

A Parsonage Story

**GINGER
AND
SPEED**

Ethel Hueston

Author of Prudence of the Parsonage

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GINGER AND SPEED

BY
ETHEL HUESTON

AUTHOR OF
PRUDENCE OF THE PARSONAGE



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GINGER AND SPEED

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CHAPTER I

A SUMMER SHADOW

THE village of Red Thrush, Iowa, drowsed in the golden somnolence of burnished autumn. A few late apples clung to the leafless trees in the small orchards, and a few great golden pumpkins defied the shriveled vines that bore them. Shining cobwebs swung on the fitful breeze that was no more than an idle breath. Iowa lay wrapped in its seasonal siesta.

In the hammock on the side porch of the shabby old Methodist parsonage of Red Thrush, Ginger Ella Tolliver was enjoying a physical, mental and emotional siesta of her own—a rare, almost an unprecedented thing in the life of Ginger Ella, for ordinarily she was not one to waste in purposeless inertia an hour that might be charged with burning action. But for this once, even the sturdy muscles, the taut nerves, the soaring spirit of Ginger Ella yielded themselves to idle relaxation.

For almost the first time in her experience, Ginger Ella was at peace with the world. Happily, she was not one to cherish long the painful memory of ink-black blots upon the escutcheon of her life, and that was well. Ginger's escutcheon was as prone to blot as are the sparks to fly upward, for although she consistently starred and spangled her days with the best intentions in the world, she was given to misadventure, due, to a large extent, to the unbounded broadness of her passions. She was not selfishly limited to her own small interests, but concerned herself as avidly with those of her father, her sisters, the Methodist Church and indeed all Red Thrush as well. A vastness of interest like that is apt to make for trouble—and did.

The summer which had so recently merged into this golden autumn, which Ginger Ella called her “nearly seventeenth,” had been a hectic one in the shabby old Red Thrush parsonage. More than hectic, it had, indeed, verged hotly toward the chaotic. Helen, the oldest of the four sisters, had married and gone to a home of her own on the other side of town with her professor of higher mathematics. The twins had fallen in love, got themselves engaged and gone their ways to college. That in itself would seem a normal enough procedure for the average modern young women, but in the case of Ginger's twins it was rank abnormality of the blackest dye. For Marjory, the beautiful sister, whom Ginger had designed for a rich and

brilliant alliance, had deliberately entangled her life with that of Hiram Buckworth, a common young Methodist preacher, nice enough, but still hidebound by the Methodist ministry, while Miriam, who had nothing in the world to her credit but scintillating mental brilliancy, had deftly appropriated to herself the affections and the ultimate fortune of a millionaire's son from New York.

All this was very upsetting, very disturbing, madly aggravating to Ginger Ella, who believed that affairs of the heart should follow definite, well-ordered lines; that wealth should select the natural concomitant of beauty and that ministers should appropriate the sedate dignities of school-teachers and deaconesses. At least Ginger Ella, scorning the usual erratic man-madness of her sex, had thus believed until that moment, a short while previous, when Eddy Jackson, clever young agriculturist from Pay Dirt Farm near by, had taken her into his arms and kissed her. After which Ginger Ella had very little to say about madness, one way or the other.

All of these incidents, however, were the affairs of the summer, and the golden somnolence about her, in which she shared, was ample proof that the summer had met its death. Ginger squirmed in blessed tiredness in the old hammock, and her lazy lashes swept her cheeks.

Ginger Ella had a right to be tired that afternoon.

Her father, having so miraculously recovered his sight in a shock brought on by circumstances which Ginger liked best to forget, was away from home attending the Southeastern Iowa Conference of the Methodist Church, and upon this very morning—Friday it was—Ginger had received a letter from him announcing that after all their plans and expectations, after all the disappointments and the temporary tempests that had marked the preceding year, the church in Red Thrush had ardently solicited his return as its pastor for another year in order that he, who had sacrificed so much in the erection of the beautiful new church, should enjoy at least one year in its service. The Bishop had acceded to the appeal, and he and Ginger Ella were to call Red Thrush their home for some time longer.

