

# Peacock Eyes

HOW OLD ASA THORP SET A JEALOUS WATCH ON HIS  
YOUNG WIFE

By Larry Barretto

ASA THORP'S wife had been an unconscionably long time about dying, but now, unexpectedly, there had been a turn for the worse, and the end was evidently at hand. A man who chanced to pass the lonely farm had been sent in haste for the doctor. He had disappeared around the bend in the road a full half hour ago, whipping his horse, the buggy jolting over the hard ruts still filled with frost; but the town was eight miles away, and even if the doctor was found without delay, he could hardly be back for three hours.

Melissa had done that. Asa himself would have forbidden it, had he known. She had run to the road, to wait there until she sighted a neighbor and gave him the message.

It was the right thing to do, Asa reluctantly admitted to himself, but unnecessary. Old Emma would probably be dead long before the doctor could reach her. Even should he arrive in time, she was beyond the power of human aid. Any one with half an eye could see that. Later, there would be the bill for this last visit. That added to the others—Asa began to figure.

"Sixteen—no, seventeen calls since last December—"

He checked himself abruptly. At this time such calculations were unseemly.

He looked again at his wife. She lay, a thin, ridged figure, beneath the bedclothes, her face ashen, her scant gray hair still strained back from her forehead with hairpins. Her worn hands, almost as gnarled as his own, and lined with heavy blue veins, rested quietly. They no longer plucked idly at the coverlet.

Asa leaned forward to see better. His white beard, stained yellow at the corners

of his mouth with tobacco juice, stuck straight out, and his penthouse eyebrows bristled above his cold eyes more fiercely than ever.

Emma did not move at all. Asa even moistened the palm of his hand to test her breathing. Then he straightened slowly, one hand on his rheumatic back.

"I reckon she's gone," he said harshly.

Behind him, peering in timidly from the doorway, Melissa, the bond girl, began to cry softly.

She wept because death was something new and strange to her. She had been fond of old Emma, in a way. Years ago, when she had first come to them from the orphan home, the hand of the farmer's wife had often rung against her ears; but now, at seventeen, it was almost two years since she had been slapped, and for the last six months she had assumed entire charge of the household—ever since Emma had begun to fail.

Besides, this was the only home she had ever known. In her grief she wondered vaguely what was to become of her. She had been bound over to the Thorps until she reached her twenty-first year. That was a long time off.

Now, with Emma dead, Asa Thorp might turn her off. The thought was bewildering to Melissa. Her most extended journey had been to the county seat, eighteen miles away. Its one business street, lined with shop windows of plate glass, remained in her memory as an amazing sight, and convinced her of her inability to cope with anything not included in Asa Thorp's eighty-acre farm. Her tears of sorrow were mingled with some of apprehension for herself.

"Stop belling!" commanded the old man.

"I—I c-can't," sobbed Melissa.

She seated herself in the chair which creaked when it rocked over the loose floor board, and raised her apron to her eyes. Old Asa took a step toward her, his mouth, with its scattering of yellowed teeth, open and ready to snarl. Then he stopped abruptly. This attitude would not fit in just now with certain plans he had dimly in mind. He attempted a crooked smile, and lowered his voice until it was a subdued grumble.

"Ye'd better be gettin' supper, Lissa. A snack will make us both feel better. Get it now 'fore the doctor comes."

The unspoken thought was that if they ate now, the doctor would not need to be invited. He had a hearty appetite, and it would be a saving. Asa's mind had returned to its eternal calculating.

Melissa wiped her eyes.

"I don't think I want no supper to-night," she said drearily. "Not with her lyin' there."

"Oh, yes, you do," insisted Asa. "Leastways I do. I ain't milked the cows yet. When I come back, you c'n have it ready, an' we'll eat."

He picked up his hat and moved toward the door.

Melissa brightened. After all, she was young and healthy.

"I'll fry up some eggs, an' mebbe a bit o' ham with 'em," she suggested.

