick to hurry to the altar. I know what I'm talking about, too. You may not believe it, but I don't think I ever would have married if you hadn't gone to Hot Springs that summer and left me all alone here on my own."

Aunt Martha sat up stock-still with astonishment.

"Go on, Jim. I don't believe a word of it. You're just talkin'!" she exclaimed.

He shook his graying head.

"No, I'm not. I'd always been fond of Madge, but as long as I had you to look after me I was satisfied. I didn't want any other home. It took four months of cafeterias and foot-loose evenings to make me realize what a peach Madge really was—" he broke off. Then, sheepishly: "We men are a selfish lot," he said.

"Tell me something I don't know," she chuckled amusedly, and the next morning—armed with a box of the pastries which had won her renown—she went over for a visit with Helen Mills.

I DECLARE,

Helen, she began when they were seated in the red-tiled patio, "you sure are a good-lookin' woman. It seems to me you're prettier now than you ever was, even when Dick was livin'."

Land sakes, how time does fly! It's five years now you've been a widow, isn't it? Don't you ever think about marryin' again at all?

Helen, who had been thinking of little else for some time, gave a blush.

"Heavens, no! And then, even if I did, who is there to marry here?" she asked.

Reaching for her knitting needles and bright balls of wool, Aunt Martha rocked gently to and fro.

"Well, there ain't nobody here, I'll admit. But Linsdale ain't the only place in the whole world. With the money you've got, there's no reason for a pretty young woman like you to bury yourself in a little one-horse town for-

ever. Then, too," with a quick, side-long glance at the rapt expression on Helen's pensive face, "there's the boys. They're coming on now and in big cities like Dallas or New Orleans there's so much better schools."

With her hands cupping her knees and her eyes fixed on the toe of a well-shod foot, Helen considered this.

"Well, of course," she agreed, "it would be best for the boys, I suppose. But there's Tom. He's always been such a wonderful brother. It wouldn't seem fair to go off and leave him."

WISE in the ways of her own generation, and several others to boot, Aunt Martha appeared to be giving this phase of the situation some serious thought.

"Well, I can see that wouldn't be easy. I know how you feel about Tom. Ever since Dick's death he's been a regular rock to lean on. But there's larger opportunities for schools—an' all—in a big place, and a mother has to think of her children first," Aunt Martha said.

It was of these larger opportunities—for the children—that Helen spoke a few days later when she drove up Whipple Hill to return Aunt Martha's pie pans.

"I've been thinking a good deal of what you said the other day, Aunt Martha. About the educational advantages for the boys, of course, and I can't help but believe you're right. Oddly enough, too, Bob Craig phoned me yesterday to say that he could get me a splendid lease if I wanted to rent my house."

Aunt Martha, who had taken it upon herself to go into conference with the real estate man, showed the proper amount of interest and surprise.

"Well, what do you think of that?" she exclaimed.

There was a far-off anticipatory expression on Helen's pretty face.

"Quite a coincidence, wasn't it?" she agreed. "I asked him how he knew I was thinking of leasing it and he said that he didn't know, but that he had a fine tenant in the event that I would. Harry Seymour, the Little Theater director, I think he said it was. And so," she paused, "with the house disposed of there's nothing left to consider but dear old Tom."

ROLLING out a pie crust and molding it deftly over the edge of her pan, Aunt Martha said:

"Well, I can settle him. My friend, Myra Wiggins, was tellin' me only this morning that she wants a roomer. Myra don't keep a boarding-house. She's in the egg and chicken business, but she's got a big, front room, next door to the bath, that she's willin' to let out. She'd give him breakfast, too. An' he could get his other meals downtown or at his club."



Helen gave a blush. . . . "Even if I did, who is there to marry here?" she asked.

There was an aghast flutter of Helen's pretty, pink-tipped hands.

"Oh, Aunt Martha, that sounds terrible! You don't know how spoiled Tom is, and how fussy about having everything just so."

Aunt Martha closed the doors of the oven with an emphatic shove:

"Indeed, I do know, too. An' I think it's a cryin' shame for a pretty young widow like

you to be wastin' so much spoilin' on a brother when the world is just chuck-full of men who'd like a little of it themselves," Aunt Martha said.

Thus it was towards the larger opportunities of the city that Helen and her boys soon embarked. But not before the charming young widow had seen her dearly-loved brother comfortably installed in Myra Wiggins' best front room.

