

The Right Thing

By Ray Cummings



The girl stood quiet in the cabin doorway looking out at the brilliant, frosty night. Over Sugar Loaf the cold, glittering moon shone full; the big fir on its summit stood stark and black against the vivid blue of the star-studded sky behind, like a giant sentinel watching over the silent valley.

Below her, at the bottom of the little pass, the winding trail with its single strand of telephone wire beside it, showed plainly in the moonlight. Up the mountain a wolf began howling. The girl turned back into the cabin abruptly and closed the door behind her.

The supper she had been preparing was almost ready. The little board table near the fireplace was set for one; over in a corner from a large, wood-burning stove came the odor of steaming coffee.

The girl put a lighted kerosene lamp upon the table and served herself with a single plateful of food from the frying-pan. Once she stood still, listening, but only the muffled noise of the brook and the lone wolf baying broke the silence. For a brief instant her glance rested on the telephone instrument fastened to the wall beside the fireplace; then, as though reassured, she sat down and began her solitary meal.

A knock upon the door made her leap to her feet and stand for an instant trembling. She put her hand into the pocket of her gingham apron, her fingers gripping a little revolver that lay there. The knock was repeated. The girl withdrew her hand—empty—and with a trembling smile that seemed to belittle her fear, she crossed the room swiftly and flung open the door.

A man stood on the threshold—a slim young man in a short heavy coat, blue flannel shirt, corduroy trousers, and neat, incongruous leather puttees. He was bareheaded. He stood wavering with a hand against the doorway to steady himself, all his weight on one foot and the toe of the other just touching the ground.

“You!” cried the girl. Her tone held amazement, but it was tender, too, with love. Then as she saw the pallor of his face in the lamplight, and his lips pressed together in a thin straight line of pain, she cried again:

“Tom, you’re hurt!”

Her arms went around him, and leaning heavily on her, he hobbled across the room. The pain made him moan, and he sank back in the chair and closed his eyes. The girl knelt on the

floor beside him, and began gently to unstrap one of his puttees. After a moment he seemed to recover a little. He sat up and wiped the sweat of weakness from his forehead with his coat sleeve.

“I know I shouldn’t have stopped, Beth, but I—I knew you were alone tonight.” For an instant the drawn lines of pain left his face; his eyes looked into the girl’s tenderly.

Beth looked up into his face, brushing back a wisp of hair that had fallen forward over her eyes. That he had come here frightened her. But she was glad that he had come, and the sight of his pale face with the look of pain on it made her eyes fill with tears of love and sympathy.

“What happened, Tom?” she asked.

The boy shook himself together. “I wouldn’t have stopped, honest, Beth—only my horse threw me—a mile back toward Rocky Gulch.” He winced as the girl withdrew the puttee and began unlacing his shoe.

“Only sprained, I guess,” he added. “But it hurts like the devil—and I’m bruised all over from the fall.” He laughed a little in boyish apology for showing his pain to a girl.

“It was about an hour ago. I wasn’t going to stop—I wanted to get to Vailstown tonight. The horse shied at something, and bolted, and left me lying there. I don’t know—I guess I’m a rotten rider.” He grinned sheepishly.

He had come to her! Of course, it was all he could do then, without a horse and with a sprained ankle at night on the

Vailstown road. At the thought of having him here with her when he was hurt and needed her help, the girl's heart grew very loving and tender.

"I've been an hour coming," he went on quietly—he brushed her hair lightly with his fingers and smiled—"and now I'm here, Beth, I'm—I'm sort of glad the accident happened."

She made no answer, but went on taking off his shoe and the heavy woolen sock; his ankle was red and swollen. She raised his foot to a low wooden bench, and he watched her silently while she filled a pail with hot water. Then he noticed the food on the table.

"Finish eating, Beth," he said. "This can wait—it doesn't hurt much when I hold it still."

Again she did not reply, but held his foot and ankle in the water a moment, and then, wrapping it in an improvised bandage, replaced the sock. She was very tender and gentle. Once the boy made as if to kiss her, but she pulled away, effectually but without resentment. Wonderment was in his eyes as he followed her swift, deft movements.

"Why don't you say something, Beth?" he asked after a moment. "What's the matter with you?"

"Now you can eat with me," she said. She had made him as comfortable as possible, and returned to the stove.

He took the plate of food she handed him. "I know I shouldn't have stopped, Beth—but I couldn't do anything else, could I?"

“How did you know I was alone?” She knew what he was going to answer, and it frightened her.

“I saw your stepfather in Rocky Gulch this afternoon—no, wait, listen Beth—I’d tell you, wouldn’t I, if anything had happened?”

He went on impetuously, as though to dispel her rising fear.

