

ESCAPE IN SPRING

BY MARTHA OSTENSO



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Title: Escape in Spring

Date of first publication: 1939

Author: Martha Ostenso (1900-1963)

Date first posted: Jan. 9, 2019

Date last updated: Jan. 9, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20190152

This ebook was produced by: Mardi Desjardins, Jen Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

A tale that will tug at
your heartstrings—of
fate's strange gift of
love to two lonely lives

ESCAPE IN SPRING

BY MARTHA OSTENSO

ESTHER THORNE had transferred the last of the young tomato plants from the cold frame to the hill garden, and sat back now on the sun-warmed earth to rest for a moment before going back to the house. She was tired. Each year, it seemed, putting in the garden was becoming more and more tiring.

It had not been so fifteen years ago, she thought to herself. That was the year she had come to this Dakota farm, the bride of handsome young Jason Thorne—handsome and proud, too, because he was bringing his young wife to the land that had once been his father's homestead. It had been an opulent land in those days, yielding its forty bushels of wheat to the acre, and the future of Jason and Esther had been radiant with promise.

There would be strapping big sons like their father, and daughters with the lush bloom of their mother upon them, to reflect the generous sunny health of this rolling prairie. And one day the eldest son—unless he chose to study medicine, law, or the like—would himself inherit the dark rich furrow his grandfather's plow had first turned up from the limitless grass.

But there had been no eldest son, and no youngest daughter. Two years after the marriage of Jason and Esther Thorne, their son had been stillborn, and Esther had returned from the very brink of death to learn that for her there could never be another child.

She could not have lived through it during those long months of invalidism, had it not been for Jason's tenderness and selfless cheer. He had sent for Josie, that buxom sister of his, to do the housework until Esther was able to do it herself. She had been unreasonable, she realized now, but she had grown thoroughly to hate the girl for her unspoiled body. In the tedium of her convalescence, too, she had seen beneath Jason's anxious care for her and had discerned his crushing disappointment, his misery in the bleak wiping out of

his hopes.

Even when she was at last able to take up her household duties again, Esther's brooding habits had clung to her. Year after year she became more firmly convinced that Jason Thorne resented a wife who could not present him with a son and heir.

Year after year she saw him draw away from her, more and more preoccupied with the yield of his land. He talked, ate, slept, worked, dreamed "crops," until the land became to Esther another Josie and she abominated it with the very core of her deprived heart.

There came an end to that, however, in that first overwhelming year of drought, when dust storms whirled fantastically over skeleton fields, and Esther saw the land as a counterpart of herself, fruitless, arid, a thing to be despised. Why had she stayed through that year, and through the next final devouring drought as well, watching Jason's face month after month grow more gray with defeat, his eyes never meeting hers except with aversion and chagrin? Had she stayed because of a helpless love and pity for the man she had married? Or had it been because there was no place for her to go? She could not, even now, answer that question. It would have been better, perhaps. . . .

And then, miraculously, there had come the reclaiming of the land from the powdery jaws of the dust: Russian thistle, to hold down the remnant of soil, anchor it; the strange new design in plowing—like combing your hair another way until your scalp ached. And the land tremulously rose from the grave—rose to remind Esther that she had not been able to do as much, she who had once been lovely and was now a stringy-haired, gaunt-faced creature hard on forty. As if to taunt her even more, Jason was at work in the fields again, hope revived, heart quickened with a new resolve, eyes bright with a new promise, Jason was young once more.

It was in the elation of that time that he had met Carol Andrews, the waitress in the Elite Café, in the county seat fifty miles away. Esther had seen the girl once or twice, and had seen the way Jason looked at her, although he never spoke of her except too casually. Carol had the moist-flesh look of Josie, of the replenished land, of young life awaiting its hour of fulfillment. And when, this morning, Jason drove away to a cattle auction at the county seat, to be gone for two nights, Esther's heart had shrunken into a knot of terror. He would be staying with his sister Josie, of course—married now and insufferably proud of her four children—but suppose he came back and told her that he wanted Carol

Andrews, because Carol could give him what she, Esther, could not? . . .