The farmer halted at the door and swung about abruptly.

"No, ye won't!" he snapped. "Them eggs go to market. There's plenty o' mush left over from breakfast. We'll have that an' a cup o' strong tea. You c'n cook it up into cakes, if you'll watch the lard," he added, as a concession.

After he had gone, Melissa moved over to the bed and looked down. Death did not seem so terrible now. Emma's face was suddenly peaceful, and the lines of pain had gone from it.

Awkwardly the girl reached down and gently touched the dead woman's hand. Then she drew back, conscious of an unusual emotion.

"I wonder how you stood it for forty-five years!" she muttered.

## II

SUPPER was over, and the doctor had come and gone, with conventional words of sympathy and a promise to send the un-

dertaker out to the farm in the morning with a coffin.

"It don't need to have no fixin's," said Asa sharply, as they stood by the door. "Just a plain box. She'll rest easy."

The doctor had nodded silently, understanding what was in the farmer's mind, and a bit worried about his own bill. He had a family to support.

Indeed, there was no need for sympathy, implied or spoken. Everybody knew Asa Thorp. Everybody had known old Emma, and they—he, at least—would have been the last to ask for it. They had held the hillside farm for forty-five years in the face of bleak winters and dry summers, wringing a living from the worn-out ground in the face of bitter hardships. Their life had made Asa bitter, too. His creed was that grim biblical one—an eye for an eye. He extracted everything that was due him—from land, from people.

And withal he had prospered. His father, so the oldest people in the village said, had left him "warm." Money had been put out on mortgage, to be returned in the form of interest. Sometimes there was a foreclosure which put another farm in Asa's hands. His territorial acquisitions were let out to tenant farmers. It was a good system, and just. No extensions, no allowance of time. Come pay day and obligations not met, the law provided for such contingencies.

If he had chosen to live close, that was his business. No one could say of him that he was not an upright man. In his youth he had gone to church regularly. Now, in his old age, he read the Bible at home of evenings. The meetinghouse was no farther away, but it wore out the horses taking him there—the horses that would be needed for plowing when Monday morning came around.

His wife had died at last, after an illness that had been long and expensive. That was unfortunate, but he asked no sympathy, nor did he give it. No, not he!

Asa turned from the door and entered the kitchen. Melissa was finishing washing the dishes, and he stood looking at her for a moment. She was pretty—well, pretty enough, at any rate, with her mass of yellow hair done in respectable braids, but somehow flying loose about her forehead in a soft veil that he could not approve of. Her blue eyes had depths in them, not the china sort, and her skin had

the color of his peaches on the trees behind the barn when they were ripening in the August sun.

That was all right, but there was a slightness about Melissa which made her seem almost frail. Her hips should have been broader, more capable, her breast fuller. If she were to fall sick—a lingering illness, perhaps—

“Come into the best room, Lissa. I want to talk to you,” he said.

Wondering, she wiped her hands and followed Asa into the parlor. It must be something important for him to choose this place, and she was filled with a sudden depression that had nothing to do with the recent death. Now she would find out what was to happen to her.

Asa was lighting the yellow lamp with its shade of fluted china. It threw a glow over the stiff-backed chairs ranged about the walls, on the windows with primly drawn shades, and, more dimly, on the pictures—crayons of relatives staring down woodenly, and one oil painting of a waterfall which looked as if it had been varnished, so frozen was the mass of blue and white rushing forever over the dam.

Asa motioned the girl to a chair and sat down himself, his hands resting on his knees. Then he blew his nose loudly on a bandanna handkerchief and settled back, staring at her steadily with his fierce, pale eyes.

“Ahem!” he coughed. “How old be you, Lissa?”

To this he knew the answer quite well, but it was a beginning.

“I’m seventeen, Mr. Thorp,” answered Melissa timidly.

Asa considered this for a moment.

“Seventeen! Well, well, so you be—seventeen. An’ what was you thinkin’ o’ doin’ now, Lissa, since Emma’s gone?”

