

The Alabaster Box

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Illustrated by

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The Alabaster Box

By LAURA GOODMAN SALVERSON

Illustrated by

E. J. DINSMORE

'There came unto Him a woman having an alabaster box.'

Bianca counted her blessings before the Lord: a hundredweight of flour, sugar, salt, tea, ten gills of blackstrap, potatoes in a barrel and a flich of fat bacon. Enough and more, to last throughout the winter.

So many blessings! And still no mention made of the Manitoba spruce piled roof high in the crippled shed that clung to the sagging shoulder of her tar-papered shanty. Or, best of all, the alabaster box hidden at the feet of the little dust-covered Madonna that through the trying years had smiled upon her devotions.

"Hail, Mary; full of grace! the Lord is with thee—" think of it, potatoes and bacon and wood enough for the winter . . . "Blessed art thou among women—" no need to trouble about felt boots . . . Praise God she had gone down the river, folks welcomed a pedlar there—"Holy Mary . . . full of grace—" no, no, so many blessings were confusing the order of her prayers! What was she saying, the Salutation, or the Angelus? "And the word was made flesh." . . . Something wrong there. Well, no matter, her heart beat high and true with gratitude.

Her devotions ended, Bianca rose from her stiff old knees, in luxurious slowness, grunting and blowing to her soul's comfort. Ah, it was good this leisurely lifting of a worn old body! Twenty years with the pack took the spring from the knees and pride from the back but never on any account must an old pedlar groan like a camel before the good customers! Now,

however, thanks to the alabaster box, she might wheeze, and sigh, and rise as slowly as she pleased.

“*Si, si*, Garibaldi, you shall have your suet and a crust,” she consoled the grey cat mewing round her feet. “Patience, patience!”

Later, while she sipped black tea, rocking peacefully before the frugal fire, and Garibaldi resumed his meditations, Bianca gave way to the luxury of dreams.

All her life she had wanted leisure to dream—as a girl in the olive orchards of her lovely Italy where soft blue skies and warm suns tempted, but there was bread to be got and a mother always ailing . . . “The getting of bread, Garibaldi, gives little time for dreams.” Still, with the coming of Piedro—Piedro the persuasive lover, bread had mattered less and dreams more than all. Bianca shrugged, baring broken teeth in a rueful smile. “Never doubt it, Garibaldi, lovers make short work of dreams. Poof! Bang! like the slamming of a shutter on a sunlit window. *Si*, but not for that we weep, but for the little ones all passing like the roses with never a day to give to their remembering.”

Bianca refilled her cup absently, a thousand long forgotten things flooding to confusion her tired mind and heart. What was lost in Italy she had thought to see reborn in America. *Si*, at sight of those broad yellow Canadian Prairies she had dared to dwell again on dreams . . . Alas, twenty years with the pack through the rains of summer and the snows of winter lay between that day and this.

Twenty years of toilsome tramping and slavish pleasantries to contemptuous people. “The pedlar? The pedlar? Send her away, we’ll have none of her truck!” Smiling, scraping, making pretty speeches to impertinent children, (never a one like her wee dead Mercedes), for to live one must eat. “Ten cents for a roll of tape? You old thief, it’s worth no more than five! Five eh? I thought so! Well, I’ll take it for five.” Day in, day out the same soul-wearing procedure. Bowing, scraping, the pack edged forward temptingly. “The pedlar again? Oh, slam the door, it’s much too cold for argument.”

Bianca ran fond eyes over the old red pack still lying in the corner. Ah, she could smile now, could Bianca. Come sleet to-morrow, thaw, cold wind, or driving snow, it mattered little. Like the ladies in the houses at whose back steps she had been scraping these many years she’d sit and watch the weather in vast unruffled content.

“*Si*, Garibaldi, with two hundred and thirty-seven dollars and fifty cents in the alabaster box no need to fear the weather.”

Just the same she hoped to-morrow would be fine. There was her dear *bambino* Mary-bell Jetta to visit. Mother of Goodness, hold her heart in keeping! How long was it now since that blessed child had entered into her barren life to make it sweet with human love once more? Five years? Six years? “Garibaldi, can you believe, it is eight years! Eight years come springtime! *Si, penseroso* that you are, Garibaldi, you can understand the joy of getting a friend.”

