

# MELINDA

A Story

By Antonio Muñoz



ONCE upon a time a baby girl was born to the wife of a rich man. The husband was exceedingly happy because it was their first child. Unfortunately the wife died on the following day; but just before she died, she said to her husband, "Baptize her yourself and name her Melinda. Then put her in the big trunk in my room. Get a large supply of milk and biscuit and store them in the same room. Do not forget to put in the kitchen utensils that may be needed in the preparation of our child's food. Neither should you forget to furnish the room with all the things that our daughter will need when she grows up. When these are done, close the room and lock it. Keep the key and do not open the door until after eighteen years. I shall take care of her until then."

The husband promised to do all that his wife asked him to do. The wife died immediately after her husband had made the promise.

The husband made good the promise he made to his dying wife. He provided the room in which the child was kept with all

the things that his wife asked him to put in. After the door was closed, it was never opened again.

A week later, he longed to see his dear child. He wanted to open the door but on second thought, he decided not to offend his dead wife.

The following year, he married again. The second wife was different from the first in that the former was haughty and cruel. A year after their marriage, the wife gave birth to a baby girl.

The years rolled swiftly by. The husband had never parted with the key to the door of what he considered the sacred room. His second daughter grew up to a beautiful young woman.

The eighteenth anniversary was drawing near. Only one more month was away. One day the husband went to visit his farm. Fate had its way for on that day he forgot to take the key with him. The wife who had always been anxious to open the door saw her chance. When her husband was gone, she got the key and opened the door. Finding no one inside, she went to the big trunk and opened it. What did she find? A beautiful young woman lay at the bottom of the trunk. She held her by the hand and pulled her out. She was dazzled by the beauty of the girl before her. Then her wicked instinct took possession of her for without any word she grabbed the girl and dragged her to the kitchen. With the help of the soot from the pans and kettles, she succeeded in making her black. After the

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finishing touches. Melinda looked exactly like a Negro girl. The wife was greatly relieved. She warned her not to tell anybody who she was and where she came from. Then she locked the door again and behaved as usual.

When the husband came back, everything looked as if nothing strange had happened. At dinner, he asked, "Who is this girl?"

"Oh she is our new servant," answered the wife. "She came this morning from the mountain while you were away."

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save me from a severe beating," begged Melinda.

"Take another fish with you," suggested the fish. "Your mistress will not know the truth."

Thereupon the fish pushed another fish to the side of the river. Melinda picked it up and carried it home. Her step-mother gave it to the cook. They had a fine dinner that day.

The next time Melinda went to the river, the fish talked to her again and she was happy. She came home late but her step-mother pretended not to notice it for she had a plan in her mind to find out why Melinda did not come home on time.

In the morning of the next day, Melinda was again on her way to the river. Her step-mother followed her. Safely hidden among the tall grass and bushes nearby, the cruel step-mother could see what was going on at the riverside. Yes, the girl was there talking to a fish. She

Melinda had to go to the river every day to fetch water. One day while she was filling her jar with water, a big fish put its head out of the water and greeted her. The girl and the fish talked for a long time but nobody knew what they talked about. The following day the same thing happened but when Melinda came home, her mistress or rather her step-mother scolded her and punished her.

"Why did you stay long at the river?" she thundered.

"A fish talked to me," Melinda told her the truth.

"What did it say to you?" asked her step-mother.

went home and waited for Melinda. When she came, the step-mother was furious. With a whip in her hand, she commanded Melinda to tell her the truth. The frightened girl told her step-mother that she met the fish again. She even told her that it was not the talking fish that she brought home the day before.

"What did the fish and you talk about?" she asked.

"Oh, that I cannot tell you for I don't remember anything now. As I have already told you, all that I can remember is that I was very happy in the presence of the fish. I even felt that I was a queen and not a servant," replied Melinda.

"I'll give you one more chance," the step-mother warned her. "Bring the talking fish here tomorrow."

Early the next morning, Melinda got her jar and went to the river.

"Why are you sad today?" asked the fish.

"Because my mistress wants you," answered Melinda.

"I cannot remember now what we talked about. I forgot everything it said as soon as it disappeared under the water. I only remember now that I was very happy during our conversation. Yes, I was so happy that I thought I was a queen then," replied Melinda.

The next day when Melinda was ready to go to get water, her step-mother said, "If the fish comes out again, bring it home with you, otherwise, I'll punish you severely."

When Melinda reached the river, the fish was there waiting for her.

"My mistress wants me to take you home. Please do something to

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"She will have me," said the fish. "but she will regret it. Take me home, dear child, but save the scales, fins, bones, and all other parts of my body that they will not need. Wrap them all in a piece of cloth and immediately after dinner today, take the package to the side of the brook behind the hill near your house and bury it there. Visit the place after three days and you will be happy thereafter. You must not eat any part of my body. Remember that, will you?"

"Yes, I'll do all that you say," Melinda assured the fish.

Melinda picked up the fish and took it home. She stayed with the cook and gathered all the parts that were to be thrown away. After dinner, she also collected all the bones and wrapped them in a handkerchief. When the members of the family were taking their siesta, she ran to the brook behind the hill and buried the package in a mound nearby. Then she went home.

*(To be continued)*