

A MOTHER IN MANNVILLE

The orphanage is high in the Carolina mountains. Sometimes in winter, the snowdrifts are so deep that the institution is cut off from the village below, from all the world. Fog hides the mountain peaks, the snow swirls down the valleys, and a wind blows so bitterly that the orphanage boys who take the milk twice daily to the baby cottage reach the door with fingers stiff in an agony of numbness.

"Or when we carry trays from the cook-house for the ones that are sick," Jerry said, "We get our faces frostbit, because we can't put our hands over them. I have gloves," he added. "Some of the boys don't have any." He liked the late spring, he said. The rhododendron was in bloom, a carpet of colour, across the mountainsides, soft as the May winds that stirred the hemlocks. He called it laurel. "It's pretty when the laurel blooms," he said. "Some of it's pink and some of it's white."

I was there in the autumn. I wanted quiet, isolation, to do some troublesome writing. I wanted mountain air to blow out the malaria from too long a time in the subtropics. I was homesick, too, for the flaming of maples in October, and for corn shocks and pumpkins and black-walnut trees and the lift of hills. I found them all, living in a cabin that belonged to the orphanage, half a mile beyond the orphanage farm. When I took the cabin, I asked for a boy or a man to come and chop wood for the fireplace. The first few days were warm, I found what I needed about the cabin, no one came, and I forgot the order.

I looked up from my typewriter one late afternoon, a little startled. A boy stood at the door, and my pointer dog, my companion, was at his side and had not barked to warn me. The boy was probably twelve years old, but undersized. He wore overalls and a torn shirt and was barefoot.

He said, "I can chop some wood today." I said, "But I have a boy coming from the orphanage."

"I'm the boy."

"You? But you're small."

"Size doesn't matter, chopping wood," he said.

"Some of the big boys don't chop well. I've been chopping wood at the orphanage for a long time."

I visualized mangled and inadequate branches for my fires. I was well into my work and not inclined to conversation. I was a little blunt. "Very well. There's the ax. Go ahead and see what you can do."

I went back to work, closing the door. At first, the sound of the boy dragging the brush annoyed me. Then he began to chop. The blows were rhythmic and steady, and shortly, I had forgotten him, the sound no more of an interruption than a consistent rain. I suppose an hour and a half passed, for when I stopped and stretched, and heard the boy's steps on the cabin stoop, the sun was dropping behind the farthest mountain, and the valleys were purple with something deeper than asters.

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The boy said, "I have to go to supper now. I can come again tomorrow evening." I said, "I'll pay you now for what you've done," thinking I should probably have to insist on an older boy. "Ten cents an hour?" "Anything is all right."

We went together back of the cabin. As a stunning amount of solid wood had been cut. There were cherry logs and heavy roots of rhododendron, and blocks from the waste pine and oak left from the building of the cabin. "But you've done as much as a man," I said. "This is a splendid pile."

I looked at him, actually, for the first time. His hair was the colour of the corn shocks, and his eyes, very direct, were like the mountain sky when rain is pending-Gray, with a shadowing to that miraculous blue. As I spoke, a light came over him, as though the setting sun had touched him with the same suffused glory with which it touched the mountains. I gave him a quarter.

"You may come tomorrow," I said, and Thank you very much." He looked at me, and at the coin, and seemed to want to speak, but could not, and turned away. "I'll split kindling tomorrow," he said over his thin, ragged shoulder. "You'll need kindling and medium wood and logs and backlogs."

At daylight, I was half woken by the sound of chopping. Again, it was so even in texture that I went back to sleep. When I left my bed in the cool morning, the boy had come and gone, and a stack of kindling was neat against the cabin wall. He came after school in the afternoon and worked until the time to return to the orphanage. His name was Jerry; he was twelve years old, and he had been at the orphanage since he was four. I could picture him at four, with the same grave, Gray-blue eyes, and the same independence? No, the word that comes to me is "integrity."

The word means something very special to me, and the quality for which I use it is a rare one. My father had it-there is another of whom I am almost sure-but almost no man of my acquaintance possesses it with the clarity, the purity, the simplicity of a mountain stream. But the boy Jerry had it. It is based on courage, but it is more than brave. It is honest, but it is more than honesty. The ax handle broke one day. Jerry said the wood shop at the orphanage would repair it. I brought money to pay for the job, and he refused it.

"I'll pay for it," he said. "I broke it. I brought the ax down carelessly." "But no one hits accurately every time," I told him. "The fault was in the wood of the handle. I'll see the man from whom I bought it." It was only then that he would take the money. He was standing back of his carelessness. He was a free-will agent, and he chose to do careful work, and if he failed, he took the responsibility without subterfuge.

