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The Scoffer

By SARAH CROXTON

THE newspapers gave the item only a small paragraph. With the usual impersonality of black print, the article spoke of the death of Mrs. Fred Leavere through the accidental falling of fruit shelves. The tragedy had not been known until several hours later when the husband had come home to find his two year old daughter alone, playing in the upper part of the house. Upon going to the basement, he had discovered the body of his wife buried beneath the heavy shelves.

That was all. Almost an obituary in its clear cut brevity. But then, the reporter saw nothing else to put in. There were things regarding that accident which even Myra's husband did not know. In that last day of her life were things known only to Myra and her small daughter.

Myra Leavere had been a scoffer. Nothing had escaped the cold analysis of her mind, nothing the devastating wit of her tongue. Outwardly she laughed at all the abstract qualities in which others believed. Inwardly she laughed at more concrete things—her friends, sometimes her husband. Often herself.

The undesired arrival of her child, Helen, into the world had not changed her viewpoint. If anything, it had intensified it; she had proven to her own satisfaction that she was a logical, unemotional mother, free of the smothering bonds of parental love. After all, she told Fred, Helen was nothing more nor less than one other child in the world. Unpremeditated parenthood with its lack of originality was one of the many ridiculous things in a ridiculous world.

It had been one of the most bitterly contested points between them. Fred had watched her strip all his other beliefs of their intrinsic value with a fond tolerance and no serious opposition. This one he refused to discuss.

It had come up again the evening before Myra's accidental death. Fred had been putting Helen through her childish tricks, encouraging her with lavish praise and glancing frequently at Myra to be sure she noticed the child. Until Myra, exasperated, said:

"Aren't people ridiculous?° We give birth to children and think we have done something wonderful; we believe that our child is superior to all our friends' children. As a matter of fact, the thing is entirely physical. A species of vanity to see ourselves reproduced and a species of pride in the possession of a human being whom we fatuously think we can mold to fit the pattern we choose." She shrugged her slim shoulders. "The tie that binds is an exploded theory."

Fred's fair face reddened with indignation; as Myra had expected it would.

"That is decidedly not so, Myra, and you don't really believe it. All your conversation won't do away with parental bonds. And in a crisis you would be the first person to refute your beliefs."

Myra shook her dark head emphatically.

"I doubt it. I am certain I could go away tomorrow and leave Helen with no regrets. She is just a biological result of our union toward whom I have no sense of responsibility and only a casual affection."

"Rot!" Fred snorted and buried himself in the evening paper decisively.

Myra felt she had spared him the whole truth. How easy it would be to leave both of them, she knew too well, putting them absolutely from her mind and her life, starting anew. Responsibility was something, she told herself, which only a few brave ones were willing to acknowledge outworn.

The day after their argument Myra carried some canned fruit to the basement. She left the kitchen door open while she went up and down the steep stairs. Fred

was overly careful to close the door whenever he went down, since the time Helen had tried to follow him. He had shuddered for days after over the possibility of Helen falling down them.

But Myra was in a hurry; even if Fred's fussiness had not annoyed her to the point of stubborn contrariety she would have left the door open this day. It was quicker and she knew Helen was playing on the sun porch.

Thinking how angry Fred would be over that open kitchen door, Myra stepped carelessly on the bottom shelf, lifting the jars of fruit to the top; in the midst of her mental comment that the shelves were too heavy to be so overloaded, she felt a swaying motion. The next second the shelves went over with a crash, burying her beneath them.

She must have died as soon as she struck the cement floor. At least she did not know how soon it was that she became conscious of a strange sensation. Her partly buried body was on the floor, awkward and limp, as if its slender grace had departed with life. She stood gazing at it with an odd detachment and an aloof curiosity toward this creature who had been herself and was now empty; the soft, black hair of which she had been so vain, was like a shadow on the cement floor and the white face held an expression of astonishment stamped on the clear cut features which had once been so vivacious.

Other sensations took possession of her; she had a feeling of freedom, of lightness, as though her body had been an encumbrance. She moved without the effort of lifting earth bound feet. Now, she thought, she was free of all ties just as she had so often wished. It had been simpler than any of her theories, this casting off of everything.

She heard the movement of small feet overhead; and she gazed at her dead body, powerless to accomplish evil or good. What an absurd death she had died, after all her mockery. Died in the midst of her domestic duties, she paraphrased scornfully to herself.

A feeling came to her suddenly that she did not belong here now and could go. She moved effortlessly, swiftly up the stairs, filled with ecstasy over this sudden freedom.

Small feet were coming toward the basement stairs; and the child that had been her daughter stood there, looking down.

Standing before Helen, Myra watched her curiously as if politeness demanded a casual farewell after their two years' acquaintance. The small round face with its frame of dark hair was intent on the basement, the sturdy body leaning forward with a precarious eagerness. Looking at her, Myra remembered irrelevantly how Fred had hated the dangerous basement stairs. He had always meant to put a gate two steps down. Myra's open raillery of what she named his senility was all that had postponed it.

Looking through Myra, Helen called in a soft, treble voice: "Mama! Mama!" And when Myra pushed the child gently, Helen did not move.

With the realization that she should be going, she moved uncertainly to pass Helen. This was no longer her job, she thought; what could it matter to her if the child fell.

And then she stopped. She could not go; she did not want to go. Without warning, sharp regret swept her that she was finished here. On top of it came strange emotions, unwanted, overwhelming in their intensity; horror, that physically she was powerless to stop Helen, terror at what the fall might do to that small body. Fright for another which she had disavowed in life, had gripped her mercilessly now that she was dead. It was as though something had burst to life within her, something far more powerful than the shell of her body. She was on the threshold not only of a different existence, but of emotions at which she had always scoffed.

She stooped down before the child and murmured coaxingly:

"Where is Helen's dog? Let's find Helen's dog. Where do you suppose he is?" She had said those words when she occupied the body in the basement. Knowing she could not be heard, she repeated them over and over, exhausting herself with the effort of will she exerted. The phrase became meaningless, but they went on like a record which would not run down.

"Where is Helen's dog? Poor dog. Let's find him—"

Slowly, reluctantly, Helen turned her small dark head, looking back toward the kitchen. Once more she glanced down the stairs; then, as though obeying a stronger will than hers, she walked into the kitchen.

The plump legs went on, making their way unerringly toward an unseen object, until she reached the glassed in porch, where she stooped down, reaching one hand beneath a chair and bringing out a fuzzy dog. Smiling, she began to play with him, her dark eyes glancing toward the kitchen as if for approbation.

Myra stood between Helen and the kitchen with its open door, watching the child that had been hers play. She knew she would stay there until Fred came home; clinging to each moment, struggling against the newborn sorrow of impending departure, the knowledge that she must break the bonds whose strength she had just come to know.