She stood up quickly and looked down the slope where the spring was a living flood of light and warmth and muted whisperings. The cottonwoods were a mist of tender green, the prairie anemones a purplish blur in the sunlight. It should have been pleasant to look down to the vast sweep of the fields where life, quiet and inscrutable, was stirring once more under a spread of blue sky. But all the pleasure had gone from it now. For this was the month, thirteen years ago, when Esther's dreams had been shattered forever. Jason would have forgotten that. He would be looking forward to better things. To Carol Andrews, perhaps, while Esther was alone here to do the milking and count the dead purposeless hours.

She picked up the cold frame and walked down the gentle slant of the garden to the square white house with its clean yard and substantial red barn and outbuildings. The starched curtains of the kitchen gave her a frilly wink as she approached. Esther Thorne was the best of housekeepers, people said. And that, she knew disconsolately, was all. She went indoors and looked at herself in the glass above the kitchen sink: her spiritless eyes that had once been dark pools of laughter and love; her chestnut hair, faintly graying, indifferently pulled back now so that its natural wave was not visible; and her mouth strained away from the full sweet curve it had once had. Was it any wonder that Jason seemed no longer to care how she looked? Tears came hot on her lids. And yet she could not honestly say that she felt alarm at the thought of Carol Andrews taking her place. She had lived too long with a sense of emptiness and frustration to feel anything.

Automatically she began to water the geraniums on the windowsill. Glancing out toward the barn, she was startled out of her dull reverie by the sight of a shadowy figure darting in through the barn door. Who on earth could that be? The nearest farm was almost five miles distant, and nobody at the Andersons' would have an errand at the Thorne barn. Besides, she had heard no car come in from the highway. She set aside the dipper with which she had been watering the flowers and stepped out into the yard.

She stood at last at the barn entrance, her eyes searching the empty stalls that ran the length of the interior, all but hidden now in the spring dusk, except where a moted ladder of radiance from the low sun slanted in through the small window just under the loft floor. She listened intently, the sound of her heart clearly audible to her above the complete silence. When she heard no motion, she called softly: "Who's in there?"

Something moved within the shadows, made a sound like a choked sob. Esther's hand clutched at her breast as she looked in the direction from which the sound had come, somewhere at the far end of the barn, just beyond the bright ray that lay across a manger.

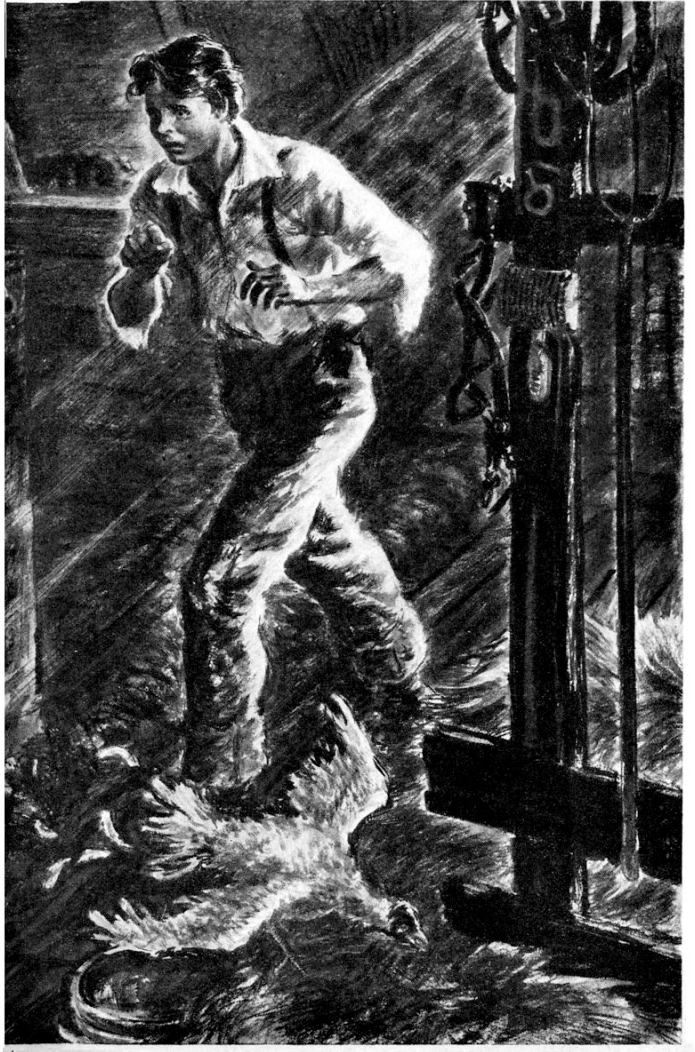
For a moment she was afraid. Then, suddenly, she was angry. "You'd better come out, whoever you are! You've no business in there!"