And he did for me the unnecessary thing, the gracious thing, that we find done only by the great of heart. Things no training can teach, for they are done on the instant, with no predicated experience.² He found a cubbyhole beside the fireplace that I had not noticed. There, of his own accord, he put kindling and "medium" wood, so that I might always have dry fire material ready in case of sudden wet weather. A stone was loose on the rough walk to the cabin. He dug

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a deeper hole and steadied it, although he came, himself, by a shortcut over the bank. I found that when I tried to return his thoughtfulness to such things as candy and apples, he was wordless. "Thank you" was, perhaps, an expression for which he had had no use, for his courtesy was instinctive. He only looked at the gift and me, and a curtain lifted, so that I saw deep into the clear well of his eyes, and gratitude was there, and affection, soft over the firm granite of his character.

He made simple excuses to come and sit with me. I could no more have turned him away than if he had been physically hungry. I suggested once that the best time for us to visit was just before supper, when I left off my writing. After that, he waited always until my type- The writer had been some time. One day, I worked until nearly dark. I went outside the cabin, having forgotten him. I saw him going up over the hill in the twilight toward the orphanage. When I sat down on my stoop, a place was warm from his body where he had been sitting.

He became intimate, of course, with my pointer, Pat. There is a strange communion between a boy and a dog. Perhaps they possess the same singleness of spirit, the same kind of wisdom. It is difficult to explain, but it exists. When I went across the state for a weekend, I left the dog in Jerry's charge. I gave him the dog whistle and the key to the cabin and left sufficient food. He was to come two or three times a day and let out the dog, feed it, and exercise it. I should return Sunday night, and Jerry would take out the dog for the last time Sunday afternoon, and then leave the key under an agreed-upon hiding place.

My return was belated, and fog filled the mountain passes so treacherously that I dared not drive at night. The fog held the next morning, and it was Monday noon before I reached the cabin. The dog had been fed and cared for that morning. Jerry came early in the afternoon, anxious.

"The superintendent said nobody would drive in the fog," he said. "I came just before bedtime last night, and you hadn't come. So I brought Pat some of my breakfast this morning. I wouldn't have let anything happen to him." "I was sure of that. I didn't worry." "When I heard about the fog, I thought you'd know."

He was needed for work at the orphanage, and he had to return at once. I gave him a dollar in payment, and he looked at it and went away. But that night he came in the darkness and knocked at the door.

"Come in, Jerry," I said, "if you're allowed to be away this late." "I told maybe a story," he said. "I told them I thought you would want to see me." "That's true," I assured him, and I saw his relief. "I want to hear about how you managed with the dog."

He sat by the fire with me, with no other light, and told me of their two days together. The dog lay close to him and found comfort there that I did not have for him. And it seemed to me, that being with my dog, and caring for him, had brought the boy and me, too, to together, so that he felt that he belonged to me as well as to the animal.

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"He stayed right with me," he told me, "except when he ran in the laurel. He likes the laurel. I took him up over the hill, and we both ran fast. There was a place where the grass was high, and I lay down in it and hid. I could hear Pat is hunting for me. He found my tail, tail, and he barked. When he found me, he acted crazy, and he ran around and around me, in circles."

We watched the flames. "That's an apple log," he said. "It burns the prettiest of any wood." We were very close. He was suddenly impelled to speak of things He had not spoken of before, nor had I cared to ask him. "You look a little bit like my mother," he said. "Especially in the dark, by the fire." "But you were only four, Jerry, when you came here. You have remembered how she looked, all these years?" "My mother lives in Mannville," he said.

For a moment, finding that he had a mother shocked me as greatly as anything in my life has ever done, and I did not know why it disturbed me. Then I understood my distress. I was filled with a passionate resentment that any woman should go away and leave her son. A fresh anger added itself. A son like this one-The Orphanage was a wholesome place, the executives were kind, good people, the food was more than adequate, the boys were healthy, a ragged shirt was no hardship, nor the doing of Clean labour. Granted, perhaps, that the boy felt no lack, what blood fed the bowels of a woman who did not yearn over this child's lean body that had come in parturition out of her own? At Four, he would have looked the same as now. Nothing, I thought, nothing in life could change those eyes. His quality must be apparent to an idiot, a fool. I burned with questions I could not ask. Any, I was afraid there would be pain.

"Have you seen her, Jerry-lately?" "I see her every summer. She sends for me." I wanted to cry out, "Why are you not with her? How can she let you go away again?" He said, "She comes up here from Mannville whenever she can. She doesn't have a job now." His face shone in the firelight.

"She wanted to give me a puppy, but they can't let any one boy keep a puppy. You remember the suit I had on last Sunday?" He was proud. "She sent me that for Christmas. The Christmas before that," he drew a long breath, savouring the memory-" she sent me a pair of skates."

"Roller skates?"

My mind was busy, making pictures of her, trying to understand her. She had not, then, entirely deserted or forgotten him. But why, then-I thought, "I must not condemn her without knowing."