It was very wet that day, eight years ago, when at dusk she had entered the shop of Olse Jetta the shoemaker, a cold wet day with a hard wind blowing from the sullen waters of the Red River—a black day. Black, too, and very still, and smelling of much leather the shop of Olse the shoemaker. A pit of darkness, save where, by the boot lasts, a tall child, grave-eyed, stood bravely smiling.



“Your shoes are soaked, lady. Now you can dry them while you wait.”

“Come in, madam. Oh, you are wet! You are cold! Quick, you must dry yourself by the fire! This chair, please, madam, it is not so hard to rise from as the other.” True, for that other had no seat and but three legs to stand on.

“The shoemaker?”

“He soon will be back. Grandfather needs the air. A little walk in the evening does him good.”

“My shoes, *bambino*.”

“Let me see them, lady. Soaked through and through! Oh, how lucky grandfather is away, now you can dry them while you wait.”

That wait! Would she ever forget it? Mary-bell Jetta, smiling her sad brave smile as she fed the fire stick by stick from a meagre pile in the corner, talking of ships and the sea where they had once lived, and the dear mother who had died on the passage to Canada. Meanwhile the shadows deepened, and the grey eyes of Mary-bell deepened, too, and a strange expression, half dread, half pity gave a look of age to her pale little face.

Bianca knew men. “He is late, the grandfather? Perhaps it is better that I should come again to-morrow?”

“Dear madam, kind madam! It is warm here, and you are tired. Oh, I know, we will make tea!”

“God’s pity! Garibaldi, do you hear what I tell you? ‘We will make tea’ and the little can empty of all but a few sweepings. The bread-box worse and the wood fast vanishing.

“Listen, now,” Bianca struck an attitude, pitching her voice to a masculine growl: “‘Grow old along with me’ . . . fool, fool, who does not! ‘the best is yet to be!’” . . . Enter Olse Jetta, bowing, smiling; drunk as a lord and with a lordly manner: “A thousand pardons, madam, to keep you waiting. A thousand more to keep you yet awhile.”

Ah, Bianca had not known a Piedro for nothing! That once, the pennies went their proper channel . . . Olse Jetta slept and Bianca had earned a friend.

The morrow was kind. Cold, it is true, but bright, as only a prairie day can be bright, with a shine and a glitter and a leap of joy about it. But at the shop of Olse Jetta no joyous voice cried greeting; no light step sped to meet her.

“Mary-bell, *bambino*! What is this? You are sick? You are suffering, my child? Mary-bell Jetta! What has befallen you, jewel of my heart?”

Close, close to the bereaved breast of Bianca the young girl, slim as a reed, fair as the Holy Madonna, burrowed her tear-stained face. “That little pain we laughed at in the foot; you remember? It grew and grew and grew —”

Shudders, anguished and terrible, rent the young frame, and entered like a dart in the soul of Bianca. “There is something wrong with the foot? A doctor has seen it? A good doctor from the hospital?”

“Yesterday, mother Bianca. That is why you find me such a coward. Ah, how shall I bear it! Something is wrong with the ligaments. I cannot walk . . . I shall never walk again.”

Never walk? Mary-bell Jetta at the dawn of womanhood, the mother-heart like a warm bird in her bosom, never to walk again? No, no, God were not in his Heaven if feet so eager to serve might run no longer on missions of mercy!

Unbelievably tender the voice of Bianca: “My foolish *bambino*, one doctor is not all! There is a way. *Si*, you will yet teach that school in the country where the green runs out to meet the big sky. *Si, si*, and play at tag with a dozen grandchildren. Not walk? To say it is a blaspheme!”

Three hundred *aves* Bianca said to the good Saint Ann for the healing of Mary-bell Jetta, the Protestant. And still the weeks dragged on with never a sign of improvement. Then Bianca decided to take matters in her own hands. Bundled in her old mackintosh, last year’s felts on her tired feet, she trudged through the December snow to interview that doctor who, she suspected, never told Mary-bell the half of truth.

But Dr. Finn was brusque and honest. “Of course she may get better, but it requires skilful surgery.”

Bianca’s shrewd eyes narrowed just a little and a look Pietro once had feared swept across her weather-beaten countenance: “That skill, it comes not by charity? It takes money?”

“I’m afraid it does, my good woman. Though, of course, in a case like this we’d do our best—”

“How much?” Ah, Bianca could snap that query effectively! “How much, Mr. Doctor? *Si*, that best, how much?”

