

THE STAR WOMAN

By ALICE E. ALLEN

THAT morning, the apple tree outside our window was a song. The gnarled old boughs were lines, blue sky filled all the spaces, and the apple blossoms, themselves, were notes which the wind's skillful fingers touched into gentle melodies. Then, suddenly, there was a glint of blue in the sun.

"The bluebird," I cried. I leaned far out of the window. There, in the midst of the blossoms, was a pretty brown nest. It swayed lightly like a little candle.

"I must tell someone," I whispered. But there was only Granny, old, deaf, and almost helpless. Besides, Paul should know first. And Paul was away all day at work in the big mill in the valley. How could I wait?

As best I could, I put my secret into a little song and sang it over and over as I worked. When it was almost time for Paul to come home, I ran down the trail to meet him. As soon as he saw me coming, he ran, too.

"What is it, Margery, dear?" he called.

"Oh Paul," I cried, as I ran into his arms. "I thought you never would come."

It was always so good to have Paul come home. But tonight—

"I've been waiting," I cried, "ever and ever so long for a day just like this one—all apple blooms even to the clouds—to tell you."

"But it looks solemn, Margery, dear," laughed Paul. "Your eyes are so big and dark and mysterious."

"It is solemn," I said, "and glad, too." I put both hands on Paul's shoulders. I raised myself on tiptoe just as high as I possible could. Paul kissed me again. Then I told him.

Never until that moment had I known what a boy Paul is, even yet. He looked as if he wanted to shout and toss his cap. But he only said:

"Margery, dear?"

"It's true, Paul."

"A little, little baby," cried Paul softly. He took off his cap and stood bareheaded under the pines. "All our very own. Ours—our very own, Margery, dear!"

The apple blossoms faded and fell. But the apple tree was still a song, for pale pretty leaves unfolded and sang in the wind. By and by there were little hard green spheres of apples, which, every day, grew more and more sun-streaked with color. One morning I saw a scarlet bough in the big maple. And that same day, sewing in the window, I heard the thud of the first apple on the grass.

"Autumn," I whispered, and my fingers flew, "and then winter."

There never was, never will be, another autumn quite like that one. Paul and I fairly lived in the forest. We drank great draughts of gold and russet and crimson and scarlet and rose color. But at last a day came, all golden skies and golden winds, with golden leaves falling everywhere you looked. It was so lovely, we knew it must be the last. And, sure enough, next morning, when I looked out of my window, there were only bare boughs pointing like slender brown fingers toward a gray, quiet sky.

Winter sets in early in our mountains. Before Christmas, snow lay thick and deep in the woods. The evergreen trees were softly powdered as if unseen hands had decked them for the coming of the little Child.

A Sunday morning came. Scurries of snow flakes were followed by gleams of pale sunshine, more snow flakes, more sunshine. About noon, Paul harnessed the horses and started in haste for the doctor.

He could scarcely have reached town when the storm broke. Snow fell in big white hurrying flakes. The wind rose. The road was utterly lost. Our fences disappeared. Granny and I and the mountain were shut off in a world of our own—a weird world where old landmarks showed strange faces and distorted shapes shrouded in ghostly white.

I knelt down close to our window. Outside, the apple tree tossed and writhed in the storm and seemed to reach out desperate hands toward me. To one of the branches the bluebird's nest still clung. It was filled and fringed with snow.

"Poor little empty cradle," I whispered.

Over and over I told myself that Paul would soon come. But the storm raged more and more fiercely. And darkness was coming. With eager fingers I clung to each ray of light which slanted through the window. But the last one faded in my grasp. Even the strange white world was swallowed up in night.

A long time after I suddenly became conscious of a big white friendly star which shone through the



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window. My tears made long blurring paths of light from the star straight through the window to my bed.

Then I had a beautiful dream all of the big white star. I thought that down one of the long quivering silvery roads, there came a woman. Out of the star-glory, her face shone, sweet and serene. Her voice spoke reassuringly to me. Her hands, strong and tender, helped me. At last, still a part of the dream, I heard a little shrill cry. And there on the pillow beside me I saw a baby-face, pink as an apple blossom. I thought I tried to find Paul. I could not see him anywhere. But bending over me was the face of the star-woman. She seemed to tell me that all was well—that Paul would soon come. Then, for a long time, I lost everything again—everything save the beautiful star, high and holy, far above me.