“He was drunk, Beth, and he’s too old a man. Look at that”—he clenched his fist, and the muscles of his bared forearm rose up in knots—“I could have twisted his neck with that for what he said about me and you. But I promised I wouldn’t lift a hand to him, and I didn’t, no matter what he said. I didn’t mean to meet him—and then—when he said what he did I—well, I just listened and beat it, that’s all.”

The boy shoved his food away from him untouched, and looked across the table to meet Beth’s frightened eyes.

“Don’t you worry, kid,” he added reassuringly, “I won’t hurt him, and he can’t hurt me—except with his gun.” The girl shuddered, and he hastened to add:

“He wouldn’t do that, Beth. Don’t you think it for a minute! Even when he’s drunk he wouldn’t do that—he’s too much of a coward—he knows he’d swing for it.”

“He *said* he would, Tom.”

“He said he would if I come up here again. I didn’t come, did I?”

It was a month now since her stepfather in drunken rage had ordered Tom from the house and threatened to shoot him if he ever came there again. But after all, he had to come tonight, as

things happened. And her stepfather was away—the first time he had been away in months—and he need never know that Tom had been here.

“He won’t be back until tomorrow—you’ll be gone then,” said Beth, voicing her thoughts.

Her words seemed to rouse the boy to sudden anger. “Why should he forbid my seeing you, anyway?” he went on, resentfully. “I love you, Beth, and you love me. And I want to marry you!” His tone changed abruptly. “You *do* love me, Beth?”

He held out his arms appealingly, and in answer the girl rose silently and kissed him. “You know that, Tom,” she said simply.

“Then why do I have to sneak away like a thief? Just because we love each other, what’s that he’s got against me?”

“You know why he said it was, Tom.” She crossed the room again to attend to the stove.

“Because I haven’t got any money. I know—that’s what he said. But I’ve got enough to keep you as well as he does—and better.” He glanced around the cabin contemptuously. “You know that isn’t the reason. It’d be the same, anyway—unless maybe I had a fortune and would give him some of it.”

Beth winced. It hurt, somehow, to have him say things like that. But she knew it was true. And she knew, too, just how he felt—how he resented the way he had been treated.

“Besides, why shouldn’t I marry you?” the boy went on. “I’m from the East, same as you. I’ve been to college—my family’s as

good as yours—for all his drunken talk—better than *his*, if you ask me. What he wants is to get you a rich husband back East if he can't stake a big-paying claim out here. And I don't fit into that scheme. That's what's the matter, and you know it."

Beth laid the coffee cups on the table and sat down again, facing him.

"You mustn't talk that way, Tom," she remonstrated. "You just mustn't. I won't listen. I've told you that before. I can't listen to such things. Why were you going to Vailstown tonight?"

He ignored her question. "Well, I'm right, and you know it. I love you, and I'd make you happy. He's the only thing in the way. So far as your happiness is concerned, he'd be better off dead, and I wish he was. Oh, I know it's a rotten thing to say, but I do. Look at that."

He leaned forward suddenly, and gripped her by the shoulder, pulling her toward him.

"Your neck's bruised black and blue. You think I don't notice things like that, don't you? I know how he treats you when he's crazy drunk—and I'm the only one who does. And I can't do anything about it because you won't let me."

"Tom—I—"

"And because he's your stepfather, you won't let anybody say a word against him. But you know he's no good to himself, or anybody else. He'd be better off dead, and you know it. Somebody'll get him one of these days, too—the way he acts down there at the Gulch when he's drunk—you wait and see.

Some day they'll find him lying in a gully or something, where somebody's pushed him. He hasn't got a decent friend in the world—only the bums are good enough for him. And that damn One-Eyed Charlie he pals around with."

Beth sighed hopelessly.

"Some day they'll find him dead down there," the boy went on. "Charlie'll do it, maybe—he's a rattlesnake anyway. And when he talks to me like he did today, and I see your neck horribly bruised the way it is now, I feel as if I could do it myself, sometimes—if I had a good chance."

His words shocked her, perhaps even more because some little whispering devil inside said it would be better that way—better for all three of them. She rose abruptly, and bending down, put her hands on the boy's shoulders, looking him squarely in the face.

"Tom, you didn't mean that," she said evenly.

His eyes shifted and avoided her own, and she felt her heart leap with sudden fear.

"Well, I feel as if I could, anyway," he answered, sullenly. "And you wouldn't be sorry—deep down in your heart."

"Tom, you can't talk this way. I won't listen. Don't you understand—I won't listen."

She pulled her chair close beside him. He put his arm about her shoulders and drew her to him hungrily.

“Tom, why were you going to Vailstown tonight?” she asked again, when he had released her.