“Why, stay here an’ keep house for you,” said the girl, astonished.

The farmer shook his head.

“No! That wouldn’t be right in the sight o’ the Lord, nor yet the neighbors, havin’ a young female around with a man that’s widowed. I reckon I’ll have to send you back to the home, Lissa, till come you’re twenty-one.”

She shrunk back as if he had struck her, and her lips whitened.

“No, no! Not that!” she begged. “Please, Mr. Thorp, let me stay here! I’ll work hard for you, ever so hard—hon-

est I will. Please don’t send me back to the home!”

Her terror was evident, and Asa noticed it with some satisfaction. She was overwhelmed at the thought of returning to the cold wooden building, with its rules and restrictions, where she had spent her childhood. It is doubtful if she had understood the implication in the first part of the old farmer’s sentence.

“Well,” said Asa, “I don’t figure to do it if there’s any other way out. How’d it be if you married me, Lissa?” he finished abruptly.

“Married you!”

The figure opposite him stiffened and half rose, as if to flee. Melissa’s face flamed into scarlet as she gasped the words.

“There, there, take it calm,” soothed Asa. “I guess you ain’t never thought o’ that, bein’ as I was a married man. I ain’t thought of it, neither, till lately; but it’s the only thing to do. You can’t go on livin’ with me, an’ you don’t want to go back to the home. If you don’t stay here, you’ll have to go back. They won’t let you go traipsin’ over the country to suit yourself till you’re of age. Besides, you ain’t got no money. If you wasn’t here, I’d have to get a housekeeper, an’ I don’t figure to do that. You know my ways, an’ I’m used to havin’ you around. You’d better take me, Lissa. I’m a godly man, an’ warm.”

He made this reference to his money significantly and sat back, rather breathless, his courtship finished.

“I can’t! Oh, I can’t!” cried Melissa.

“You can, if you make up your mind to it,” answered Asa. “Why not?”

“You’re too old!”

Her face was muffled in her hands, but he heard her.

“Sixty-eight,” he said sharply. “I’m good for twenty years yet, an’ a giddy thing like you needs an older head to guide her. Well, if you won’t, you won’t. I never did think you’d be such a fool, Lissa. To-morrow I’ll take you back to the home.”

This brought her up straight. That hateful place had very real memories of terror to her. To escape it, almost anything was preferable. Frantically she sought an alternative.

She had no relations—no one who would take her in. She might run away—it presented itself to her as a desperate expedi-

ent; but without money, with no experience, she would not get far. Her native wit told her that. She would only be returned to the home.

Slowly her face, bleak and pinched now, turned toward Asa.

"I'll marry you, Mr. Thorp. Thank you," she said.

Asa permitted all his teeth to show in a smile, and rubbed his hands softly. Melissa would make an excellent wife. She knew all his ways, and was obedient and thrifty. The expense of a hired housekeeper would be considerable, even if one were willing to stay. All in all, a good evening's work!

It occurred to him to rise and kiss his bride-to-be, but he restrained himself. With Emma lying there in the room upstairs, it did not seem quite right. His satisfaction showed in his faintly hissing breath, however.

"You're a sensible girl, Lissa, an' I'll make you a good husband, watchin' you an' guidin' your feet into the ways of godliness. To-morrow, after the funeral, when we've put poor Emma away with little Asa and Ella, we'll drive to town with parson an' get a license. Me bein' your guardeen will make it easy."

The silent figure in the chair shuddered slightly. Asa sensed that something was wrong.

"I'll be back in a minute," he said, and left the room.

A few seconds later he was heard rummaging in the attic, his heavy footsteps creaking. When he returned, Melissa had not changed her position.

"Here's a present for you," said Asa, in triumph. "It's a bolt o' calico Emma bought twenty-five years ago, but what with deaths in the family she never did get to have any of it made up. I allus figured it would come in handy some time."

He laid across the girl's knees a large piece of blue material with bright red spots on it.