Quite suddenly I opened my eyes. There was a lamp on the table. And the baby's face on the pillow beside me was real. It was my baby—our baby—Paul's and mine. And there beside the bed was the star-woman. She was real, too—tall and gracious and sweet.

I tried to smile. My eyes must have been full of questions. And the star-woman understood. For she answered them all, one after another, quickly and quietly.

"Your own little daughter, dear," she said. "And Paul will soon come. The storm is over now. A friend and I were crossing the mountain. The storm delayed and confused us. We arrived here just in time."

"God sent you—out of the star," I whispered, "with my baby!"

Midwinter came. Bare boughs creaked and rattled with every gust. Granny sat in her chair in the warmest corner of the kitchen. A great fire filled the living room with color and comfort. The star-woman still stayed with us. She had asked that she might and Paul and I were glad to have her. Unused as she was to our simple way of living, our humble food, all our little makeshifts, she was gay and brave and sweet and helpful.

And we all loved her. Sometimes, though, her beautiful sensitive face was so sad and white, I

could almost have cried over her.

One bitterly cold morning I sat before the blaze and rocked my baby. For the hundredth time, I called Eleanor—that was the star-woman's name—to come and see how much baby's hair was like Paul's—the same brown-black, and always wanting to curl; and how her feet and hands were like nothing so much as apple blossoms. And Eleanor laughed and said she might have her father's hair, but she had my blue eyes full of questions and my dimples and disposition.

WHEN at last baby slept, Eleanor rose and came to take her from me. But I clasped her passionately.

"I love the feel of her," I cried, "so warm and sweet and helpless in my arms. Oh, do you—can you—know what I mean?"

Eleanor brought her chair close to mine.

"You have wondered, Margery, dear, you and Paul, where I came from that night of the storm?"

"You came out of the star," I said softly, "and it is so wonderful to have a real live star-woman in our home, we dare not question, lest the charm be broken."

"But I must speak, Margery, dear," said Eleanor. "Although I do break the spell. You will hate me—you and Paul and Flower."

"We love you," I said. "Paul and Flower and I." I slipped one hand into hers. It looked so red and rough against her lovely white slender fingers. But she held it close.

"When I stopped here that night," she went on, "I had just left my home—my husband—with a friend. We—he and I—were on our way to the city, which lies on the other side of your mountain. Don't look so frightened, dear. Such occurrences are not uncommon in my world."

I held Eleanor's hand fast.

"I was thinking," I cried, "what it would mean to leave Paul—like that—oh, I cannot think—"

"Ah, your love and Paul's," exclaimed the star-woman. "As I see it day after day, sometimes I think there was never another like it. It is so strong and sweet and sane, it blesses all who come near it, like the forest. Perhaps love in cities is different."

I shook my head.

"Love is love," I said. Then I fal-

tered:

"Was he—your husband—cruel?"

"He tired of me," said Eleanor quietly, "after Boy came."

I dragged my hand away from Eleanor's that I might hold baby closer.

"Was there a baby?" I cried.

"Boy is three years old," said Eleanor.

In a minute she reached over and took my hand again. This time she held it in both hers.

"Two men loved me, Margery, dear," she said. "Both were strong and true and good. I chose John. We were married. Never, I think, was greater happiness than ours those first years. But when Boy came, somehow, slowly, all was changed. I tried to believe it was the way of all married life—tried to think it was but natural for a father to love his child more than his child's mother. But my heart was not satisfied. It had known love. It cried out for its own. Then Philip came. He had never ceased to love me. He could not see me suffer. He offered me—love. He wanted me and Boy. I left Boy. If I had Philip and love, it was but fair that John should have Boy. Besides, Boy idolizes his father."

Eleanor was silent—her eyes on the flames. How I wished I was strong and wise that I might help her. But I knew so little of her world—of any world beside the forest. After a minute she went on more calmly:

"That Sunday I yielded. Philip and I left home. On the mountain road we lost our way in the storm. After darkness fell, the storm grew less, but the roads were almost impassible. We came upon this little shelter—this haven of rest. Granny let me in to this very room. The fire had gone out. You were upstairs, dear. I could not leave you. Philip put the horses under shelter and waited. When, at last, I held your little baby in my arms, something inside of me gave way. I wanted Boy—the feel of his clinging sleepy little body in my arms. Then, by and by, your Paul came. He knelt down beside you and the baby. The love and awe and worship on your two faces melted all the hardness and bitterness in my heart. I stumbled down stairs. Some

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