

# THE WISH

## An Odd Fragment of Fiction

By MYRTLE LEVY GAYLORD

**B**URNED and scarred by the hot breath of passion and the deep wounds of life, the mother took the newborn girl-child, Leonore, to her breast for the first time. She trembled with joy and pain at the touch of the greedy little lips.

Presently the woman and the child at her breast slept. The mother dreamed that out of a black sky a silver fairy appeared in a cloud of light.

"One wish, one wish only, for the newborn," the fairy offered.

The mother, clutching the child closer to her, trembled and choked, and it seemed that she would not be able to answer. Finally words came, as if involuntarily:

"That she may not feel, that she may not suffer, that passion, love that

scorches and does not warm, may never touch her!"

The fairy smiled a faint, far smile and inscribed a circle with her star-tipped wand.

"It is well," said she.

The cloud of light faded into a black sky. The child stirred, and the mother awoke, her heart aching, she knew not why.

**L**EONORE, the woman, was tall, pale and exceptionally beautiful. She gazed out of clear, gray eyes that had lost the wonder of childhood without ever gaining the warmth of womanhood.

She passed through life as one in a dream. She saw much, she understood much, but when, in those intense moments that sometimes come, the quick tears of sympathy and love

sprang to the eyes of those about her, her heart would seem a thing of stone. She knew that she *should* weep, but she could not. Then she would whisper to herself:

"Tears are not real. No one really feels. They just pretend."

Donald, the young poet, loved her suddenly, burningly, gloriously. He looked into her cool gray eyes and swore to himself that in their depths slumbered the answer to all life.

He wooed her passionately, beseechingly, and in vain. He laid bare to her all that aching beauty that was his soul. She smiled vaguely, detached as a pine tree outlined against the evening sky. . . .

They dragged him from the little pond behind the house. He lay among the flowers, still and beautiful, with the fire that had burned so painfully forever extinguished.

There were tears in the eyes of those who had gathered around him in the great, gray room, tears in the eyes of all save Leonore. Leonore looked at the waxen face and thought only that it was beautiful. She did not weep.

"How cruel," she heard them whisper. "It was for love of Leonore, and she is a stone. She does not feel."

For many days she struggled with this thought. She did not feel. How could she feel? She began to look for misery that she might weep. She

went to the funeral of a child who had died at its mother's breast. But neither the child in the little white casket, nor the mother, with her streaming hair and wild eyes, could bring tears to Leonore.

One night she sat before the fireplace in her bedroom, staring at the flames. The flickering light fascinated her. For a long time she sat motionless, watching it.

Then, out of the glowing heart of the fire, Donald spoke to her:

"Leonore, you *can* feel, but you will not."

She shook her head sadly. "I can not—I *can not*."

"The fire—feel!" he cried. "Surely you can feel the fire. Try!"

Obediently, she placed her slim, white hand into the flames.

"You feel? Now you *do* feel?" he begged her.

"No," she whispered. "No!"

"You are not a woman," he gasped. "Ice water, not blood, flows in your veins. See," he pointed to a keen-edged paper knife that lay gleaming on the table.

Obediently, she reached for the knife, and with steady fingers she cut the artery at her wrist. Donald faded back into the flames. . . .

When they found her in the morning they knew that she had sought death, but they could not understand why she had burned her left hand so cruelly.