"With care, you ought to get quite a lot o' dresses out of it," he continued.

Melissa's fingers slid over the stiff, glazed cloth, but she hardly glanced down.

"Thank you, Mr. Thorp."

Asa frowned. He had expected raptures, and she said only that. Women were funny cattle. Well, for this time he would let it pass.

"Since you're goin' to be my wife, I

reckon you'd better call me by my given name," he observed.

"Thank you—Asa."

"That's better! Now we'll read the Bible an' go to bed. To-morrow 'll be a hard day. Just hand me the Book off the table, Lissa."

Obediently Melissa rose, and brought him the heavy Bible with its embossed wood covers. She wanted to remind him that he had not yet entered Emma's death in it; but that would be impudence, and he might change his mind and send her away. He was a good man, and just. Ever since her twelfth year she had been told of his godliness.

Asa was reading, his voice filled with all the wrath of a God of vengeance as he shouted the words at the girl opposite:

"Shall I not visit for these things, saith the Lord? Shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?"

"A wonderful and a horrible thing is committed in the land—"

Melissa kept staring at the bunch of peacock feathers in the tall vase, in order to avoid seeing the stiff white beard that wagged so strangely by the yellow lamp. The iridescent eyes of them, green and blue with velvet-black centers, seemed to be mocking her. She wondered vaguely what it would be like when she was married.

### III

SPRING came with a rush, warming the brown earth and flinging a mantle of palest green over the bleak hills, when Asa took to his bed. His ancient enemy, rheumatism, had attacked him again.

Melissa, the wife of two months, cared for him dutifully, bringing him gruel and rubbing his back with liniment before she replaced the coverings of warmed red flannel; but she did it silently, and with the air of one thinking deeply. She was always thinking these days, and it exasperated Asa. He felt himself excluded, held back from his latest possession.

Emma he had bullied into sharp retorts or quivering fear, but not this girl. She had a way of staring at him with those great blue eyes which he could not read. What was the fool thinking of, anyhow, he wondered irritably?

Melissa was not proving an obedient wife. For one thing, she had moved again to the attic room on the plea of his illness,



but Asa knew that she would not again return to the lower floor—not of her own will. At night, when he read from the Bible, she kept her face obstinately turned from him to the vase of peacock feathers. They seemed to fascinate her. He had spoken to her, warning of the evil that came of withholding her attention from the Lord's Word for earthly things; but she had given no heed.

Asa knew that it was not the peacock feathers, but a desire to avoid seeing him, that led to this waywardness. Even when he had considered it his duty to raise his hand against her in chastisement, she had said nothing, only shrinking away under his blows.

There was no spring in Melissa's heart—only a numbed feeling, which was slowly thawing to hatred of this old man who had stolen her youth, had stolen her body, and had given her, in return, a bitter understanding. It frightened her, and she fought against it desperately.

He was a godly man, he had kept her from the home—she understood why, now—and he called upon the Lord fervently. This frightened her, too; for she was beginning to hate this God who was Asa's God. She was a wicked woman. Her husband said it often enough, and it must be true.

For a week Asa kept to his bed. Then he rose, groaning with pain and grumbling at the time wasted. Everything was wrong—the late planting was not finished, the kitchen was dirty, he had missed the collection of two rents, and Melissa was not stripping the cows properly when she milked them.

The first afternoon he spent in the sunlight on the porch, for he was weak. If his wife had advised him to do this, he would have gone at once to the barn, if only to lie exhausted in the hay; but she had offered no advice, had said nothing, and this was a further exasperation. Evidently she was not greatly concerned for his health.

The second afternoon he hitched the horse and drove away in the buggy, without telling her of his destination. Melissa watched him go in silence, but with a lightning heart. Probably he would not return before six o'clock. If she hurried with her work, there were new kittens in the hay-loft to be cuddled and played with, and the first jonquils were showing by the ice

house. She would gather some of the flowers and keep them in a pitcher until her husband returned.