Ginger, if she could prevent it, never let so much as a minute elapse between the birth of an idea and its execution. At nine o'clock she was in receipt of her father's letter that they were to continue in Red Thrush. At five minutes past nine she was rearranging the entire parsonage to suit her own personal and private ideas of how a home should be laid out, a privilege which had never before been vouchsafed her, the youngest of four daughters.

The youngest of four! All things do come in time, whether one is willing to wait or not. Helen was married. The twins were in college. Ginger simply

could not repress a pleased little smirk of satisfaction with the way things had turned out. Oh, glad she was that they were to remain in Red Thrush for another year. It would be far more zestful sport for her to lord it over a parsonage and a church where she was already familiarly known than in a strange one, where her sudden accession to a seat of authority would create no surprise.

One shadow clouded the serenity with which she surveyed the future. In his letter her father had written and underlined the words, "Make the necessary arrangements with Miss Jenkins." Now, Ginger was very well aware that for a period of some years Miss Jenkins had had her cap set—in a most sedate and spinsterly manner, of course, but still set—for the gentle widowed minister. Hitherto, Ginger herself, by dint of rare ingenuity and persistence, had managed to circumvent her in what she called "those fiendish machinations" for the ensnarement of her unsuspecting parent. But to accept her right into the parsonage with them, to share their daily life as well as their daily bread—Ginger sighed. It was a shadow of sinister blackness. There was so very little time, as it was, and Ginger was wont to crowd so much of activity into all her hours that she could ill afford the time that would be required for successful circumvention.

"But," said Ginger Ella, "time or no time, circumvented she is going to be! And how!"

So sure had they been of their removal from Red Thrush at this meeting of the Conference, that Ginger Ella had not returned to high school when it opened, late in September, and it was for that reason that she was at home when her father's letter arrived, and thus at entire liberty to carry out her own plans. It was partly in the burst of enthusiasm engendered by the pleasing news, partly because Ginger always did things the moment she thought of them, but mostly by way of proving to Miss Jenkins right at the start that she was going to run the parsonage herself and be the head of things around there, that she had plunged into the physical rearrangement of the household.

With her own hands she had pulled the old piano under the curve of the circular staircase, as she had seen it done in a motion picture; put the old magazines—very old, they were, contributed after family reading by various members—on a stool below the book-shelves; arranged a heap of goldenrod in a vase in the bay window, with the cracked side of the vase carefully turned to the wall; and, as an afterthought, opened the window behind them, Miss Jenkins having an occasional tendency toward hay fever.

Miracles had been accomplished by the time Miss Jenkins came home from school for her noon recess, and the memory of her fluttering delight at

the prospect of a year of uninterrupted residence in the parsonage added to Ginger's tired contentment. In her own way, she was devoted to Miss Jenkins, the more devoted because she could rule the rigid spinster with a lifted little finger. Ginger alone, of all the world, dared to salute that stately woman with a flippant "Jenky"—this, indeed, to the secret delight of that repressed and hungry womanhood. But for all her devotion, Ginger had no notion of permitting her to sweep her guileless parent into the troubled waters of a belated second marriage.

It was at the birth of this same Ginger Ella that Miss Jenkins had first entered upon an intimate friendship with the parsonage family, which was then located in another pastorate on the eastern border of the state. The friendship had deepened and ripened from the very first, influenced largely perhaps by the death of the mother who gave her life in the coming of the last baby daughter. When, a few years later, Mr. Tolliver was transferred to another charge, Miss Jenkins had quietly adjusted her small affairs, resigned her position in the schools and secured another in the town to which her favorites had gone. There she followed them, keeping her own modest suite of rooms across the street from them, living her own life, teaching in the primary schools for her living, and always with the main interest of her life centered in the rollicking Tolliver brood in the parsonage, focusing particularly upon Ginger Ella, whom, in her heart, she called—and blushed to do so—"my baby."

Ginger had greeted her gaily from the front porch as she came up the flagstone path during the noon recess.

"News, Jenky!" she had called in her flippant friendly manner. "I've had Red Thrush wished on me for another year. How would you like to come and live with us for good? I'm quite a fair cook, as you know, and I'll be very nice to you, and make you very comfortable." That was Ginger's way of saying, "You may come if you like, and we want you, but I'm the head of the house."