As she spoke, a ragged form lifted itself slowly and stood almost directly in the stream of sunlight. "You can't touch me—you *can't*! I'm free! I can go where I want."

Esther stood for a moment and looked at the boy, for he was no more than a boy, his gangling height deceiving at a distance. His thin shoulders were drawn forward and his arms lifted as if he had set himself against an attack. His face was white beneath its weathered tan, his eyes full of terror, his dark hair hanging limp and moist over his sullen brows. He had neither hat nor coat and his shirt was open halfway down the front.



Esther stood for a moment and looked at the boy.
His face was white beneath its weathered tan,
his eyes full of terror.



OF course—you can go where you want,” Esther said gently. “I’m not going to touch you, boy. You needn’t be afraid of me. But—who are you? And what are you doing here?”

His lips twisted into a wary grin. “I ain’t tellin’ that. You get away from that door. I’m comin’ out, and you can’t stop me.”

Esther took a step toward him. “Listen—”

“Don’t you come near me,” he warned her fiercely.

Esther halted. “All right, I won’t. But look—it’s near suppertime. You must be hungry. When did you eat last?”

“Before I left—” He checked himself hastily. “No—I’m not talkin’. Let me out of here, that’s all.”

Esther moved to one side. “I won’t try to stop you.” She waited for a moment, but he did not move. He was watching her narrowly, his lips tightly drawn. “Listen,” she said at last. “I’ve got some fresh cinnamon buns in the kitchen. Some I made this morning. And there’s a stew simmering on the range. And—”

“Who’s at the house?” he demanded.

She smiled. “There isn’t a soul. Jason—he’s my husband—went away this morning.” Perhaps she shouldn’t say too much about being alone, she thought suddenly. “If you’d rather—I could bring something out and you could eat it here. If you promise to wait till—”

“You’re goin’ to send somebody out to get me,” he interrupted, his voice shrill with alarm.

Esther drew herself up impatiently. “Do I look like a person who would do that?”

He shook his head slowly, his eyes widening in a childlike way. “I don’t know—I guess you don’t.”

“Will you wait here, then?”

The boy gave a pitiful little swagger. “I’ll take a chance. I’ll go to the house with you. Only—you go ahead. I’ll follow you.”

Esther did not venture to look behind her until she came to the doorstep of the back porch. “If you’ll pick up a few sticks of wood from the pile there,” she suggested, “we’ll keep the fire going.”

“Sure,” he said, and there was a note almost of eagerness in his voice as he hurried toward the pile of wood Jason had ranged against the porch wall.

It was only then that Esther noticed how the boy limped.

FEW minutes later, the table set with the yellow linen cloth kept for special

occasions, Esther was dishing up a big helping of savory stew for the boy. The **A** stew was some that had been left over from last night, and she reserved only a small portion for herself.

“Now, then,” she said as she set the plate before him and noticed with a twist at her heart that his eyes were fairly devouring the food. “But don’t eat too fast. It’s not good for you to eat too fast, and there’s lots of time.”

“Maybe I better wash up a little—before I eat,” he mumbled, his face going fiery red.

“That’s a good idea,” said Esther brightly, and poured hot water for him from the stove reservoir. “Here’s a clean towel for you.”