When Asa drove into the yard again, he had a stranger with him—a young man, who clambered down from the buggy and placed a bulging bag on the steps. Melissa was astonished and interested. The newcomer was stocky and broad-shouldered. His pleasant face was tanned, and his brown hair was cut high up on his healthy red neck.

From the depths of her inexperience Melissa sought to place his age. Thirty—well, perhaps twenty-five; at any rate, he was young. The thought gave Melissa a feeling of pleasure, like the kittens in the loft. As a matter of fact, the boy was only twenty-two.

Asa's introduction was brief.

"Lissa, set another place. This is the new hired hand. His name's Jed Carter. He'll sleep in the little room off'n the kitchen."

When Jed Carter had gone to put his bag away, Melissa asked her husband rather breathlessly:

"Where'd he come from?"

"Evansville. I can't do the work alone no more. The misery in my back is awful. I got to pay him twenty dollars a month an' his keep."

Asa groaned, not entirely with physical pain.

"I'll rub it to-night with the cure," murmured Melissa absently.

Little was said at supper. Asa spoke shortly of the work to be done, the wet weather, and the high price of seed. Then he relapsed into silence. The young people smiled at each other occasionally, and mumbled unintelligible things when the dishes were passed. Melissa was excited at the stirring event of having a stranger at the table. Already the bleak farmhouse seemed unreal, an unfamiliar place which she hardly knew.

Jed was frankly sleepy, but well content to be settled. Mrs. Thorp was really young; where did that old lummoX get such a young wife?

Later there were prayers, and Asa read from the Bible. The yellow lamp was lighted in the best room, and Jed was commanded to enter. Abashed at the sober grandeur of the family portraits and the chairs upholstered in red rep, he stood awkwardly by the door, twisting his cap in his

hands. Prompted by a kindly thought, Melissa made room for him on the sofa.

Asa had finished praying, and had turned to the Bible, when Jed noticed the tall vase filled with peacock feathers. He started, and exclaimed audibly.

"What is it?" whispered Melissa.

Her husband disliked being disturbed at such a time.

"Peacock feathers," said Jed loudly. "They're unlucky. Gran'ma wouldn't have 'em around, an' ma took sick an' died right after a neighbor give her a bunch. I'd throw 'em out, Mis' Thorp. No good's never come of 'em yet."

"They're kind of pretty, but I reckon they ain't so nice," murmured Melissa embarrassed. "We'll throw 'em out to-morrow. I never heard they was bad luck."

Asa looked up, his finger marking the page.

"You seem to like 'em all right," he said sharply. "You're allus lookin' at 'em. Them peacock feathers stays right there!"

"The eyes is allus lookin' at you," said Jed uneasily.

"There are heavenly eyes that also see the doer of evil," remarked Asa sententiously. "Peacock eyes won't hurt the pure in heart. I will now read from the Prophet Jeremiah."

#### IV

THE days sped past, and the inevitable happened. Before August the two young people were in love with each other.

Melissa discovered it first; Jed was slower in his awakening. His hand, accidentally touching hers, brought a thrill to her that caught her breath. When he entered the house, her heart beat so violently that at first she thought she was going to be ill. Innocently she spoke of her anxiety to Asa. She had never looked so well, or so lovely.

Asa, regarding her intently, shook his head, but he continued to regard her intently when she was not conscious of it. Emma had never been taken sick this way.

The girl began to show an extraordinary interest in the stock; there was always an errand that took her to the barn. Of late afternoons, when her work was done, she trudged out to the hillside fields, and, leaning over the rail fence, watched the men harrowing the young corn. She found a warm content in looking at the distant figure shouting to his horses in mellow tones

that floated back to enfold her in their vitality.

It was on a day when Melissa had gone out to bring a pail of water to the workers that the truth burst upon them. Asa was working in the upper field. Jed met her on his round, pausing where she stood under the shade of the fringe of trees that divided the field from the pasture. Throwing the reins over the horses' backs, Jed came toward her, his smiling face moist and flushed from the heat.