"Look after him, Mrs. Wiggins. He's a snicky old thing. He likes his toast thin and his coffee strong," Helen said.

"I'll remember," Mrs. Wiggins promised, with a smile on her cheerful, pudgy face; but the pampered Tom could have testified that she did not remember long.

THICK bread and pungent-less coffee that tasted as if water had been poured over the dregs, soon became his portion.

The water was seldom hot enough to let him shave in the morning. He tried it several times and then started to frequent the corner barber shop. He annexed half a dozen new and forceful words with which he swore inwardly when he had to wait his turn for a place in the chair.

He liked the bed clothes tucked in securely at the foot of the bed, but Mrs. Wiggins did not have a touch of security in her fingers. Night after night he awakened to find he was using the covering for a scarf. Besides, she had a habit of putting a pink flannel blanket next to his body, with the remark that "it gave folks a cold to sleep between linen sheets like some of 'em did."

His pillow was hard, and the window wasn't in the right place. It squeaked when he raised it, and it required a clothes brush to hold it up. Even then it didn't permit a sufficient quantity of air. When the wind blew the brush out, as it frequently did, it would fall with a crash.

Twice when Mrs. Wiggins had promised to sew on buttons she had completely forgotten about it. Another time he entrusted the pressing of a pair of trousers to her, and sat for 40 minutes waiting for their release, remembering that he was due at an important business conference. Mrs. Wiggins cheerfully explained that she "never was no hand with an iron." When he did receive the long-desired garment the crease was crooked. She asked what he was in the habit of paying for such services at his tailor's, and cheerfully stated that she would be satisfied to take the same price.

HOWEVER, to the radiant Helen, who was finding city opportunities—for herself as well as the children—all that Aunt Martha had predicted, he wrote a gallant lie.

"Don't bother about me. I'm getting along splendidly," he told her, whereas the truth was that Myra's wrinkled sheets, thick toast and boiled coffee, bitter with the taste of tannin, were combining to make him just as uncomfortable as it was possible for a spoiled, well-ordered bachelor to be.

"It's telling on him, Martha. Ever since his sister and her boys left he's had a lonesome, miserable look. And Dora Parsons, who's her best friend, says that he's been out with that Richards girl every night this week and that he stops by for a cup of coffee with her, in the mornings, on his way downtown. Blessed if I don't believe your scheme's going to work." Mrs. Wiggins said, with a pleased little cackle when she dropped in to make a report early one afternoon.

Aunt Martha's pink cheeks rounded in a smile and her eyes twinkled like blue stars bent on mischief.

"Going to work? Land sakes, Myra Wiggins, haven't you heard the news?"

"News? What news? Sakes alive, Marty, what on earth are you laughing at?" she said, looking at her with wide-eyed inquiry.

Wiping her eyes with a corner of her blue-checked apron, Aunt Martha answered:

"NOTHIN', except that I was wonderin' what sin of yours it was that made him take the sudden notion. Did you remember to forget his soap and fresh towels again, or was it overlookin' to see that his clothes are pressed?"

Myra was frankly non-plussed. With a frown of perplexity on her broad, good-natured face she asked:

"What notion? What's happened? I've been out at the market stalls all morning and I haven't heard a thing. But if it's Tom Andrews you're talking about, he left my house at eight o'clock in his new gray suit."

"Yes, and at 11 o'clock, in his new gray suit, he was leaving the house of Reverend White of Marshall, Texas, where he and Mona was married," Aunt Martha said triumphantly.

With her hands planted on her plump, wide-spread knees,

Myra sat gaping in surprise.

"Married? Sakes alive! You don't tell!"

Then, with frank admiration, "My, but you is a shrewd one, Martha!" she exclaimed.

"You just do beat all, with your schemin' an' plannin', an' the way you know what's best for people before they know it themselves. Why, I thought Tom Andrews was hopeless!"

As she brinkly beat her cookie batter in a big, yellow bowl, Aunt Martha chuckled.

"Oh, men ain't such a hard proposition, Myra. There ain't nothin' the matter with this here male sex except that the whole kit and bilin' of them is just too big to spank. Nothin' but boys grown tall, it seems to me. Which, emphatically, 'is all the more reason why we girls should club together to show 'em that home comforts and wives is one and the same identical thing."