But while he ate, and when Esther got up once or twice to fetch something from the pantry, his eyes followed her every move. His feet were twisted awkwardly under his chair, his body taut as if he were set to spring.

Twice Esther glanced covertly from the window, where the light was fading to dove-gray and rose. It would be dark before very long. What was she going to do? You couldn’t let a boy wander away by himself, with night coming on. There was no doubt in Esther’s mind that he was wanted somewhere for something he had done. He was so young, and yet—in these days—the names of mere boys had figured with tragic prominence in newspaper headlines. She would have to find out about him somehow and without awakening his suspicion.

“Here—let me give you some more milk,” she said, and took the blue pitcher from the icebox. “Drink all you want.”

“O. K.”

“And maybe you’d like to take something with you, in your pocket, to eat along the way,” she ventured, and watched him closely. “I could put up some sandwiches in a jiffy.”

He didn’t answer, and Esther had to turn away quickly from the look that came into his eyes. He began to mop hastily with a piece of bread at the gravy on his plate. How long his lashes were over his sober gray eyes! A thought came suddenly to her then: If her own boy had lived . . .

“How old are you?” she asked as casually as she could, and began cutting him a piece of apple pie. Her lips curved in a smile as she thought of the cautious game she was playing with him.

“Going on fourteen,” he told her, and thanked her as she set the pie before him.

Fourteen. Jason’s son would have been just “going on fourteen” now. Only Jason’s son would not have had the thin shoulders, the pinched face—and that hunted look in his eyes. Esther felt a quick grasp at her heart, a sudden tightening in her throat. She had to look away once more.

“I had a boy once,” she said absently. “If he had lived he would have been just about your age.”

“Yeah?” His voice was scarcely more than a breath. And for the first time he permitted his eyes to wander away from Esther. He sat for a moment gazing into space. “That’s funny,” he said at last. “I was thinking my—my mother would have been just about like you. She was pretty.”

Pretty! Esther wondered if she had heard right. “You have no mother?” she asked hurriedly, feeling the warm color rising in her cheeks.

The boy shook his head.

“And your father?”

“I don’t know about him. He went away—and he never came back.”

“Oh—” Esther wanted to ask him more, but she thought better of it. She stacked the dishes into the sink. Then she went back to the icebox and took out a platter of cold beef. “If I had known you were coming,” she said almost gaily, “I’d have had a chicken.”

The boy grinned so that for a moment his eyes lost their frightened look. Esther laughed. The tension between them was broken at last.

“What do they call you?” she asked.

“Billy.”

“Well, Billy, next time you come to see me—”

Her words died abruptly. The boy leaped to his feet and stood with his stricken eyes upon the door. “Who’s that?”

Esther had heard the car come to a stop in the driveway. She stepped to the door and stood with her back against it.

“No—don’t go out!” she whispered. “Go into the other room and close the

door.”

The boy darted for the doorway, then hesitated. “You won’t let them come —”

“No, no, Billy. Hurry!”

He vanished, and Esther waited until he had closed the door. Then she stepped out through the back porch into the twilit yard.

She drew a sigh of relief when she looked toward the driveway and saw the car that belonged to Olav Anderson, the Thornes’ nearest neighbor. The old man himself was at the wheel.

“Hello, Olav!” she hailed him.

Olav lowered a window and thrust his head out. “Hello, Essie! You getting along all right vit Yason away?”

“Sure, Olav!” Esther laughed. “What could happen to me?”

“Vell, my old voman vant I should come in on my way from town and see you’re all right. Yason, he von’t be back tonight, eh?”

“No, nor tomorrow night, either,” she said. “But I’ll be all right. You won’t come in for a while?”

“No, I go on home now, yust so you’re all right.”

“How’s Mrs. Anderson?”

“Ya—so good as ever. Not’ing to do but sit all day and drink coffee and hear the radio till she get too lazy for not’ing.”

“She did enough work when she was younger,” Esther reminded him. “And it won’t hurt Greta to look after things now and let her mother sit. I’ve been too busy to turn the radio on since Jason left this morning.”