"Water, Mis' Thorp? I'm that thirsty!"

Melissa started to him, the pail held in her outstretched hand. Then a treacherous root intervened, and, with a little cry, she plunged forward.

Jed caught her in his arms as she fell, the water drenching them to their knees; but he did not release her. As suddenly as the cold water, a flame swept over him. His words of sympathy changed, and he was whispering broken, meaningless things into the spun web of her hair. The violence of his passion almost choked him. His fingers were pressing into the softness of her shoulders.

Slowly, with closed eyes, as if an unseen hand were forcing up her chin, Melissa raised her head until her mouth rested against his. Then, with a gasp, she broke away.

Frightened, they stood staring at each other. Unwatched, the horses began nibbling the green shoots at their feet. At last, crimson and abashed, Jed began stammering apologies. The enormity of his crime appalled the boy, but the words stuck in his throat.

"I can't help it," he blurted. "Lissa, I love you! Oh, I love you!"

Melissa began to cry. Childlike, she sought no evasions.

"I feel that way too," she whispered.

Radiant, Jed sprang toward her, but Melissa backed away, her face white with misery.

"We can't!" The words were hardly breathed. "It ain't right in the sight of God—an' what would Asa say?"

It was true. By coveting another man's wife he had sinned. Characteristically, he placed no blame on Melissa. Confused, humbled, he sought a way out.

"I'll go away somewhere, so I won't bother you," he said dully.

To be on the farm again, alone—with Asa!

"No, no!" she cried, frantic. "Not that! Jed, don't leave me! I'm afraid, Jed; afraid to be alone, with him. He's so queer, an' sometimes he hits me."

Her hand was stroking his bare forearm, terrified. Jed's face had turned white and his breath sucked in. The muscles of his strong arm hardened and bunched under her hand.

"He does, does he? I'll break his damned neck!"

"No, no, Jed, you dassn't! It ain't often. Only please don't go away. You can stay, an' we'll be friends again, like we was. Please! I got to go now. He's comin' over the hill."

"We'll be friends again like we was, Mis' Thorp," echoed Jed flatly.

Slowly the girl walked back across the furrowed field, the empty pail forgotten, her wet skirt clinging unheeded to her legs.

Their assumption of casualness was so marked that Asa became suspicious. And now he watched Jed as well as Melissa. They had kept their pledge, but they were powerless in the grip of their emotions. A dozen times a day they betrayed themselves, and a dozen times a day Asa watched them with cold, veiled eyes, putting the worst possible interpretation on his wife's flushed cheeks and Jed's sudden garrulity.

Their fingers, accidentally touching, lingering like a caress until one or the other became suddenly conscious, inflamed him; but he said nothing. His God of vengeance was sometimes slow to strike.

Jed was a good worker, and somehow Asa's resentment against him was of a minor sort. In the old farmer's philosophy, it was always women who led men on. He would have discharged the lad, but farm hands at this season were hard to get, and Jed's services came cheap.

Instead, he began inventing subtle ways of torturing Melissa. A casual word which might be misunderstood blanched her cheeks with terror. He spoke optimistically of the time when he would be able to do the work alone again, and for a moment he thought the girl was about to faint. It gave him exquisite pleasure.

One evening he harangued her on the virtue of being a dutiful wife, and then harshly commanded her to return to his room. Shaken with nausea, absolutely revolted, Melissa had screamed hysterical refusals at him, and then had fled to her attic, torn with sobs.

That night she crept down the stairs, to whisper her terror to Jed. It was the first time she had seen him alone, since the day by the field. An oil lamp was burning, and Jed was washing at the kitchen sink. At the sight of Melissa's tear-stained face he ran up to her, his hands still wet and soapy, and demanded to know the truth. Had Asa beaten her again?

"No."

"I'll break his damned neck if he does!" he whispered fiercely.

