

Return To Beauty

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IT was pretty tough to come back and find the folks all gone and Diane married to someone else. Nothing seemed to matter any more. There had been a time when the lazy little town had been very dear to me, but now it depressed me. I was empty inside, as if I'd never be able to feel again. It wasn't altogether the town's fault or the fact that things had changed, it was more that I had lost a certain something inside I couldn't define. Anyway, I wasn't happy—I knew that.

As I wandered listlessly down the dusty main street the morning after I got back, some barefooted kid ran up beside me and piped, "You're Johnny, ain't you?"

"Yes," I answered.

"You jest got back. Where you goin'—fishin'?"

"I might."

"You can git a boat down to Mort's if you'll haul him a load a cinders for his dock."

"Mort Brooder?" I asked, "Is he still around?"

"Heck yes. Pap sez he ain't never gonna die, he reckons." The boy ran ahead and started walking backwards, facing me.

"Why're you limpin'?" Got a sore toe? I ain't had none for more 'n a week now—my feet're gittin' awful tough. Yours'll git toughed up too if you'll go barefoot and walk on rocks fer a while."

He spied another boy across the street.

"Hey, Tuffy," he yelled, "where y' goin'?"

"Fishin'," the other shouted back.

"Wait fer me," the boy answered. "So long, Johnny," he said, and was gone.

I wandered on down to Mort's and found him painting the bottom of a boat with tar. After a moment, he looked up. "Why if it ain't little Johnny Chambers," he exclaimed, "don't 'pear as if ye'd growed a bit."

"Not much," I said.

The old man laughed—a sort of a cackle. "You never was no bigger'n a minnit, but you was a spunky little dickens. I allus said, 'y can't guess the size of a litter by the size o' the sow,'"

He put down his brush. "Whatcha got in mind, son?"

"I thought I might go fishing for a while," I said.

"You ain't got no pole ner bait. Fish ain't goin' to jump into the boat," he said cryptically.

I smiled a little—remembering. "I figured that I might swipe a pole and some bait from you like I used to do."

Mort snorted. "You was the durndest cuss fer that, wa'n't you! Howsomever, I 'low as I still got a pole or two you c'n use. Come on up to th' house."

I followed him and went inside. I suddenly remembered that I had never been in Mort's house before. It wasn't at all as I expected to find it. There were a lot of soft rugs scattered around on the polished floors and there were pictures on the walls. While Mort was gathering up tackle, I picked up a picture from the mantle to see if I recognized the people in it. It was a picture of a woman and a little girl but I didn't know either of them. Mort came in and found me with the picture in my hand.

"Them's my wife, Milly, and our little

girl. They both died before you was born-ed. Year of the big flood—both got pneumony and died afore I could get ole Doc Winters from acrost the river.” He paused, musing. “Milly allus liked rugs and pictures—never could seem to git ’nough of ’em. I like to keep things the way she had y’know.”

“They are nice,” I said, and put the picture back on the mantle. Mort picked up the tackle and I followed him out the door to the boat. We cast off and rowed upstream in silence for a while until the old man spoke.

“Did the war rough ye up a little, son?” I see y’ limp in’ a bit.”

“I was hit by a piece of flak over Kure,” I said grimly, and he let it go at that. After a moment he spoke again. “Doc Winters’ boy, Jim, got killed over to France durin’ the invasion, I hear tell. You knew Jim, didn’ you?”

“Yes, we went to school together.”

“Jim was a good lad—woulda made a fine doctor. Are you goin’ back to school?”

“Maybe,” I said.

“I hear you was studyin’ to be a writer and doin’ right well. ’Pears to me it’d be a shame not to go ahead.” He waved a hand toward the shore. “Pull in a little and I’ll toss out the anchor. They’s fish in here.”

I did as he said and we put out our lines. For a time we fished in silence and then I got a bite. I waited until I thought the fish was on the hook and then pulled in but I missed the fish. Mort waited until I had my line back in the water before he said anything. Then—“Sorta lost your touch haven’t y’, son?”

I looked at him to catch his expression but his face was blank as he engaged himself with rebaiting his hook. “S’funny,

a worm’s jus’ about the onpertiest thing you’d ever see but the fish loves ’im,” he mused.

Mort didn’t say anymore for a long time—just sat with his eyes half-closed watching his cork. Suddenly he looked up. “Johnny, lad, how would ye put in words how soothin’ it is to watch the water flowin’ by liken it had to go somewhere but wa’n’t in no hurry to git there? Ye’ve studied words. How you goin’ tell people so’s they can understand how the willers seem to be bendin’ over so’s they can kiss the water—sadlike—’s if they were sayin’ goodbye? Or how good it makes you feel to see a bass playin’ in the shallers like he was havin’ fun jus’ bein’ a bass? Could ye tell me, son?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Y’ could try. I allus said, ‘you can’t ketch a fish ’nless you go afishin’.”

He seemed so in earnest that I didn’t have the heart to refuse. I began to look around to take time to form my sentences. As I did so, I saw that the willows did reach down to touch the stream in a sad caress—that the dark, green water flowed serenely by as if it had a majestic purpose—that a bass was splashing joyously in the shallows. There was more. The little wavelets gave to the stream a beaten silver effect—a sunbeam laid a great golden lance across the water—a diver-bird wheeled crazily above and dived into the water and out of sight. My eyes dilated until they hurt, bringing tears. I looked at the old man. “Isn’t it beautiful!” I breathed.

There was a tug on my line. With a twitch of the pole, I set the hook—and landed the fish. Mort was elated. “You’re gettin’ back the touch, Johnny, you’re gettin’ it back!” he said.