“Ya—you vork! I know. Vell, I guess I go home now. My old voman says you should lock the doors till Yason gets home. She hear on the radio dere’s some young fella got loose and mebbe he come dis vay. So you look out, eh?”

Esther laughed. “No young fellow would bother me.”

“Ya—vell, so you t’ink, eh? If I was young fella, mebbe I show you different.”

HE laughed and waved his hand as he turned his car about, and Esther stood watching it disappear through the cottonwood grove. Then she went into the house with a nervously beating heart. What had she done—what was she doing now? It had all seemed very simple at first. A boy had wandered into the barn and she had taken him to the house out of common human pity. But had that been all? Had she not kept him with her because his mere presence filled a void in her heart, stilled an ache that had not ceased to smolder in thirteen years? The thought that she might be harboring a young malefactor and helping him to evade the consequences of his own misdeeds came to her with a shock. In the end the boy would be caught—and punished—no matter how he tried to dodge his pursuers.

But who with any heart could have done other than what she had done after seeing Billy's eyes as he stood there in the ray of sunshine that fell across the manger? Now, though, what was she to do? If only Jason were home! . . .

But the boy must be in an agony of suspense. With a trembling throughout her body, she crossed the kitchen and opened the door to the inner room.

"It's all right, Billy," she said in a firm, bright voice. "You can come out. It wasn't anybody."

His response came, thin and reedy: "Are they gone?"

"Yes, yes. Don't be afraid. It was just a neighbor."

He came slowly into the kitchen, dragging one leg, his face turned from her. But she had seen his grimace of pain. She drew down the blinds and looked at him as he hunched himself on a chair beside the stove, his hands clenched on his knees. A reckless decision came to her.

"You'd better stay here with me tonight, Billy," she said in a matter-of-fact tone. "Nobody will disturb us, and you need a good rest. Will you tell me what happened to your leg?"

The boy dug his knuckles into his eyes and burst into hard little sobs. Esther knelt beside him, her arms warm and strong about his taut, bony shoulders. "Billy—you mustn't cry!"

He writhed in shame at his own tears. "They sent me to my uncle. It was him that kicked me—yesterday morning. That's why I run away. It was worse than the—the reform school."

"Reform school? I see. Well, I knew a boy who stayed there awhile—years

ago. He's a fine big man now. He's—he's mayor of a town I used to live in." Esther chuckled. "He did the silliest thing. He got in with a gang of older boys, and they made him swipe things out of a store."

Billy gazed at her with wet and luminous eyes. "Yeah—I know. Shorty Moran told me he'd beat me if I didn't swipe the flashlights out of old Dinkey's hardware. And then they made me the lookout when they broke into another place. That's when the cop got us."

A breath-taking pang crossed Esther's breast. "That's just like what happened to this man I used to know. But he came out of the school and went to work, and now—he's a great man who isn't afraid any more, and everybody loves him."

He looked at her wonderingly. "Yeah?"

"Sure!" she laughed. "And you can be like him, Billy. Listen—we'll straighten all this out together, eh? But first you'd better let me have a look at that leg and see if we can't fix it up."

She was appalled when she rolled down his grimy tattered sock beneath the frayed pants leg. On his shin there was an ugly bruise from which the skin had been torn away. Particles of dust and chaff clung to the wound.

"There's just one place for you, young man," Esther said swiftly, "and that's in bed! Come on. There's a small spare room upstairs. You can have it all to yourself, and I'll fix up that leg of yours."

By ten o'clock the boy had been asleep for hours in the clean warm bed upstairs. But Esther still sat at the table in the kitchen, the darning basket on her lap, the work only half done. How many times had she not risen in a panic at the sound of a car going past on the highway? But no sound came closer than the bleating of the ewes in the lambing pen. If only Jason were home! she thought again. He would know what to do. And what he would do, she knew, would not be heartless, however little there was of tenderness within him for her. But he would probably be angry with her when he found out that she was sheltering some one who was being sought by the authorities. He was so circumspect always, was Jason!

