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sit
by
the
fire

by . . . Myrle Benedict

Virgie had gotten over her wildness and shyness when she was around him, but she was still afraid of people.

'T WASN'T the fust time I'd seen her—the strange wild girl trampin' over the hills, but 'twas the fust time she'd come close enough so's I could actual see whut she looked like.

She didn't look mean, like the stories folks tole made her out to be. She looked kinda lost, and awful young, like. She was just a little bitty thing, too.

Now, I take that back about her lookin' lost. She didn't exactly. She looked more like somebody had done gone off an' left her, an' she was jest bound to make do as best she could.

She didn't run off when she seen me. She helt her ground an' stared at me, long an' hard, like 'twas her as owned the meader an' not me. She was right spunky, too. Didn't look like the sight of a ol' codger like me scairt her none.

Lookin' at her up close like that I could see she mighty close 'sembled my middle girl Virgie, her whut died when she warn't much older than this here girl.

I helt out my hand an' I spoke to her. I says, "Lookie here, girl, whut you doin' on my propitty?" Only I says it real gentle like.

When she seen me holdin' my hand out like that, she jumped a few

Myrle Benedict's more poetical friends say she looks like Ondine; others say Lillith. Not having met her we can only report that this extraordinarily sensitive Oklahoma writer works as a radio-TV writer for an ad agency, is described as tall and green-eyed, and is active in a local theater group.

steps back, like she was scairt I was gonna throw somethin' at her.

"Now hold on, girl," I says. "I ain't gonna hurt ya none. Now whut's a pritty leetle thing like you a-doin' out in the open all the time? Ain't you 'fraid you'll get hurt, or maybe et up by a mountain-lion or somethin'?"

For the first time her face kinda softened, like she'd heard an' understood all I was sayin' only she didn't want to let on none.

"No," she says, so soft I could scarce hear her. "I ain't a-feared o' that."

Then, like it had just dawned on her she'd said a spoken word, she turned an' woulda scooted back into the brush if I hadn't said anythin'.

"Wait a minute," I says. "You don't have to run off. Not from me. Shecks, I'm jest a ol' man, livin' up here on the side o' the mountain, all alone. You don't have to be a-feared o' me."

She turned, an' kinda looked at me, like she didn't know whether to b'lieve me or not.

"Come on," I says. "Whyn't you an' me go down to my cabin an' talk? There's a mite o' corn pone and I got some ice-cole buttermilk back in th' spring-house. Won't hurt you none, by the looks o' you."

She opened her mouth an' then closed it again.

"I ain't tryin' to force you, girl," I says. "I'm a-goin' back, an' if'n you want to come, come, an' if'n you want to go without supper, do."

I turned around an' started back

down the path to my little cabin. I'm a ol' man, an' all my children have gone off an' married. My ol' woman, she died some years back, an' I live up here all alone. I tend my field an' the garden patch, an' I'm a sight better off than a lot o' old men whut goes an' lives off'n their kids. Folks say I'm crotchety, but I ain't. I got a real nice life up here, an' I don't want no meddlin' busybody from down in the village messin' it up tryin' to "help." That Miz Perkins, in partic'lar. She's th' do-goodinist woman I ever seen. Thinks it's a cryin' shame my kids "neglect" their pa like they do. Well, I don't call it neglectin'. I raised 'em up to stand on their two hind legs an' look after themselves, an' I expect them to let me do th' same thing.

I got inside my cabin, an' left th' door open a little. It was nice an' cool, after the heat of Indian Summer. I went out to th' spring-house an' got th' pitcher o' cole buttermilk an' brung it back to th' house. I poured out two glasses full, an' set the pan o' corn pone on th' table. I didn't bother none to look an' see if'n th' wild girl follered me or not.

Pretty soon I heard a little rustlin' sound, like a mouse makes in a corn-crib, only a lot softer, an' then I heard her a-gulpin' that buttermilk like she was starved. I pushed the pitcher toward her a little, an' let her be. She'd drank down three glasses o' buttermilk afore she said anythin'.

"That was good," she says.

