

SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

by Elvina Granlie

The old sign that hung in the window facing the street timidly conveyed to the passerby that the ancient, rather colonial building was the residence of "Lily Grinneth, Seamstress," who specialized in "Fashionable Dressmaking and Renovations". There was nothing peculiar at all about the sign, but often the people of the town who passed by were seen to shrug their shoulders and whisper about it, and smile very secretly with the corners of their mouths. Very seldom did any of them enter the low, curtained, sewing room where Miss Grinneth presided, but the few who called upon her merely out of curiosity or to have some necessary service done that cannot be acquired elsewhere in town, entertained their neighbors with the gossip about Miss Lily for many weeks at a time.

Nor was there anything peculiar about Miss Grinneth. She was a quiet, lonely old woman with a tender wistfulness in her expression. She was stout at the hips from constantly sitting still at her sewing, while she cut, patched, and sewed garments with the skill that is born of long practice. Most of the time she was contented with her work, but there came moments of mental depression in which she closed her shop, drew down the blinds and retired to her bedroom to brood over the one particular event of the past that had changed her whole life. Almost invariably before these moods were spent, she would get up and go to the closet, and lift out a soft blue dress of shining silk, which she spread out upon the bed. Then she would sit down near it without touching it, and

gaze at it with aching bitterness in her eyes. Sometimes the bitterness of the memories brought forth hot tears that flowed through her colorless lashes unheeded and ran down the wrinkles in her cheeks.

At these times, she could envision clearly every incident that had led to that event. She could see herself as she had been, young and pretty, skipping home from school with Maisie Ross, who had been her best friend. Maisie had worked in a downtown clothing shop after school hours because her parents were poor. She had often told Lily that she thought the Brandon & Son's clothing shop the most attractive place in town, and Lily secretly agreed with her because Dexter Brandon's father owned it. Dexter, tall, dark and romantic, had been her school boy hero. It thrilled her to be near him and just to hear this name spoken had sent quick color into her cheeks and caused her heart to flutter in ecstasy. It was because of Dexter that she had spent so much time at the shop with Maisie. Strange that she had not been conscious of the bitter jealousy with which Maisie regarded Dexter's advances to her. She had been blind to the fact that Maisie loved him, too.

On that glorious May morning that Dexter had said, "Lily, I want you more than any other girl in school to be my partner at the Senior Prom tonight, she had been suffused with pride and joy, and eager to tell Maisie. Later, it was disappointing that Maisie grew sullen and silent when she heard it. Lily remembered the sharp pain of sympathy that she had felt for her then. She knew that her friend's heart ached with a sense of unfairness from being snubbed by her schoolmates because she was poor and shabbily dressed. In an attempt to console her, Lily had

offered to lend Maisie a gown out of her own adequate wardrobe to wear to the dance that night.

"Oh, it isn't that," Maisie had assured her. "I have a new dress. A lovely blue silk with all ruffles, you know, and lace ..."

And it was a lovely dress. Lily gasped when she saw Maisie's dress that night in Maisie's room -- lace-edge ruffles, an exquisite blue and a sparkling stream that rippled and danced on a June night were gathered at the waist with one clear rhinestone that reflected the color of the sky.

"How beautiful! Oh, Maisie, you will be the queen of the dance tonight wearing your blue dress!"

But Maisie had not been very enthusiastic. She combed through her hair in silence before she spoke again.

"My dress is too narrow for me in the waist," she explained lamely. "If you would like to wear it, you may."

In the end, Lily had worn Maisie's blue dress and had been the center of attraction in that magic night of music, laughter and ecstasy. Dexter had murmured tender and endearing words in her ear -- she could hear them even now: "You and I together, Lily. Let's be together like this always."

Oh, that the night could have lasted forever! But it hadn't and the days that followed brought complications s undreamed of, that Lily Grinneth was still dazed with the lack of understanding as to how it had happened. How could she know that Maisie's dress that Lily had worn had been missing at the Brandon and Son's clothing shop? Stolen, they said it was, because there was no record of it in the sales books. The

manager remembered that Miss Grinneth was a frequent visitor at the shop. Could she explain how she had come to wear the frock? Maisie Ross? But that couldn't be possible. All evidence was against Miss Grinneth. Even Miss Ross had testified against her with implied accusations. They would be considerate and not question Miss Grinneth further but would let the matter drop if she would consent to pay for the garment.

Stunned and hurt beyond words, beyond even the power to think, Lily had paid for the dress -- the dress that Maisie had taken out of her own wardrobe for Lily to wear! Lily paid for it out of pity for the trembling Maisie, and had gone home to her parents to cry out the pain in her heart. She, whose morals were pure and clear, who had honestly tried hard to do right always, was suspected of stealing!