“Covering precious time only, time that another patient might be needing, you understand, I should say not over two hundred dollars.”

Bianca sat stunned. It must be very terrible that foot of Mary-bell Jetta’s to take so much mending. Two hundred dollars! . . . Two hundred dollars! . . . Hard earned—heart wrung . . . Two hundred—

“Mother of Sorrows! It will take long? Be very dreadful, that two-hundred-dollar doctoring?”

The question, scarcely more than a whisper, annoyed the celebrated surgeon. The pity of it, he had really made a generous offer. "Not at all. Skill, not time, my good woman, that's the thing . . . An hour, scarcely more, and your young friend walks again as well as ever."

All the way home the strangeness of it droned in her consciousness like an angry wasp. An hour! One little hour! Not enough time to sell ten shoe strings. Just one hour for two hundred dollars! Five years, six years—hands crooked like claws with the cold, feet like lead and the back one ache of protest, that made two hundred dollars for Bianca the pedlar. Skill, not time . . . Mercy of God! who gave that skill? . . . But the blessed *bambino* Marybell Jetta might walk again. . . .

That night Bianca took down the pack, from its roost in the shed, a very ingenious pack made from a round piece of red oil-cloth with brass curtain-rings tacked round the top. "Old one," said she, pulling the string sharply, setting all the rings jingling together, "to-morrow, give good weather, tinsel and red paper and holly ribbon sells without haggling."

A week later, on the twentieth of December to be exact, Bianca knocked at the door of the Padre Taddeo's little house just behind the humble church, precariously perched in the crook of the river. The Padre was very old, not so sharp of hearing: and his *soutane* quite as rusty and mud spattered round the hem as Bianca's shabby garments. They peered at each other those two, grown old in service, through the gloom of late twilight. The good Padre shook his head slowly as he smiled his recognition.

"Daughter, wasn't it you who prayed to be delivered from the pack? And here you are again tempting the weak and the foolish."

"*Si, si*, Padre Taddeo. But that pack he cries for the road. Like a lover he cries—to deny is impossible."

"Daughter, there is something else; something real. Bianca Corella, what are you up to now?"

Like a child confessing fault Bianca told her story in tumbled, incoherent sentences. Quick tears, and passionate prayers at first rendering much of it unintelligible and utterly confusing to the old Padre. But at last he understood the whole of it.

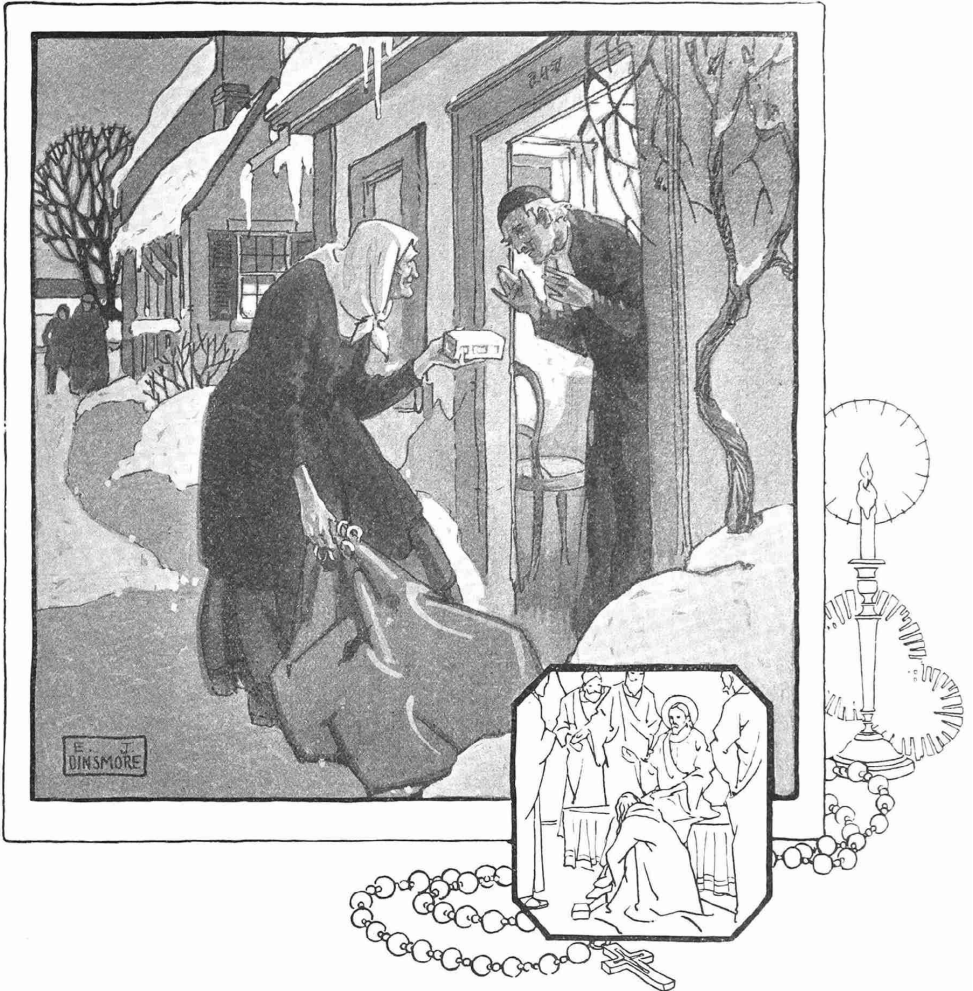
"This money, which is your all, you intend for the doctor? I am to keep it while you go down river to catch a death of rheumatism? I am to pay the great doctor the whole of your savings?"