I figured she wasn't likely to

break an' run at the moment, so I turned around an' looked at her. She was a-sittin' on the edge o' her chair, like she was a-measurin' the distance to th' door in case she had to run for it. She had a milk moustache on her, where she'd been too greedy with th' buttermilk, like a kid. She had on a darkish sort of dress an' it was all dirty an' tore from th' brambles. She didn't have on no shoes, an' I could tell she was used to wearin' shoes, 'cause her feet was little an' white an' looked soft, even though they was pretty dirty right now. She was kinda pale, an' had dark hair, all wild an' tumbled lookin'.

She saw me lookin' at her feet an' drew them up under her, like she was a-shamed.

"Whut's your name, chile?" I says. "Whut'r you doin' out roam-in' the mountain? Ain't you got no folks?"

"N-No, I ain't," she says. "I ain't got nobody."

"Whut are you so scared about? I ain't gonna hurt you."

"You ain't for sure?" she asks like a kid.

"I ain't for sure. Now, how come you're actin' like a rabbit caught in a snare?"

"I—I don't like this place."

"Well, I don't blame you none, if'n all you've done lately is run away from ever'body, an' not let any of 'em get in hailin' distance."

"I know. But they was all so big . . . an' I was scared."

"Why ain't you so scared o' me?"

"I dunno. You don't seem like th'

other folks I've seen. You ain't never yelled at me, nor flang a stone at me. You know when to let a body be."

"Who'd want to throw a stone at you?"

"Oh, one o' them kids from over on th' yonder side o' th' hill."

"Well, I ain't gonna let nobody harm you, neither. Fact is, you c'n stay right here, if'n you've a mind to. 'Tain't nobody here close 'cept me, an' I'm a ol' man, an' I wouldn't mind havin' a purty young thing like you to sorta liven up th' place."

She looked at me, suspicious-like. "Why?" she says.

"Oh, I dunno. Maybe it's cause you look like Virgie, a little. That's my middle girl. She died some years back, when she warn't much older 'n you. B'sides, you need some place to stay, don't you?"

"I reckon."

"Wull, that's settled, then. You c'n sleep up in the loft. I'll fix Virgie's ol' bed for you up there, an' you can have it all for yourself. Whut's your name, anyway, bein' as how you'll be livin' here?"

"I don't rightly have no proper name," she says real soft. "If'n you don't care, I'd 'preciate it if'n you'd just call me . . . Virgie."

So the strange wild girl come to live with me. Once she'd gentled down an' decided to stay, she was a real joy to have around. She fixed up some of th' ol' dresses she'd found in a trunk, an' I went down to th' gen'rl store an' bought her some bright stuff so's she could sew some

dresses for herself. She fixed up that loft so bright an' purty, an' give the walls a fresh coat o' whitewash, an' even whitewashed th' walls in th' rest o' th' cabin. She put up green curtains at th' winders an' put a red-an'-white checkered cloth on the table. She even made me change m' overhauls twicet a week an' trim m' hair an' beard, too, an' made me wash m' hands b'fore I eat. She was a tol'ble cook, an' she got better as she went along.

We give out down at the store that she was a distant relation, with no parents, so she'd come to live with me. There was a few who knew in their hearts that she was th' wild girl, but they never knew for certain, 'cause we never told.

But even them as thought they knew, stopped their talk in time an' come to look on her as my actual kin. She even called me "Uncle Reb." That's m' name, Rebel. M' folks named me that 'cause I was borned whilest th' War was goin' on.

Warn't no surprise t' me, when spring come 'round again that some o' th' young whelps down in th' village decided to come a-courtin' Virgie.

Now, Virgie, she'd done got over all her wildness an' shyness when she was around me, but when them lazy louts started drapin' themselves over th' porch rail, it come right back.

She'd sit there, pleased in a female way with all th' attention, but scairt, too, o' them big lumberin' boys. An' one evenin', after 'Kiah Piersall had been there, she come in a-cryin'.

"Virgie, what's that big ox done to you?" I says.

"Oh, Uncle Reb, he ain't done nothin', exactly," she says. "Only he—he tr-ried to kiss me, an' he was so hot an' the flesh around his eyes was so swollen, an' I was afeared!" She set down in the chair I'd made her an' huddled up in a heap. "He says he wants t' marry me, an' Uncle Reb, I just caint! I caint!"

"Whut do you mean, you caint? Now it's a fact that these menfolks hereabouts ain't whut you'd 'xactly call prizes, but you're gonna have t' marry somebody, some o' these days, Virgie."