She looked again at the clock, and had an incredible yearning to glance in on the boy, to reassure herself that he was still actually there. She could take him up a glass of hot milk, so that if he were awake she would have some sort of excuse.

She got up from the table. Moving across the kitchen, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror above the sink. She paused for a moment and stared at her reflection. The boy had said that she was like his mother—"pretty." She took down her hair, waved it softly about her face. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement, her eyes brighter than they had been in months—in years, perhaps. But her lips looked actually pale. How long it had been since Jason had really kissed those lips! There was a lipstick tucked away in a bureau drawer upstairs, and a box of fragrant face powder Greta Anderson had given her for Christmas. Why shouldn't she look "pretty," if for no other reason than to remind Billy even more of his own mother? There was nothing silly in that, she told herself defiantly. Anyhow, there was no one else around to see it or think it ridiculous.

Before the mirror in her own bedroom she stood back and regarded herself almost with amazement. If she brought out the blue-and-white flowered silk, now—the one she had not worn since last summer, and then only once or twice, at the Old-Timers' Picnic and at the school-board meeting . . . She began to laugh at herself. Not tonight—that would be absurd. Tomorrow night, maybe, after supper. And she and Billy would sit together in the living room. *Tomorrow night?* Why, Billy would have gone by that time.

She went downstairs quietly and heated the milk. When she came back up again and stood listening at the door of the small room, she heard the boy move and moan.

"You'd better drink this milk, Billy," she said softly as she went into the room and bent over him. "You'll sleep better if you do."

He blinked drowsily up at her. He drank the milk, smiled, and was asleep again almost at once.

ESTHER was up as usual at daybreak, moving quietly about the house. She had scarcely finished eating her breakfast when she heard a furtive movement on the stairs. She went quickly into the other room and saw him peering over the banister.

"Is it all right?" he whispered apprehensively. "Can I come down?"

"Come on," she said. "I thought I'd let you sleep and give that leg of yours a chance to—"

"It's a lot better," he told her. "I could help you with the work after breakfast."

Esther thought swiftly. She could smuggle him back and forth between house and barn, she supposed, without any danger of his being seen by any one passing. "Well, come and have breakfast, anyhow," she said. "We can talk about work when you've had something to eat."

"O. K.—but I can milk good, and that won't hurt my leg."

It was a perfect day, windless and golden, and as the hours passed Esther came strangely to feel that she had had the boy with her here always. His first hostile wariness, like that of some beaten animal, had melted under her tactful treatment of him. Every now and then, with sudden impulsiveness, he told her something of his past. Much of it he hurried over with a stout, pathetically mature embarrassment; but over some of it they laughed together, and Esther was enchanted by his laugh.

She was happy, radiantly happy, after all these years. Whenever she saw her own reflection in the glass—she had taken the trouble to water-wave her hair softly again this morning—her heart quickened with pleasure. And in the evening, after she had put on the flowered silk dress and had come downstairs to play checkers with Billy, it occurred to her suddenly that all day she had not given a single thought to Carol Andrews! Nor had she once thought of letting the boy go. She was being just foolish, she realized now; but she had wanted this day more than any thing else in the world, and she had had it. She refused to think of tomorrow. Billy had said nothing about tomorrow, either, and she had not dared to ask him, for fear of breaking the spell that held them both.

Now, in the mellow lamplight, they sat down at the claw-foot center table in the living room, the checkerboard between them. Billy looked at her with a shy glow of admiration.

"My mother always used to fix herself up after supper, too. She sewed for people." He flushed then, and immediately gave his solemn attention to the board.

The spring night was still. A bird twittered on its nest under the porch roof.

Twice the boy handily but politely beat Esther, and then she won a game. She was clapping her hands gaily at her triumph when she heard the car drive in. Billy sprang in panic to his feet, his eyes enormous.

"Go upstairs!" Esther ordered. "Whoever it is, I'll have them away soon." She swept the checkers into a drawer.

She stood trembling on the porch, and saw that two automobiles had stopped

in front of the house. The first was Jason's. He got out and spoke to the tall heavy-shouldered man who emerged from the other car. It was Pete Nolan, the sheriff from Billings Creek.