“I—I—” He seemed to make a sudden decision. “I wasn’t going to tell you, Beth, till I was sure.” He met her searching gaze squarely. “I think I’ve struck it, Beth—over there on Cedar Creek. It looks good—pans richer than anything around the Gulch. I wanted to get it recorded in Vailstown tonight. Then, if everything was all right, I was going to phone you.”

His face was flushed and eager now, and very boyish. She leaned forward and kissed him.

“I’m so glad. Tom. At last—you deserve it. You’ve worked hard.”

“I think I’ve got it, Beth—got it for you, just like I said I would.”

Beth rose, and went to the window. “Its clouding over,” she said. “We’ll have snow by morning.”

She came back to the fireside, and glancing at his bandaged ankle, smiled. “You’ll have to stay here tonight. In the morning I’ll walk over to Simpson’s—it’s only three miles back around Sugar Loaf—and get you a horse. You can make it to Vailstown then.”

A faint, distant sound outside made them look at each other in sudden alarm. They listened. It grew louder—a horse coming along the trail from Rocky Gulch at a gallop. Beth thought of her stepfather, perhaps returning unexpectedly—to find Tom here with her. In the silence she could hear again the lonely howl of the wolf on Sugar Loaf—a sound immeasurably

mournful, very much like the desolate, silent mountains themselves.

She rose to her feet, trembling. The sound of the horseman approaching grew steadily louder. Then her glance fell upon the little tin clock over the fireplace. She smiled with the relief of sudden comprehension.

“Nine o’clock, Tom. I’d forgotten. It’s only the mail rider for Vailstown.”

She went to the window. “It’s snowing, Tom,” she added.

Tom was sitting up in his chair, tense. She wondered vaguely why he did not seem relieved at her words.

“It *is* the mail,” she cried, after a moment. She opened the door a little and stood looking out.

The boy started from his chair, standing upon his injured ankle without thought of it. “He may stop, Beth. He mustn’t see me here. It wouldn’t look right, don’t you see—it—”

She wheeled on him sharply. “He isn’t going to stop,” she said. Then she flung the door wide open and stepping outside, waved her hand to the passing rider on the trail below.

“Sit down, Tom.” She came back into the room and closed the door. “You mustn’t stand on that ankle.”

He sank back into the chair, his face white. “God!” he exclaimed, “I shouldn’t be up here with you alone tonight after—after what—”

Beth sat down again beside him. The thoughts that came to her mind frightened her. She tried to dispel them, but couldn't. She put her hand upon his arm.

"I'm glad you've struck it, Tom," she said. "I knew you would. And some time—"

"I'm going to have you for my wife," he finished. "And take you back East, maybe, where you belong."

Suddenly he flung his arms about her again and kissed her upon the lips roughly. "It's the right thing—the right thing, Beth." He repeated the words a little bitterly.

She disengaged herself gently.

"You say 'the right thing,' Tom," she returned quietly, "and you mean to be cynical. Because I've said that to you sometimes—and—you never quite understood, did you?"

"But why shouldn't you marry me if we love each other?" he protested again.

He had never understood, of course. And hadn't he the right to understand?

"I'll tell you what I meant, Tom—what you have never understood—never realized." Her face was very earnest, very serious. "You say my stepfather is—is no good. Well, you're right. He is no good as the world judges those things—and maybe as God judges them, too. But he's the man my mother loved—there's no getting away from that, Tom—she loved him; and she died loving him, and with the whisper on her lips telling me to help him and care for him as long as he lived." She

laughed—a curious little laugh that seemed to catch in her throat.

“I never told you that, did I, Tom? I was only fourteen then—but that day, talking there with mother, I thought out my creed—my religion. To do the right thing always. Tom—that’s it—that’s all there is to it. Not the thing that may look best for me at the time or even right for me—but the just thing—the right thing in the eyes of God.”

Her delicate little face grew wistful with the memories the words evoked. She had never spoken to Tom—or to any one—like this before. She had hardly realized until now as she put it into words, how much this simple creed of hers had come to mean to her—how unconsciously she had used it as her guiding star, through all these dreary, mournful years that followed her mother’s death.

She had been unhappy, she knew; and yet not unhappy, either, since happiness came with the knowledge that she was doing the right thing.

And then Tom had come—Tom with his love that had awakened hers, with the promised fulfilment of all her girlish dreams. It was hard for Tom—hard for her, too, when now the right thing made them deny love. But still, she had gone on trusting—hoping, blindly hoping—just waiting for God to work it out in His own way—the way that would be right for them all. And she was sorry now—and a little frightened—that she had never let Tom understand.

