

Old Tom and Nancy



IN THE LITTLE ATTIC ROOM NANCY SWEEPED AND scrubbed vigorously, paying particular attention to the corners.

“I – just – wish – I – could – dig – out – the – corners – of – her – soul!” she muttered. “The idea of stickin’ that blessed child way up here in this hot little room – with no fire in the winter, too. And all this big house to choose from! Unnecessary children, indeed!” snapped Nancy, wringing her rag so hard her fingers ached.

For some time she worked in silence. Then she looked about the bare little room in disgust.

“Well, it’s done – my part, anyhow,” she sighed. “Poor little soul! A pretty place this is to put a homesick



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child!" she finished, going out and closing the door with a bang. "Oh!" she exclaimed, biting her lip. "Well, I don't care. I hope she did hear the bang!"

In the garden that afternoon, Nancy found Old Tom, who had pulled weeds and shoveled the paths about the place for many years.

"Mr. Tom," began Nancy, throwing a quick glance over her shoulder to make sure no one was watching, "did you know a little girl was comin' to live with Miss Polly?"

"Go on with your jokin'," scoffed Tom, straightening his back with difficulty. "Why don't ye tell me the sun is goin' to set in the east tomorrow?"

"But it's true. She told me so herself," said Nancy. "It's her niece and she's eleven years old."

The man's jaw fell. Then a tender light came into his eyes. "It must be Miss Jennie's little gal. Glory be! To think of my old eyes seein' this!"

"Who was Miss Jennie?"

"She was an angel straight out of Heaven," breathed the man. "She was Miss Polly's oldest sister. She was twenty when she married and went away from here years ago. Her babies all died, I heard, except the

last one, and that must be the one that's comin'."

"She's goin' to sleep in the attic – more shame to her!" scolded Nancy, with another glance over her shoulder toward the house.

Old Tom frowned. The next moment a smile curved his lips. "I wonder what Miss Polly will do with a child in the house," he said.

"Well, I wonder what a child will do with Miss Polly in the house!" snapped Nancy.

The old man laughed. "I'm afraid you ain't fond of Miss Polly," he grinned.

"As if anybody could be fond of her!" scorned Nancy.

Old Tom smiled oddly. He stooped and began to work again. "I guess you didn't know about Miss Polly's love affair," he said slowly.

"Love affair! No! And I guess nobody else did either."

"Oh, yes," nodded the old man. "And the fellow's livin' today, right in this town."

"Who is he?"

"I ain't tellin' that." The old man drew himself erect.

“It don’t seem possible,” maintained Nancy.

Old Tom shook his head. “You didn’t know Miss Polly as I did,” he argued. “She used to be real pretty. She would be now, if she’d let herself be.”

“Pretty! Miss Polly!”

“Yes. If she’d just let that hair of hers out loose, and wear bonnets with flowers in ‘em, and lace dresses, she’d be pretty! Miss Polly ain’t old.”

“Ain’t she, though? She’s got an awfully good imitation of it,” sniffed Nancy.

“Yes, I know. It began at the time of the trouble with her sweetheart,” nodded Old Tom. “And it seems as if she’s been eatin’ thistles ever since; she’s that prickly to deal with.”

“I should say she was,” declared Nancy. “There’s no pleasin’ her, no matter how you try! I wouldn’t stay if the folks at home didn’t need the money. But some day I’ll just boil over. And when I do, it’ll be good-bye Nancy.”

Old Tom shook his head. “I know. I’ve felt it. It’s natural – but it ain’t best, child. Take my word for it, it ain’t best.” And again he bent his old head to the work before him.

“Nancy!” called a sharp voice.

“Y-yes, ma’am,” stammered Nancy, and she hurried toward the house.