"Why—Jason!" she called breathlessly. "How'd you get back so soon?"

"Got everything done a day sooner than I expected," Jason told her. "I picked Pete up along the way. Come on in, Pete."

"Evening, Essie!" the big man laughed. "Don't believe a word Jason tells you. I practically had to handcuff him to get him out of town."

"I'll bet you did," Esther laughed, but her throat tightened up so that she could say no more.

They entered the house, Jason going straight to the kitchen. He was carrying a large paper bag. Esther drew a chair for the sheriff, then followed Jason. He was lifting a picnic bottle of beer out of the bag.

"Pete has been on the road all day," he explained, "so I thought I'd get something to wet his whistle before he goes back to the Creek. He—"

Jason paused and looked queerly at Esther. His puzzled frown moved from her hair, her face, down over her dress. She felt her cheeks suddenly stinging with color, and swallowed desperately at the knot in her throat.

"What are *you* celebrating?" he asked, looking again at her hair as if he had never seen it before. An odd expression came into his eyes. "Been having visitors?"

"Don't be silly!" she exclaimed a little sharply.

In a moment they were seated about the table in the living room, Jason pouring the beer.

"Pete's been on a man hunt," he announced, handing a glass to Esther, his eyes once more searching her face in astonishment—and something deeper.

"A man hunt!" Esther cried. "Good gracious!"

"Well, just a boy hunt this time," Pete Nolan said.

Esther moved the lamp to one side of the table. "Oh, yes; Olav Anderson said something about it. He came by last night, on his way from town, to see if I was all right. You didn't expect to find the boy here, did you?" she asked

carelessly.

“No tellin’, Essie,” the sheriff said. “He was headed this way last we heard of him. We’ve broadcast a description, and I’m just askin’ along the way, in case—”

I HAVEN’T had the radio on all day,” Esther said. “What did he do?”

“Nothin’ serious. Jumped his parole. We had him in the reformatory for a year or so—got mixed up with some young bandits stealin’ car parts and sellin’ the stuff to secondhand stores. Bresky, his name is. Billy Bresky. We took him out o’ school a coupla weeks ago and put him in the custody of his uncle on a farm just outside Raymond. Hasn’t any folks of his own. His mother died five or six years ago, after the father deserted them. Just one o’ them situations. The kid didn’t hit it off any too well with the uncle, I guess, and day before yesterday he skipped out.” Nolan was a kindly man, but now he scowled. “We can’t have him runnin’ wild. That’s the kind that makes trouble later on if they’re not watched. Nine out of ten of ’em turn bad just as soon as they think nobody’s lookin’.”

“What will you do with him when you do find him?” Esther steadied her voice and avoided Jason’s eyes.

The sheriff took a gulp of beer. “There ain’t much we can do, except put him back where he was. But if I catch any o’ them bohunks up north there tryin’ to hide him out, I’ll make it plenty tough for them.”

“Is he—Bohemian?” Esther inquired.

“His mother was something of the sort.”

Esther flung up her head with sudden courage. “The poor kid probably isn’t trying to get anywhere in particular. He just wants to get away. And that’s natural at his age.”

“What do you know about what’s natural at his age?” Jason demanded. Then, because he caught the look of pain that shadowed her eyes, he added, “I mean, you can’t let a kid run wild.”

Esther challenged him: “What would you have done?”

Jason had scarcely taken his eyes off her face. He leaned toward her. “Say, you’re not holding out on us, are you, Esther? Do you know anything about this kid?”

She tried to laugh at his question, as if it were absurd; but her face felt stiff and the sound all but died in her throat. And in that moment, his eyes piercing her, Jason knew the truth. He got suddenly to his feet. “Esther!” he exclaimed.

Then, in the silence that followed, there came the sound of a footstep on the floor above. As they turned to look, the boy appeared at the head of the stairs. He limped down, his eyes shifting from one to another of the small group.

