

THE OLD ROCKING CHAIR

A Memorial Day Story

By OLIVIA BARTON STROHM



On a bench on her back porch sat Mrs. White—very stiff, very uncompromising. The morning glory vines, blown by the wind, played in checkered light and shade over the porch; over her tense, upright figure, topped with its crown of silver hair; over the sunburnt face of a young man who stood near twirling his hat.

The May sunbeams stole as far as the door where, just within the screen, a girl was seated, cracking nuts.

There was a vacant rocking chair

grandmother pulled at the fringe a few moments, then she went to the door. "You heard what Henry said?" she asked.

Eleanor nodded. The silence, and a tell-tale redness in her cheeks and eyes, spoke volumes.

"Have you got enough nuts for the cake filling?" the old lady said after a pause.

"Yes'm, they're all done," and Eleanor, gathering up her apron full of shells in one hand, and the dish in the other, rose and went into the pantry, glad to escape conversation.

Her grandmother returned to the porch. The chair rocked in the wind, but she heeded not its invitation, taking instead her old position on the bench.

There she sat alone for a quarter of an hour or so until Eleanor, passing on her way out to water the verbenas, stopped to say: "Grandma, you look drowsy; take this pillow," and she slipped a cushion behind the old woman's back.

Then as she started down the



White of her manners which, in the excitement of the interview, she had forgotten.

"Take a chair, Henry."

But the young man, in no mood for a truce, ignored the invitation. "Then you won't let me have Eleanor?" he said.

She answered him as bluntly: "No, Henry; you're a good boy and all that, but you're not my choice."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Whose choice, did you say?"

At the sound of his voice the cracking of nuts in the kitchen ceased.

Mrs. White took up her shawl and ran her fingers through the fringe. "Don't be sarcastic, Henry. I mean what I say—my choice. Eleanor has given me her word of honor that she will not marry without my consent."

From within the witchen door there came a sharp sound of a pan falling. It made the youth start nervously; the grandmother laughed: "That is what the men all say. They never seem to realize that the girl who has a sense of duty toward an old woman is best worth winning."

Henry walked slowly to the porch steps, then turned. "You see, it's just this way, Mrs. White; it isn't a question of whether Eleanor's worth winning, or loves me, or anything else. All I know is, that I love her, and am too crazy to think of anybody or anything but her. I suppose I ought to say I'd quit, but—" he went to the other end of the porch from whence he could get a view of the girl seated within—the girl whose eyes met his.

"But I can't promise you; good-by." And although he addressed Mrs. White, he looked beyond her through the doorway, backing slowly to the steps. Then he turned and walked off down the garden path, attended by a sentinel row of sunflowers.

Eleanor went on with her work. Her



"Then You Won't Let Me Have Eleanor?"

this is Decoration day, and the old soldiers are to march to the cemetery."

There was a twinge in the elderly conscience at sight of the young face with its drawn cheeks and heavy, pink-lidded eyes, but she only said: "Thank you, but I must not sleep; I want to see the soldiers, too," and the girl passed out into the garden.

After a few minutes, something set the chair to rocking again, but this time it was not moved by the wind. It was occupied by a tall, strapping man who twirled a hat in his hands. She looked closer—no, it was a cap, a blue cap and the man was in uniform.

He was big and broad shouldered, and blunt in speech and manner as he

said: "Well, 'Lindy, I'm here for the last time. We march to-morrow. I can get a furlough if I want it, but I don't want it unless—well, you know what I do want."

Strangely enough he did not wait for her words. She did not—could not speak.

He went on: "What have you got against me, 'Lindy? Is it because I seem rough? But I'm a soldier, and you don't find many softies in the army. But we boys are true—true as this uniform, and we aren't afraid of a battery—not even the kind that your eyes flash, 'Lindy."

The cap was thrown to the floor, and he clasped his hands, big, weather-beaten hands, and leaned toward her. "They tell you I'm a rover, and can't settle down, but it ain't so; I'll only fight as long as the flag needs me, and then—then home to you. I know—they're trying to match you with that old White because he's rich, aren't they?"

Something tied the woman's tongue; she could not utter a sound.

He rose. "I know you love me, 'Lindy, but you're afraid. I'm off—off for good—or bad. And when you hear of me dead, with a bullet in my body, you'll know whose fault it is. You're

He stood in front of her, pouring out the words in a storm. He was very red, his breath felt hot on her forehead as he bent over her. "But I love you, 'Lindy, and when I come back again—when the war is over—be true—be true—"

The words came in choppy, disjointed sentences, then they suddenly ceased.

The chair began to rock again—sedately this time, and another speaker took up the thread where it had been abruptly cut off—took it up in a thin, cold voice. "He was a gray-bearded man with a Bible in his hand, and Joe, her soldier-lover, had gone.

"Miss Melinda," the newcomer was saying: "I deemed it proper you should acquaint yourself with the marriage service beforehand. Your family and myself have decided on a church wedding: I know you prefer a home

Eleanor Flew Out the Back Way.

ceremony, but we have decided otherwise. You are young and these matters may safely be left to older heads."

He took her hand in his own palm, which was cold, and with a formal good-by he, too, disappeared.

But the chair kept on its rocking—more violently this time, and in it sat an old nurse, holding a peevish baby tight against her breast. She was saying: "I tell you, Mrs. White, it's a good thing you didn't marry that soldier, Joe Cooper. Just see how nice you're fixed now. Here you have a good, reliable husband—some older, to be sure, but you gals all need tight reins. I was young and giddy once, myself. And think if you'd a married that soldier; you'd a ben a widow woman now, for they're decoratin' his grave this minute—it is Decoration day, you know. They do say as Joe Cooper had promised his mother not to go back that last time, and then all of a sudden he up and went—a love affair, they say. Killed? 'Course he was—first thing—"

Grandmother White sat up very stiff and opened her eyes.

Eleanor came rushing on to the porch. "Granny, dear, what's the matter? Did the gun frighten you? It was only the salute. The parade has started. You must be uncomfortable on that bench, come, sit here," and she led her to the rocking chair—vacant now, but still swinging—swinging—

"No, no, not there, not in that chair, Eleanor."

Grandmother White rose and went to the edge of the porch from whence she could see the line of men with flags waving here and there between the trees.

When the last soldier had filed out of sight and while the drum was still sounding in her ears, the old lady said: "Yes, yes, it was a bad dream, Eleanor, child—but did you say there was enough nut filling for a big cake?"

"Yes, grandma," she said, trying not to show surprise at the irrelevant question.

"Then we'll invite that young Henry over for dinner."

Eleanor grew pink as the bunch of bleeding-hearts at her belt—"But, Granny, you said—"

"Never mind what I said. Run over to his mother's and tell him to come here; send him to me."

As Eleanor flew out the back way, bareheaded, eager, her grandmother called after her: "Tell him he'll find me on the porch—in the old rocking chair!"

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