"Oh, no, I ain't," she says, lookin' up sudden. "I ain't gonna marry nobody!"

"Why sure you are, Virgie. I knowed that when I took you in. You cain't spend the rest o' your life lookin' after a ol' man. You gotta have a life o' your own, with a husbin' to look after you, an' kids, maybe. I ain't gonna be here always, an' you just cain't go through life without nobody. 'Tain't natural."

Her face went real white, an' I thought she was a-goin' t' swoon, but she didn't. There was two spots o' red in her cheeks, an' her voice shook a little. "Uncle Reb, I didn't know whut I was gettin' myself in to, when I come here, I don't like it much, but I'm here, an' there's not much I c'n do about it now. But I just want t' be left alone! That's why I come to live with you. You let me be. I thought you understood maybe, but you don't neither."

"Don't understand whut?" I says, but she didn't 'pear to hear me.

"I c'n always go back an' roam th' hills. I c'n go far away, an' maybe find somebody else who'll take me in for a while, but I don't want to. I like it here, an' I like you, Uncle Reb. Only don't make me mix with other folks!"

"You don't seem to mind goin' down to th' store, or goin' t' meetin', or to th' barndance once in a while."

"That kinda mixin' isn't too bad, Uncle Reb. It's th' springtime mixin' I'm a-talkin' about—th' kind o' spring an' fall mixin' that's in th' blood."

I laughed. "Honey, if'n it's in your blood, it's not anythin' to be afear'd of."

"But, Uncle Reb, you don't understand! It ain't in my blood . . . the folks I come from, they don't even remember it, 'xcept as it was writ down in books. But you folks, you got it so strong it likes to make a body faint from just bein' close to it!"

"Virgie, I don't understand what you're sayin', for a fact."

"Uncle Reb, listen to me. I'm not like folks around here. I'm not like anybody you ever met. I—I don't think it's quite proper for me t' mix too close with you folks. All I want is a roof over my head, an' good food, an' to be let alone!"

She meant it, I could tell. "Aw right, Virgie," I says. "I don't rightly understand why, but I'll go 'long with you, if'n that's whut you want."

"It is, Uncle Reb," she says, an'

she lowered her eyes so's they caught the light for a minute an' shone out like two amber stones.

Springtime come an' went, an' when summer had come, th' young menfolk settled down a little. Virgie took t' going t' th' barndance once in a while again. But she quit it whenever th' autumn moon started shinin' big an' yell'er along th' ridge o' th' hills.

When th' fust snow come, she really settled in for th' winter. Of an evenin', she'd sit by the fire, all skwoonched up with her eyes shut, for all th' world like th' ol' red cat whut come t' live with us.

Virgie hadn't been with me too long when a ol' red mamma-cat come trailin' by an' took up with her. I didn't care if'n Virgie kept it, 'cause it could keep down th' mice in th' house, so long as it didn't bring in too many kittens.

So anyhow, of an evenin' them two 'd curl up afore th' fire an' toast themselves an' th' cat 'd purr an' hold its head up for Virgie to pet it. She never give it no name, just called it Cat, but it seemed to know that's who she meant when she called it.

I think that's the time Virgie was happiest, when th' snow lay deep on th' ground, an' there was no call to go outdoors, nor no call for nobody else to, neither.

Come spring again, Virgie started to shed the good, healthy plump she'd built up in th' winter. Th' young men started comin' back, jest

the same as last year, an' Virgie, she got as snappy as a ol' turtle.

"Uncle Reb, it's gettin' me, too," she says one day. "I c'n feel this spring-thing, almost like you-all can."

"Oh, hush your mouth," I says. "I'm gettin' just a little tired o' your complainin' 'cause the boys is after you. There's more'n one gal down to th' village whut would give a pretty to be in your shoes, let me tell you."

"I don't want th' boys after me!" she says, an' run off to hide.

I couldn't help snortin'. She was a silly little thing, not t' 'preciate that she had th' whole part o' th' young men at her heels. I couldn't see it, m'self. She was too little. Man lives in th' hills, needs a woman big an' strong 'nough to help 'im. But she did have a strange sort o' face, with th' big eyes an' little chin, an' with that cloudy dark hair an' the pretty way she had o' talkin', she didn't need to say more'n a dozen words b'fore th' boy she was a-talkin' to was plumb gone.