“*Si, si, Padre.* So the little Mary-bell wakes on Christmas finding the foot like the good God made it.”

“It is madness. Bianca *mio*, you are much too old for the pack this weather. You say there is food and fuel till springtime. You said nothing of rent. A roof costs something?”

Bianca shrugged. “Ten dollars the month, since the new shingles. But, down river folks welcome a pedlar . . .”

“Think carefully,” the priest counseled. “It is not money only you are giving but rest and freedom; the much needed peace for the body’s healing.”



The old Padre would understand by and by; understand and approve.

Bianca forebore to answer. He would understand by and by, the old Padre; understand and approve.

Up from the depths of the pack came the alabaster box never before out of the keeping of good Saint Ann. Clumsily, with a nervous clatter she laid the precious thing on the stand between them, a mist of happy tears dimming her sharp old eyes. Gnarled, age-withered, unspeakably weary, but with the light of ineffable joy, soft as a lover's caress, on her wrinkled face she stood there gazing down upon it. Her precious alabaster box of sweet offering! Her gift, *per conto*.—*Si, con amore!*

Prudent words, prompted by pity for this waste of needed substance sprang to the Padre's lips never to be uttered. Bianca the pedlar renouncing with joy her last fond dream, was lifted high above his pity. Humbled before the glory in her face Padre Taddeo himself saw a great light:—

‘There came unto Him a woman having an alabaster box of very precious ointment and poured it on His head as He sat at meat . . . and they had indignation saying, to what purpose is this waste—’

“My dear daughter,” he said, at last, too wise, now, for other counsel, “what you wish shall be done. Mary-bell Jetta, God willing, wakes with joy on Christmas morning.”

Aye, joy ineffable; the joy of Christmas angels! So thought the Padre when, the miracle over, Mary-bell smiled into his face, her eyes clear wells of love and happy dreams.

“Bianca? My Bianca? Why is she not here? She must come. Unless it is too cold. She must come, my mother Bianca, to see me laugh and hear me tell about the little school we shall keep together . . .”

But down by the old Red River, where a small tar-papered shack crouches before the wind, a little group of women stood gathered. Some whispered. Some wept. Some talked indifferently. The old Padre, walking slowly, grey head bent, heard, before he saw them:—

“Dead! And not a soul with her. No, just a cat curled against her breast.”

“Yes, for several hours. It's heart failure they say.”

“What? At the feet of her patron saint? Ah, poor deluded woman!”

“Oh, very old. Eighty, if a day.”

“Well, she should have known better than try the roads this weather. What was she, Italian?”

“Heart failure, eh?”

“Yes, through exhaustion.”

“Exhaustion? Bianca? Why only last week she sold me Christmas candles as shrewdly as you please!”

Old age! exhaustion! heart failure! . . . Ah, no! Padre Taddeo, entering humbly that house of high devotion knew better. The good God had called Bianca from loneliness and toil to that Exceeding Peace awaiting the bearers of Alabaster Boxes spilled for Love’s Sake.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[End of *The Alabaster Box* by Laura Goodman Salverson]