He was always saying that now—whispering it to her when they were out of earshot. There was a black, smoldering look in his eyes that frightened Melissa more than Asa did. Some time, something terrible was going to happen.

"What's wrong?" he asked anxiously. "Tell Jed, dear!"

But now that she was here, Melissa could not tell him. Her cheeks burned. Mutely she shook her head. All she wanted was the comfort of seeing him for a moment.

Like two children they stood there, with hands clasped, while the girl grew calmer.

From the top of the stairs Asa, with a quilt drawn over his shoulders, looked down on them silently. When the girl turned to go, he stole back to his room.

Back and forth throughout the night he walked, from the window to the dresser, his clenched hands raised above his head in imprecation, while from his stiff white beard came whispers of vengeance and a jumble of texts. His wife creeping from her room to talk with the hired hand, in her nightgown!

The next day he accused her of it. All the venom that he had stored for weeks poured out upon her. Taken off guard, bewildered, frightened at the discovery of her secret, Melissa sought to babble lies, and then became silent. About her love she could not tell an untruth.

"How did you know?" she whispered, and then stood quiet waiting his blow.

Asa smiled sardonically. How did he know? The silly fool!

"The eyes of the Lord see all, but you forgot that. Them peacock eyes my hired man's allus talkin' about told me!" Harsh laughter grated from his throat. "If you tell him that I know, I shall send him away, an' then I'll kill you!" His fingers dug deep into her arm. "Day in, day out, for

months an' months, you shall see before you your companion in sin, an' you dassn't speak, you wanton!"

His long arm spurned her away, and she went reeling to her knees. There he left her, too crushed to weep, knowing well that she would keep silent.

That night Asa read only passages concerning harlots and evil women who were stoned, while Jed, red-faced and angry, sensing vaguely in the old farmer's sneering voice an insult to the girl he loved, clenched and unclenched the hands hidden in his pockets.

Melissa sat with head bowed, trying to blink back her tears. For once she did not stare at the peacock feathers. Their flaunting eyes were pointing shame at her, and she would not let Asa see the tears that stained her cheeks.

And now the house became a place of silent spyings, of lipping footsteps that crept along dim passageways. Asa was everywhere, unexpectedly. One thought to find him in the fields, and there he was coming from the barn. He should have been feeding the stock in the barn, but wraithlike he was emerging from the cellar.

He took to prowling at night. One morning Melissa found a peacock feather lying on the kitchen table. Startled, she looked at her husband. Asa smiled grimly.

"Peacock eyes that see all," he said.

Jed shifted uneasily. He did not know what it was about, but he hated the gaudy plumes. Too many evil stories of his childhood were woven into them. Silently Melissa picked up the feather and returned it to the vase that Asa had forbidden her to touch.

The next day she found one by the pump, and the day after there was another in the milk house. Wherever she might be, one of the brilliant things was staring at her from some corner—the ice house, the closet, the summer kitchen. Daily she gathered them up and replaced them in the vase.

If she had dared, she would have destroyed them, but in his anger Asa might send Jed away. It was better to suffer.

Slowly they were tearing her nerves and crushing her life with their fragile weight. She grew listless, and her eyes were circled. One morning, when a feather brushed against her cheek in the dimness of the room where the preserves were kept, she screamed, and it was half an hour before

she found strength to pick it up and put it in the parlor.

And thus the days drifted interminably into late September.

V

DANDY, the bay horse, was sick. Through the day Jed had watched the suffering animal anxiously, as he stood in his stall with drooped head and heaving flanks, and patient agony in his soft eyes. Asa did not seem to care. If Dandy died, it would mean an outlay of money to replace him; but the farmer had not even visited him. More than usual he was mumbling incoherent words into his stiff beard.

That night it rained. The drops pattered on the roof of the old house like sibilant whisperings in the darkness.

After supper there had been prayers. Melissa, her eyes closed, lay back against the sofa, an overwhelming lethargy creeping over her. She was too exhausted even to sit up when Asa reproved her for her slovenly attitude during the worship of the Lord. Jed, respectful in a stiff-backed chair, thought she looked more like a child than ever. In the corner the peacock feathers, vivid green and ultramarine, glowed unnoticed.