Her eyes were dim and soft with tenderness as she leaned forward toward him.

“That you can understand, Tom. It’s very simple, isn’t it? And don’t you see, that’s just what father never has done. It has always been the right thing as he saw it, yes—but the right thing for himself—always the right thing for himself.

“And somehow, Tom, it doesn’t seem to work out, when you only figure the right thing for yourself. I don’t just mean that it hurts or sacrifices others—but somehow, some way, it don’t work out for you—yourself. It looks all right—you can’t see why it isn’t all right. But there’s something working against it—some law of nature—or God maybe—or something—and it just don’t work out. I believe that, Tom—I believe it absolutely—and—and no matter how hard it is, I’m trying to live up to it. I promised mother that.”

Tom moistened his dry lips. “Then so long as he lives you—you—”

She put her hand over his mouth.

“Don’t, Tom, don’t. It isn’t only that way—it’s in everything. The right thing always—even if it looks wrong and bad for me. And I believe in the end it will work out best—something we don’t understand will make it work out.”

Suddenly she slipped from her chair onto his lap, with her arms about him, her head on his shoulder.

“But I do love you, Tom, so very, very much.” All the yearning tenderness of love was in her voice. “I do want to be your wife—some day—when it’s the right thing to do.”

The telephone bell rang, startlingly loud in the silence of the little cabin. Beth pulled away from the boy and rose to her feet. That nameless apprehension—the vague presentiment she had felt before—came back to her now as she stood looking at the instrument, hesitating. The ring was repeated—a slightly different call this time, abruptly stilled.

“What is it, Beth? Is it for us?” The telephone was silent now.

She lifted the receiver. A voice in conversation sounded in her ear; instinctively she did not speak, but listened with an eager attention.

“Dead,” said the voice, “lying there dead, with marks on his throat—murder, all right.”

The little cabin room went suddenly black for Beth. The noise of the brook down by the trail seemed roaring in her ears; out beyond she heard the wolf still howling. She knew she must not faint—whispered it bravely, despairingly to herself.

“Beth! Beth, what is it?” The boy had started to his feet.

At the sound of his voice her head suddenly cleared. She let go of the telephone box she had clutched for support, and raised her hand in warning for silence. The voice in her ear was still sounding. She recognized the voice now—the sheriff of Rocky Gulch.

“—hell of a scrap this afternoon,” the voice was saying. “It’s him all right—only circumstantial evidence, but damn strong. And he’s gone—you know him—Tom Hawley—that slim young feller from the East over at Ransome’s.”

The man in Vailstown made some answer.

“You send some men down the trail,” the sheriff went on. “He might come along any time. Probably won’t. And phone Centerville—or whatever else you think best. You’ll hear from me later-morning probably. I gotta ride way over now and tell his daughter—I dassent phone her, with her all alone out there. Hell of a job, too. Then in the morning we’ll get busy right.”

Again the man in Vailstown spoke—some question this time about One-Eyed Charlie—and the conversation then continued.

But Beth heard no more. The shock of this abrupt news of her stepfather’s death, and then the suggestion of murder—murder done by Tom Hawley, the man she loved—the man whose wife some day she wanted to be—all whirled through her confused brain.

Tom Hawley, standing there now by the fireplace watching her wonderingly—Tom Hawley was a murderer?

The shock of it caused a sudden revulsion in the girl’s heart. Her fingers gripped the little revolver that lay in her apron pocket. The sheriff’s voice was still sounding in her ear; her lips were at the mouthpiece—she had only to speak to give Tom up—a murderer whom the law demanded.

And then something within her—some tiny voice of nature—whispered to the girl that she loved Tom Hawley. And that he had thought it was the right thing to do—only because he loved her—because he wanted her for his wife—wanted to make her happy. If she gave him up he might be sentenced and hung. The man she loved, to be killed by the law.

The right thing! The words of her creed came back to her. Which was the right thing now? Her tired brain groped at the question wearily. The right thing! The words she had said to Tom flashed through her mind: “Not the thing that may look best for me, but the right thing in the eyes of God. And something—some law we don’t understand—will make it work out all right.”

Beth dropped the telephone receiver to the end of its dangling cord and put her hand over the mouthpiece. Then she whirled to face the boy who still stood watching her expectantly.

“They’ve found it out, Tom.” Her voice came low, but vibrant and tense. In the hand she held outstretched a bit of polished steel glistened in the lamplight. “They know it’s you.”

At sight of the revolver she pointed at him the boy started forward. Amazement, incredulity were on his face.

“Beth! Why, Beth, what—”

“We’re going to do the right thing, Tom—the right thing in the eyes of God.”

He was hobbling forward, and her voice rose suddenly:

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