

HELLEN

Teena Welker

As Hellen lay weakly on her bed, she traced the pattern of the big blue quilt. It made her remember her mother with feelings of love. And then she felt the resentment.

"Why do we have to move again?" an eight-year-old Hellen cried. "Why did you leave me here all alone?" she asked her mother, but of course no one heard. Her mother had died two years earlier, and her father's restlessness and fleeting desperation kept Hellen and her older brother on the road from home to home. None of the houses they had lived in were nice, by any one's standards. This time, Hellen's father promised it would be different. They were going to move into Kentucky Territory and start all over. Her father was going to build their house all by himself. "Maybe this is the last time we'll have to move!" she thought as she pushed the blue quilt into a box for her father to load. On the way to Kentucky, they passed many big plantations, and when they drove by one, there were three children playing in the front yard. The kids were happy and clean and had toys brought back from Europe. Hellen saw their mother come out of the huge plantation house and call them in for dinner. She felt a quick twinge of hate as she watched them run up to the marble-white steps and hug their mother. Hellen made a vow to herself that, since she could never get her mother back, she would become as rich as these kids. Then she would be happy just like they were.

Hellen remembered when the house was finished in Kentucky. It was crude, but warm and nicer than any place they had ever lived in. Her father said they would stay there as long as Hellen wanted. The land was much more fertile than back in the East, and there was more food to harvest in the fall. Hellen's father was able to buy two cows with the money from the harvest, and the family began to enjoy meat and milk regularly. Her brother and father seemed to be happy and satisfied, but Hellen still thought of the rich children on the plantation. She had to think of a way to get lots of money, somehow!

On Hellen's sixteenth birthday, her father called her a young lady. She certainly didn't feel like a lady. Ladies lived in big houses back East and went to town for their sixteenth birthdays. Her brother, now married, brought her a dress that his wife had made. "Hellen, I picked out this material all by myself! Marie made it especially for you!" he

exclaimed, watching Hellen for signs of approval. Hellen thanked him while she pretended she lived on a plantation back East and had received a dress from Europe as her birthday present. She put on the dress and twirled around the room. Her brother looked at her with delight, seeing how happy the new dress had made her. Meanwhile, Hellen dreamed of meeting a handsome rich man at a party. Her father announced that it was time to begin looking for a husband for Hellen. She heard the plans and ran out of the room. There was no way to meet a rich man if she were to be married soon.

At seventeen, Hellen found herself walking down the steps of her porch on her father's arm to join her husband-to-be. A tear rolled down her cheek as she kissed her dreams of money goodbye. Her groom turned and saw the tear. He reached for Hellen's hand, and looked at her with adoration. Such a serious girl, even on her wedding day! The young man was the son of a successful farmer in Indiana, and Hellen would be going to live there after the ceremony. Hellen's father was jubilant that he had made such a good match for his daughter. Several neighbors congratulated Hellen on her new husband, and noted her long expression. Hellen knew they would be shocked if they knew the real reason for her sadness.

The children came along quickly, almost before Hellen was ready. Her husband did well on his portion of the farm, and was happy to have two sons to help with the work load. A daughter was born two years later. Hellen took the children into town as often as she could, and marched them past the fancy store windows. She would watch the rich women and their children inside being fitted for the newest style clothing. Then Hellen would go home with bulk material and try to sew a reasonable facsimile. She swore never to let her daughter know how much she envied the rich. Hellen tried to make her daughter a dress whenever she had time. The family was happy, and Hellen almost forgot about her dream.

Now she sighed as she sat up to fold the blue quilt covering the bed she lay in. Hellen knew she would never get out of the bed. She was forty-three, and her husband had died four years earlier. Her sons kept close watch over her, and her daughter sat constantly by her side. As Hellen thought over her life, she came to the sudden realization that she had been rich all along. She was loved and cherished, and that was worth more than all the money in the world. Hellen was ashamed that it had taken her forty-three years to figure that out. With tears in her eyes, she handed the folded quilt to her daughter, and lay back on her pillow as her life passed from her.