Miss Jenkins had fluttered down, breathless, upon the top step.

"Your father is coming back — —"

"Oh, yes, I wouldn't stay without Father," said Ginger firmly.

"And we'll all live here together—your father—and you—and I," stammered the trembling woman.

"There's plenty of room. I'll take Helen's room at the head of the stairs so I can see what's going on. You can have the spare bedroom at the back, if you like, or the twins' old room, whichever you prefer. Think you could stand us for a whole year?"

Miss Jenkins glowed and gasped and fluttered, her thin pale face flushing a vivid rose. This had been the one dear, distant dream of her starved heart—to gain at last a permanent foothold in this house of her hidden affections. She would not have admitted it for the world, but she had been praying privately, behind locked doors, every night, that for this one year, with Ginger so young and still in high school, Mr. Tolliver would be obliged—yes, obliged—fairly driven if necessary—to take her with them to their new pastorate as general companion to the girl, and housekeeper to both.

No skeptics need ever argue with Miss Jenkins that prayers are not answered, and dreams do not come true.

“Oh, Ginger,” she whispered at last humbly, awed by the knowledge that her meek voice had risen to the height where Heaven heard, “isn’t it wonderful?”

They forgot all about luncheon. Within the one brief hour and a half allowed for the noon recess, spurred by Ginger, assisted by the janitor from the schoolhouse a block away, Miss Jenkins had moved all of her possessions from her furnished rooms across the street, and arranged them—according to Ginger’s ideas—in the twins’ old room up-stairs. And at this very moment, school having closed for the day, while Ginger lay in the hammock and drowsed and grinned in smug contentment with a kindly world, Miss Jenkins was up-stairs, unpacking, behind closed doors for she was a modest woman, the more intimate articles of her wardrobe and placing them in neat piles in the old chest of drawers beneath the mirror.

Ginger glinted lazily up through the thinning crimson leaves of the old rambler into a tumble of lazily drifting clouds in the pale sky, and winked a bright eye at the mellow winking sun.

“It’s a long winter before us, and nobody knows what all may come of it. But whatever comes, it will be plenty, if I have anything to do with it,” she said to herself. And added comfortably, “And I expect to have a whole lot to do with it, if you ask me.”

Ginger loved showing off, but she loved it especially in the presence of familiar friendly faces—the faces of Red Thrush, for instance, and the Methodist Church—and Eddy Jackson. It was quite a step for Ginger, from her place as the baby of four sisters to the head of the house. Ginger smiled, serenely confident of her ability to cope with the exigencies of her important rôle.

It was upon this peace of hers, this quiet, radiating, blissful serenity, that the great voice of Iry Ford broke discordantly.

“Hey, there, Ginger! Come on out. I brung ye some comp’ny.”

Iry Ford drove the public taxi from the trains to the hotels, two in number. Ginger knew him very well. At sound of his voice she sat up. Company? She was richly endowed with that intuitive genius which blesses the Methodist ministry, and she thought she detected a vein of malicious pleasure in the great voice of Iry Ford. She got out of the hammock, adjusting her rumpled frock sedately, conscious of the social poise to be expected of one in her suddenly exalted position.

The small cab at the end of the flagstone path seemed to be quite full of passengers, men and women, but her first glance assured her that they were all strangers. She had never seen them before. Company for her?

Iry Ford leaned over the wheel and grinned up at her. Yes, certainly, he was viciously pleased about something, and Ginger had a quick feeling that it was a thing of no pleasant nature which caused his pleasure.

“Come out!” he called again. “Comp’ny! For you, Ginger!”

Ginger rose to the occasion. This was the parsonage. She was its social head. Company? She forced the smug and sleepy lines from her face and curved it into a welcoming smile as she walked quickly down the flagstone path between the leafless rose-bushes that bordered it on either side.

As she approached the cab, her eyes studied the faces of its occupants.—Strangers, every one. It must be some foolish joke of Iry’s. She frowned at him.

“How do you do?” she said brightly.

“How do you do?” “How are ye, Miss?” “Good afternoon,” chorused the occupants of the cab, in a composed perfunctory way, and they smiled, unsmilingly.