I didn't pay it too much mind when she didn't come home to supper. But she was gone all th' next day, too, an' didn't come in 'til 'way after dark. I could tell she'd been cryin'.

"You et supper?"

"No, Uncle Reb. I ain't hungry."

She looked at me, an' her eyes caught in th' candlelight, like they had a way o' doin'.

"Uncle Reb, whut would you say if'n I told you I wasn't one o' your folks?"

"Honey, I know that. You ain't any more kin to me than . . ."

"No, I mean, I ain't like nobody around here. Nobody a-tall."

"Virgie, are you startin' that again? I declare, chile, you got the funniest notions in your head o' anybody . . ."

"Uncle Reb, I mean it. Set down here." She took th' candle an' lighted the gasoline lantern I don't hardly never use. She went over to th' chest an' got m' readin' glasses for me. "Here, put these on. I want you to see me good."

I put 'em on, an' she set down in front o' me. "Look close at m' eyes, Uncle Reb."

I looked at 'em, an' it was a minute afore it sunk in whut I was seein'. They wasn't like ordinary eyes, they wasn't. I still couldn't see 'em too plain, even with m' glasses, but I could see 'em well enough to see they was like that ol' red mamma-cat's eyes.

"Whut are you, Virgie?" I says.

"I'm a . . . visitor, Uncle Reb," she says. "Me an' some more like me. We come from somewheres a far off. Th' others, they wanted to come a lot more'n me, an' they talk-ed me into it. I was feelin' awful fearful when you found me an' took me in."

"Where are th' others like you?"

"I dunno. We went all over. Most o' us is scattered through the hill countries, though, 'cause it's more dangerous for us in th' cities. Th' people there are more likely t' notice that we're diff'rent."

"I reckon you're right. But how come th' folks 'round here ain't seen how you're so diff'rent? Seems like they c'd look at them eyes an' see right off."

"I got some little bitty pieces o' special-made glass I wear on m' eyes, whenever I got to go among people. They don't hurt none, when you get used to 'em, an' they make my eyes look like ever'body else's. I ain't wore 'em too much with you, 'cause your eyesight is awful poor anyhow. M' skin is diff'rent colored, too. I keep some dye rubbed in t' give it color. That is, I did. I don't need to very much anymore."

"Why not, Virgie?"

"Uncle Reb, th' longer I stay, th' more I get like th' folks here. I guess I ain't strong 'nough t' keep m'self like I was. If'n I stay out in th' sun long anymore, I get brown. I never did before. My skin don't look silvery no more, even without the dye. O' course, there's some things I can't change, like m' eyes, an' m' feet." She stuck her feet out, with no shoes. I couldn't see anythin' diff'rent, 'til she wiggled her toes, an' there wasn't but four of 'em.

"But, Uncle Reb, I catch m'self thinkin' strange thoughts, like you folks. An' in th' springtime . . ." She started cryin' an' hid her head in her skirt. She looked up again. "I ain't used to th' feelin'. With us, it's a quiet thing, but with you-all, it's like a rollin' wave that don't never quite go down but climbs higher all th' time."

I didn't say nothin'. I jest set quiet for a while, thinkin'. After a little, Virgie got up an' went to her room in th' loft. Pretty soon she come down, dressed in th' old ragged dress she had on when I found her.

"I reckon you'll want me t' go," she says real quiet.

"No such thing, I says. I been thinkin' long an' hard. You're a stranger, for sure, but you've lived under my roof an' you've eat my bread. I've come t' love you like one o' my own, an' you're welcome t' stay as long as you want."

She looked at me, an' those strange eyes o' hers lit up like candles. "Oh, Uncle Reb! Thank you so much!" She swooped over t' me an' give me a kiss on th' cheek, th' fust one I've had in years.

So Virgie stayed. As th' seasons o' the year passed, I c'd tell, little by little, she was losin' her strange ways.

I'm a-gettin' old, an' a little feeble, an' I worry 'bout Virgie sometimes, an' whut'll happen t' her when I'm gone. After she told me whut she did, I can't see that it would be good, crossin' her strain an' ours.

I jest hope she c'n maybe find one o' her own kind afore she gets so much like us he wouldn't be able t' tell who she was.

He'd better hurry. Last week I caught her kissin' 'Kiah Piersall, out in th' autumn moon. And this time, she warn't scairt.