Soon afterward the lamps were extinguished, and, with candles in their hands, the three went to their rooms.

Jed was restless. He tossed about, seeking the sleep that would not come. In the barn, alone, was Dandy, trying bravely to stand on trembling legs. Perhaps he was down. What if the halter was too short? Jed imagined, once, that he heard a whinny of despair. At last, reluctantly, he crawled from his bed and pulled on his clothes. If Dandy was all right, he could at least give him a little of the bran mash or a sip of brandy. At the back door he paused for a moment. It had stopped raining.

Ten minutes later, on one of his night prowlings, Asa found the hired man's room empty. The bed had been slept in, but he did not notice that Jed's clothes were gone. With shaking fists, the old man cried down in whispered fury the vengeance of the Lord. This was the confirmation he had been seeking!

Silently he crept to the head of the attic stairs, and listened. There was no sound; but they would be quiet, those guilty ones!

His brain felt strangely numb as he sought a plan of action, but in his throat



great pulses beat until the whole house seemed filled with the sound of them. Again he returned to the lower floor. He thought of eyes of the Lord, that watched always—and then of the eyes that Lissa hated.

From his bedroom window it would be a simple thing to get to the room where they were. By creeping along the sloping roof and stretching up, he could reach Melissa's window. Then, in the morning, the eyes—the eyes that should taunt her with their knowledge!

It had stopped raining, but it was slippery on the roof, and the slope was steeper than he had thought. The night wind shivered mournfully through the trees. The world seemed strange—oddly flattened in the darkness.

Precariously sliding his feet over the wet, weatherstained surface, Asa made his way. A last gust of rain from the dying storm struck him, blurring his eyes. The wind caught at his nightshirt, and flapped it against his ankles. He would have attempted to return—there were so few places for hand grips—but the old man felt that he was the agent of the Lord.

Which was her window? Ah! Six, five, three steps more, and he would be there. The shutters were closed. Dimly he could see the slats of them. His breath came short at the thought of her horror.

Then something happened. A rotten

cornice that gave way—and the roof was sliding beneath his feet, sliding wetly with lightning speed.

Melissa, drugged with sleep, dreamed that she heard a muffled shriek.

It was she who discovered him next morning. Her screams brought Jed running to her. Asa lay among the crushed nasturtiums that grew about the house, his neck oddly twisted, dead.

Together they stared down at him in awe, their hands clasped for comfort. Then Melissa understood. With a cry, she wrenched away her fingers.

"Jed, you killed him, like you said you would! You broke his neck!"

"Lissa, I didn't," he cried. "I—I didn't. I would have done, but it wasn't me!"

In his face she saw reflected only terror. Then her arms were about him.

"It's all right, Jed. You done it for me. I'll say it was me done it; they'll never know. I'll say—"

His hand shut off her frantic words.

"I didn't!" he repeated passionately. "I would have done, but I didn't!"

Suddenly he stooped and pulled something from beneath the body—a mud-stained feather. Together they stared up at the sloping roof. There, caught in a worn, gray shingle, bright in the morning sun, its eye all vivid blues and greens glowing at them, was another peacock feather.

### COLD EVERYWHERE

THERE's plenty of gold in the world to-day,  
And you needn't go far to find it;  
If one little cloud in the sky is gray,  
There'll be gold lying just behind it.

There's a mine of gold in the primrose bed,  
Where the busy black bees are winging;  
And a jasmine leans from her place overhead,  
All her golden censers a swinging.

There's gold on the lake where the sunbeams rest,  
And an oriole comes up flying;  
And on the snow of a lily's breast  
A purse of pure gold is lying.

There's gold in the heart of man, I say,  
Though many may never have mined it;  
There's gold everywhere and gold every day,  
If only we're looking to find it.

*Elizabeth M. Montague*