He did not speak until he stood close beside Esther. “You can’t do anything to her,” he said stoutly. “It ain’t her fault. I came here by myself yesterday. You can take me if you want to—but you can’t touch her.”

Esther put an arm about his thin body and drew him close to her. “Don’t be afraid, Billy. They won’t touch me—and they won’t take you away if I can help it.”

She was looking at Jason as she spoke. Pete Nolan sat stupidly fingering the gold chain that hung across his middle, eying the boy in blank confusion. Jason sat down heavily and ran his hand over his face.

“Do you know this boy, Essie?” the sheriff asked finally.

“I never saw him till yesterday afternoon,” Esther told him.

Nolan fingered his watch chain a moment longer, then jerked his head. “Come over here, son,” he ordered. “What’s wrong with that left leg of yours? You’re lame.”

“Sure,” the boy said. “That’s where he kicked me.”

“Who kicked you?”

“My uncle.”

Pete Nolan was silent for a while. “Do you know what happens to you when you break your parole?”

“Sure. You send me back to the school.”

“Where were you headin’ for?”

“I—No place. And that’s the truth. But I couldn’t stay with him. Don’t send me back there!” Tears came suddenly to his eyes.

“You’d rather go back to the school?”

Billy thought, then turned and looked helplessly at Esther.

“How can he know what he’d rather do?” she demanded.

“That’s right, I guess,” Nolan admitted. He took his hat from the floor beside his chair and got up. “Well, come along, son. We’ll take care of you.”

Esther laid a hand on the sheriff’s arm. “Pete—I know what your duty is—and all that. But you’ve got to listen to me. Blame me as much as you like. I found him hiding in the barn—and I brought him to the house because he was hungry. And because I—because I wanted him, Pete. I didn’t have time to think of what I was doing—or what I was going to do. I just wanted to keep him here—until Jason came. I wanted to show him to Jason and—maybe—”

Her words were choking her. But she met Jason’s eyes, and there was a sudden depth of tenderness and understanding in them. There was more than that. An expression in his eyes that she had all but forgotten through the years. It set her pulse throbbing with a sweet, excited pain.

Jason stepped to the front door. “Come out here a minute, Pete,” he said.

Esther put an arm about the boy and listened to the murmur of the voices. Then she got up. “You go to bed,” she said—“and stay there. Not even a sheriff would have the heart to take a boy out of his own bed.”

She lit the lamp in the boy’s room and turned to go downstairs again. “I’ll bring you up something to eat later on.”

His smile was radiant with trust in her, and then a spark of mischief flashed in his eyes. “O. K.—a piece of apple pie maybe?”

Esther laughed almost giddily as she hurried downstairs.

She heard the whirring departure of Nolan’s car, and then Jason came and stood before her in the kitchen, where she was cutting the pie.

HAS Pete left?” she asked without looking up.

“He’ll be back in the morning. Where’s the boy?”

“In bed—where he ought to be. I’m taking him up a piece of pie and a glass of milk.”

Jason was silent, but she felt his eyes upon her, and the blush crept again into her cheeks.

“Esther,” he said at last—and his voice had that strange new sound—“you want to keep him, don’t you?”

“That’s for you to decide, Jason,” she replied softly.

“Pete says he thinks—if we want him to—he thinks he can arrange it that way.”

Esther had picked up the tray, but he took it from her now and set it down again. Then he took her face in his hands and lifted it to his.

“Something has happened to you,” he said with difficulty. “You’re—you’re just like you used to be. Is that the kid’s doing?”

“I guess he helped,” she admitted.

He grinned at her. “Gosh, Esther—you’re downright pretty.”

“But not as pretty as Carol Andrews, eh?”

He stared, perplexed. “What in—Say, what’ve you been thinking? Of all the cockeyed ideas—”

“Oh, I’ve just been silly, Jase—just silly!” She flung her arms about him and hid her face on his rough shoulder. He bent and kissed her hair and held her close to him.

“Let’s go up together with that tray,” he said at last. “I’d like to have another look at that kid of ours.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled 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.

[The end of *Escape in Spring* by Martha Ostenso]