After that, gossip about her spread like wildfire through the town. Dexter married Maisie, and Lily Grinneth shut herself apart from the world, shunned and grief-stricken. Her parents who felt her grief as keenly as she did, lingered only until the autumn of that year. Then they, too, passed out of her life, and she was left alone in heart-aching solitude with her bitter memories.

With the passing of years, Miss Grinneth was comforted by a feeling akin to pride, that she had sacrificed so much to save the reputation of her friend. No one knew that it was Maisie who had sinned by yielding in the crisis of temptation. How she had succeeded in taking it, Maisie alone knew.

She and Dexter had a daughter now. Often Miss Grinneth thought of the child and wondered what she was like. She had a sort of maternal regard for her, though she had never seen her. It seemed almost as if the child was of her own flesh and spirit. With every year that passed, she marked the child's birthdays. On the day that the child was seven, she had sewed for her a dainty frock of pink organdy and had woven into each stitch an earnest hope, a happy wish for her. When it was finished, she reverently stored it away, among the other tiny garments of the birthdays before. Then, years later, when the girl was seventeen, she made a set of silk lingerie of the rose tints of dawn. That was the last gift that had marked the birthdays of Dexter's daughter. Today she was almost eighteen.

As if in a dream, Miss Grinneth saw the dress that she would make for her. A pale blue taffeta -- But, oh no, not blue! Blue was such a sad color. There was not a shade of blue among the garments that hung in her sewing room on hangers that were marked "For Sale." She wanted none of her customers to have a blue dress with ruffles and an azure rhinestone that reflected the dolor of the sky. It reminded her of Dexter, and dark despair surged over her until she felt a wild impulse to tear the garment, that had been the cause of her sorrow, to shreds and trample its beauty under her feet. Then, when she thought of Dexter's daughter again, calm came upon her. All that day, she worked with a new energy.

In the last afternoon, Miss Grinneth heard footsteps on the sidewalk outside the door. They stopped. Then the knocker sounded. Miss Grinneth arose and there flashed across her mind, a sense that told

her some fulfillment as at hand. She moved to the door and opened it. One the steps stood a young girl. There was something so familiar about her in spite of the pale, haughty face and hard, painted lips that Miss Grinneth could not speak.

"Well?", the young girl asked impatiently. "Aren't you the lady who sews? I've come to look at your gowns. I've been at every shop in town, but none of them suits me, and I simply have to find something presentable for the Senior Prom tonight."

She came in and handed the seamstress her card. Miss Grinneth took one look at it and reeled dizzily. Mary Brandon! Then this girl was Maisie's daughter. This girl was Dexter's daughter.

"Haven't you any others but these?", asked the cool, contemptuous voice again. "These dresses are so hopelessly old fashioned. They don't wear short skirts nowadays. One would think a seamstress would study fashions. Are those awful things all you have?"

Miss Grinneth straightened herself with an effort.

"They are all I have to sell ...", she began.

"Oh, dear." Mary Brandon interrupted her with almost a sob in her voice. "Why is everything so disgusting? I have set my sights on having a blue dress tonight. But Mother has to be spiteful and talk about blue being a sad color, and about making grave mistakes, until Mother is angry and they quarrel again -- why are you staring at me like that?"

Miss Grinneth barely heard her. A wild, daring thought grew in her mind. In a daze, she heard herself speak to the young girl as she

went toward the closet. Trembling, she lifted out the long blue dress of shining silk, smoothed it out for the last time, and held it out to Maisie's daughter.

Mary Brandon was speechless with delight. Gone was her arrogance. She knelt beside the dress to get the feel of it.

"Oh, I want it to be mine," she whispered and when she looked up at Miss Grinneth, there were tears in her eyes.

"It is yours," Miss Grinneth said slowly. Then suddenly she knelt down and took the girl in her arms. All her pent up love went out to Dexter's daughter in the embrace. She kissed the high, white forehead that was so like Dexter's and held the slim young body close to hers. "I know your mother, she said at length and your father, too. I have known you always."

One by one, she brought out the treasured birthday gifts and placed them on the floor beside Mary. Then she told her about them.

"Oh, Miss Grinneth!", Mary cried. "Mother has never given me anything like this. She has never kissed me, and been so kind to me like you are. I love you. I wish you were my mother!"

Later, when she was going out the door with her treasures, she waved back a promise that she would come again. Miss Grinneth sat down weakly. The room was full of Dexter. Through the twilight mists that had gathered, his soul reached out to hers. He had made a grave mistake. Yet after all these years, his love had come back again and would never die. She raised her eyes in mute thankfulness to the tablet of Ten Commandments that hung about her on the wall.

"Seventh Commandment," she read through the vale of tears that swam before her eyes. "Thou shall not steal." In her heart, there was only tender sympathy and understanding for Maisie.

"He who hath my commandments and keepeth them," she murmured through lips that grew tremulous as she thought about Dexter. "He it is, who loveth me."

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