A Child of the Covenant

Eva Wilder McGlasson

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HE was a Georgian, the landlady said. Indeed, he said so himself, volubly enough, when there was any one to listen. The difficulty seemed to be that there was seldom any one to listen at such times as found the Georgian ready for conversation. The other boarders were, for the most part, young men who went to work in the morning just as he was getting well to sleep, and who came back at the hour when the Georgian, clean−shaved and cheerful, was going out for the night. He was well−favored and young, with an air of good−fellowship in his yellow mustaches, and with a gay, reckless gleam under the wide rim of his soft hat.

It was particularly by reason of his handsomeness that the girl who had the room over the parlor had noticed him. She was herself pretty enough to pronounce upon these matters with authority, having a dark demure presence, with a Quakerish part in her black hair and a flutter of little curls at the brow. She was from Kansas, the landlady said, and was spending the winter in New York for the study of music, a statement borne out by certain trills and quavers and trials of voice sweetly evident now and then in the room over the parlor.

When the young men of the house and the rest of the boarders, two elderly women of hygienic habits, were made known to the girl, she bowed soberly and in silence. The hot−water potions of the old women amused her a little, but she regarded the matter with outward gravity; indeed, she was always rather grave, especially in her bearing toward the young men.

They were commonplace, all of them; variously so, but still commonplace. The Georgian she hardly saw enough of him to decide upon him beyond the impression he gave of good−breeding and good humor.

Once she asked the landlady if he was a journalist, that he seemed to work only at night.

"God knows," said the landlady, and her tone was not pious.

She was a large woman with a queerly screwing gait, said to result from a leg conjecturably wooden. She wore crinoline, too, which gave a certain validity to the surmise, and her temper was such as coerced tolerance for cold mutton and warm salad.

"He comes of good family," she said. "His mother was here to see him in the spring. He staid in of nights while she was in the city. She was more of a lady than any one I 'most ever saw, and just wrapped up in him thought he was the best young man living. I liked her. That's why I put up with him; for he's a bad lot he is that."

The girl wondered dimly as to the color of his sinning. Then remembering the acrimony of the voice which daily arraigned the three servants of the house, and brought forth a flood of Hibernic retort, she concluded that the Georgian's errors were probably those to which open natures are prone errors likely to meet short shrift from natures as sour and narrow as was the landlady's.

Thinking seriously upon the matter, she mounted the narrow stairs. A man stood aside in the landing to let her pass. His yellow mustaches seemed as if fluffy with gold−dust. His head was deferentially bared and abased. It was the Georgian going down to breakfast at three o'clock of the afternoon. There was distant interest in his eye as

it rested on the slight figure in dark blue serge.

The Western girl shut her door rather sharply. She was aware of blushing, and was not pleased with herself.

Concerning the Georgian she heard little for some time. Then one day it befell that as she stood warming her hands at the parlor register she heard voices in the hallway. The elder of the hygienic ladies was in speech with the landlady, and the listless fall of her accents carried distinctly to the girl's ears.

"I've just had such a sweet letter from her," the old woman was saying. "We correspond, you know. I wanted to read you this part. Let me see oh, here it is! 'At church this morning a dear little baby, the child of an esteemed friend of our family, was baptized. Our pastor in his prayer included all children who had received the ordinance at his hands, and it was the deepest happiness to me to reflect that my beloved and only son was one of these indeed, a true child of the covenant. I long for the time when his affairs in New York will permit him to come South finally and forever. I feel that I have seen too little of him, his college life and succeeding business enterprises having kept us apart. There is a great deal to be done in the South. I know he feels this to be so, and is deeply interested in plans for the benefit of our poorer classes. But I fear his sympathies will do him injury. Last week I sent him means toward aiding a poor young musician he had come upon in his lonely walks. He is always seeking out the broken and wretched. He wrote me very pitifully of this young man, whom he found starving in a garret. I was very glad, as I always am, to be able to help him. My boy's own income from the estate does not enable him to do all that he would.'"

There was an indignant murmur, in which the Kansas girl distinguished terms of protestation.

"She ought to know!" cried the landlady. "She ought to know that her son's deceiving her; that he's no more than a gamester and scamp. Out every night of his life! I never laid eyes onto a more dissipated young limb. She ought to have the wool pulled from her eyes. I'm not saying anything about what he owes me" the voice lowered as if with a thought of caution, and rose again on a tide of accusation "six months' board and all that. He keeps putting me off with promises. I'm tired of it. If it wasn't for his mother I'd of showed him the door long ago. A child of the covenant! Makes me laugh!"

Of the subject of this diatribe the Kansas girl saw less and less. His occupancy of the adjacent room was a matter of inference rather than of knowledge. Late in the night his neighbor was occasionally awakened by the sound of a fumbling step on the stairs. Following it would be an uncertain metallic resonance, the aimless adjustment of a key to its lock. Once or twice, meeting him in the hall, the girl, though her face was averted, saw that he looked pale and worn. There were hard lines at his lips. He seemed to shrink away as she stole by.