"Roller skates. I let the other boys use them. They're always borrowing them. But they're careful of them."

What circumstances other than poverty- "I'm going to take the dollar you gave me for taking care of Pat," he said, "and buy her a pair of gloves." I could only say, "That will be nice. Do you know her size?" "I think it's eight and a half," he said. He looked at my hands. "Do you wear eight and a half?" he asked. "No. I wear a smaller size, a six." "Oh! Then I guess her hands are bigger than yours." I hated her. Poverty or no, there was another food than bread, and the soul could starve as quickly as the body. He was taking his dollar to buy gloves for her

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big, stupid hands, and she lived away from him, in Mannville, and contented herself by sending him skates. "She likes white gloves," he said. "Do you think I can get them for a dollar?" "I think so," I said. I decided that I should not leave the mountain without seeing her and knowing for my- self why she had done this thing.

The human mind scatters its interests as though made of thistledown,³ and every wind stirs and moves it. I finished my work. It did not please me, and I gave my thoughts to another field. I need some Mexican material.

I made arrangements to close my Florida place. Mexico immediately, and doing the writing there, if conditions were favourable. Then, Alaska with my brother. After that, heaven Knew what or where.

I did not take the time to go to Mannville to see Jerry's mother, nor even to talk with the orphanage officials about her. I was a trifle abstracted by the boy because of my work and plans. And after my first fury at her-we did not speak of her again, his having a mother, any sort at all, not far away, in Mannville, relieved me of the ache I had had about him. He did not question the anomalous relation. He was not lonely. It was none of my concern.

He came every day and cut my wood, and did had become cold, and often I let him come in small helpful favours and stayed to talk. The day side of the cabin. He would lie on the floor in front of the fire, with one arm across the pointer, and they would both doze and wait quietly for me. Other days they ran with a common ecstasy through the laurel, and since the asters were now gone, he brought me back vermilion maple-leaves, and chestnut boughs dripping with imperial yellow. I was ready to go.

I said to him, "You have been my friend, Jerry. I shall often think of you and miss you. Pat will miss you too. I am leaving tomorrow."

He did not answer. When he went away, I remember that a new moon hung over the mountains, and I watched him go in silence up the hill. I expected him the next day, but he did not come. The details of packing may be longings, loading my car, arranging the bed over the seat, where the dog would ride, occupied me until late in the day. I closed the cabin. And started the car, noticing that the sun was in the west, and I should do well to be out of the mountains by nightfall. I stopped by the orphanage and left the cabin key and money for my light bill with Miss Clark.










"And will you call Jerry for me to say goodbye to him?" "I don't know where he is," she said. "I'm afraid he's not well. He didn't eat his dinner this noon. One of the other boys saw him going over the hill into the laurel. He was supposed to fire the boiler this afternoon. It's not like him; he's unusually reliable. " I was almost relieved, for I knew I should never see him again, and it would be easier not to say goodbye to him. I said, "I wanted to talk with you about his mother-why he's here-but I'm in more of a hurry than I expected to be. It's out of the question for me to see her now, too. But here's some money I'd like to leave with you to buy things for him at Christmas and on his birthday. It will be better for me to try to send him

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things. I could so easily duplicate skates, for instance. " She blinked her honest spinster's eyes. Her stupidity annoyed me. "What I mean," I said, "is that I don't want to duplicate things his mother sends him. I might have chosen skates if I didn't know she had already given them to him." She stared at me. "I don't understand," she said. "He has no mother. He has no skates."

Moral of the story- Family isn't always by blood; love and trust form real bonds.



Word	Meaning	Icon
orphanage	A home for children without parents.	   A house with children.
numbness	Loss of feeling (usually from cold).	  A hand with icicles showing it's frozen.
frostbit	Skin injury caused by extreme cold.	  Red or white patch on face or hand.
malaria	A disease-causing fever is spread by mosquitoes.	  A mosquito near a sick face.

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Word	Meaning	Icon
overalls	Loose trousers with a top part, worn for work.	  Simple work clothes.
blunt	Direct and straightforward, sometimes rude.	  Straight arrow from mouth (no curve, no softening).
integrity	Honesty and strong moral principles.	 A compass showing true direction (symbol of honesty).
subterfuge	A trick or dishonest way to achieve something.	  A mask (hiding true face).
predicated	Based on or established by something.	 Foundation of a building (base supports the structure).
instinctive	Natural, not taught; automatic reaction.	  Dog reacting with heart (natural affection).
anomalous	Unusual or abnormal.	  A question mark over something odd.
laurel	A type of flowering shrub (often called rhododendron).	 A pink or white flower.
vermilion	A bright red colour.	 A bright red circle or leaf.
treacherously	Dangerously or deceptively.	  A car in fog with a danger sign.
spinster	An unmarried woman, usually older.	 A woman alone.