On a certain morning, as she came along the corridor, a maid with a tray stopped her.

"Would yez tourn the knab av the door for me, miss? Me hands is full."

"Is any one sick?" asked the other.

"Och! I'll never tell av it's sick or lazy he is the Sootherner. He's not lift his bed the two days, and me with me face like beef with toastin' bread fer him that he don't touch when I bring it." She thrust her tray into the crack of the door.

Presently after a doctor seemed to be coming and going. Then it happened that the Kansas girl heard strange sounds indeed from the Georgian's room. Some one in there was gay, and sang wild staves of bar−room ballads. Some one, too, was afraid, and from a burst of laughter broke into a pitiful wailing for help, beseeching that they take away the row of little fiends who sat grimacing along the bedside.

The doctor's voice broke through these blended sounds with a tone of expostulation.

"He must be sent away. He should have been sent sooner."

The landlady's accents were keen with decision. She intimated that in her own house she was mistress.

"Oh, well," sniffed the doctor. His voice carried a sense of comprehension. She meant to turn the young man's misfortune to her own advantage, to levy a tax upon his need. There would be exorbitant charges. The doctor understood, but he only said: "Oh, well, if he's got any relatives they ought to be summoned! Eh? Can't I bring him around? My dear lady, no physician would be justified in making such a statement. There is marked congestion. He must have been going at a pretty lively pace. They generally pull through; but this fellow A mother, has he? You'd better telegraph."

The landlady seemed to hesitate. "If she should see him this way I don't know." And she added: "I'll wait. I won't telegraph yet. He'll pull through. No use throwing money away."

The Kansas girl felt a burning indignation at the harsh literality of this resolve. If the landlady did not telegraph on the morrow, she herself would send word to the Georgian's mother that her son was down with some strange, serious attack.

But the next morning, while it was yet dark, the landlady sent a message to Georgia. The child of the covenant had died at three o'clock of the night.

A deep silence hung over the house; doors were shut softly. The hygienic old ladies shuddered over the parlor register, drawing their shoulder−shawls close and talking in startled whispers.

As the Kansas girl went up to her room, the next day but one, she met at the head of the stairs a woman with soft white hair. It was not one of the women of the house. No hint of felt insoles or spring heels lay in the fine long foot below the trailing black skirts. Traces of tears blurred the stranger's lovely old face. Her eyes were drawn and dim, but her lips, despite their quivering, wore a look of calm.

The girl on the stair withheld her breath at sight of the tall black form, for the room from which it stepped was the Georgian's room, and she knew that the visitor must be the Georgian's mother. Had she needed other evidence the brooch at the wrinkled, slender throat would have sufficed, for the portrait painted delicately on the ivory was that of a blue−eyed man, who, but for his obsolete neckcloth and arrangement of hair, might have been the Georgian's self.

The older woman, taking note of the scared small face below her, paused.

"Pardon me," she said. "You knew my boy? You are the young lady who sings? He wrote of you once. I feel that every one he knew must always be dear to me." She stopped because her voice had broken. "I am ashamed to give way so," she added, presently. "It is a privilege to lose a son as I have lost mine. The fever he died of was nobly contracted. In my selfish love I have warned him against the air of the poor quarters of the city. But his love for his fallen brothers " Her eyes filled. "He meant to do a great work among our people. The whole South would have felt his influence."

"I know," breathed the girl, "I know."

"He had talked with you of his plans? He did to the landlady. She's just been telling me how kind and gentle he was, how circumspect, how thoughtful about everything, even the little money matters young men sometimes regard lightly. There was none like him. Oh!" she broke out, "God's hand is heavy upon me, but His mercy

upholds me! Suppose my boy had been one who wrought folly and wickedness? how should I have endured " She turned suddenly into the room, and the girl heard her sob out, "My boy! my baby!"

Staring through the blinds the next morning the Western girl saw two glittering ovals just below the polished tops of vehicles drawn up at the curb. Over the steps of the house came the dull black of a box end ringed with blossomy white. Behind it walked the Georgian's mother. Her unveiled face was peaceful, and the shadow of a smile haunted her lips. She had an air of majesty, as of one whose motherhood is glorified by some special consecration of the child.

Down the brownstone steps, a foot−breadth behind the gracious figure of the Georgian's mother, the landlady screwed her way. Her crinoline heaved fitfully, and she wore an oldish velvet sacque buttoned awry. Her tight knob of gray hair under her flat green bonnet looked like a knot in a tree below a big leaf.

She was red faced as ever; her eyes were like little black beads set in baked clay. But as she stumped along, big, uncouth, and ridiculous, there was something about her which made the Kansas girl's breath catch.

There was a clatter of wheels on the stones below. The Kansas girl took up her music. And in her mind was a certain vague consciousness that the most impressive figure in the little commonplace enactment she had been witnessing was neither the Georgian nor the Georgian's mother.