“How’re ye?” grinned Iry Ford. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder to indicate his passengers with an unholy smirk of malice. “They come to live with you. They come to join your Home for the Blind. They’re blind.”

The horrors of the summer swept back upon Ginger a hundredfold.—How dared she have thought that the past was dead?—She shuddered. Her small face whitened and the brightness fell away from her.

“Iry,—you mustn’t—joke about such things,” she whispered.

“I ain’t jokin’,” he chortled. “It’s facts. They’re blind.—Ain’t you blind?” He appealed in tones of triumph to his passengers for corroboration.

“Yes,” they assented, as one voice, the troubled tense voice of the unseeing. “Yes, blind.”

“And they come to live in your Home. You know, Home for the Blind. Methodist Home.—Didn’t you come to live in her Home for the Blind?” he

demanded of them again.

“Yes,” they assented softly, “we came to live here.”

Ginger Ella wrung her hands. Agonizing waves of pity, of horror, yes, of throbbing fear, swept the vivid young face.

“Iry,” she pleaded, and her voice was anguish, “how could you?—Oh, the poor dears!—Iry, you knew better. How could you do such a thing?” And her voice wept for pity of their disappointment, pain for their affliction and, perhaps, shame also for her own dilemma.

“How could I?” he repeated indignantly. “I didn’t do it. They was sent. They come on the train. I just brung ’em out for ye.—I won’t charge ye for ’em—glad to do my bit for a good cause, as the sayin’ goes.—You get out here,” he said, with a broad diabolical grin which Ginger alone could see. “This is the place. This here lady is Miss Ginger. She’s the head of the Home.”

“Don’t get out, dears, don’t,” begged Ginger distractedly. “There—there isn’t any Home—not any more. It—it is closed.—You— Oh, I am so sorry.—You must go back—where you came from.”

“We can’t,” explained the patient chorus of unseeing voices, dispiritedly. “We can’t go back. It burned down. We have no place to go.”

Ginger wrung her hands afresh. Tears swam in her eyes, sobs rose in her small and suffering breast.

“Oh, oh,” she moaned. “What shall I do, Iry, what shall I do?”

“I dunno, Ginger,” he answered kindly. “I’m sure I dunno. It looks like an awful tight jam to me.” And he added, chuckling with some malice, “It’s up to you, it’s your Home for the Blind. I’m glad ’taint me.”

“Oh, how could you?” she wailed.

“I tell you I didn’t have any hand in this here business at all,” he protested hotly. “I didn’t fetch ’em. I just brung ’em.”

“But you’re glad of it,” she accused him, “you know you are glad of it.”

“Well, I do think it’s kind o’ funny,” he admitted, with his horrible gloating grin. “Anyhow, I won’t charge nothin’ for bringin’ ’em.”

“Well, come in, then,” said Ginger, jerking herself up with a faint show of parsonage hospitality. “Come in for a while, anyhow, till Father gets home.—Poor Father!—Just lives along from shock to shock.—But come in. I guess we can manage. To-day, anyhow. And over Sunday.” Her glowering glare for Iry Ford melted to one of terrified commiseration as she regarded her unexpected guests. “Come in, my poor dears, and we’ll see.”

She stood back, small hands twisted painfully one into the other, and watched with suffering eyes as her unwelcome, pitied, unfortunate guests got themselves, and not unnimble, from the ramshackle old Ford cab, with Iry's help.

"I'll send your bags right up from the depot," said Iry volubly. "You'll like Red Thrush. It's a darn nice little town, and this here Home for the Blind is one of our most favorite institutions. You'll like it great.—And this here Ginger—she's the salt of the earth, that girl is. Yes, the very salt. And the pepper, too, as you might say, with even a dash of mustard.—Oh, you'll like Red Thrush great!—So long, Ginger. Wishin' ye luck."

CHAPTER II

UNEXPECTED INMATES

AH, well might Ginger Ella shudder to realize that the horrors of the summer, which she had fondly believed to be dead and buried with other more remote humiliations, had come to life again to confront and confound her! She had confidently assured herself that even Red Thrush had forgotten her blunders and her disgrace. Alas, the errors which she had so valiantly cast from her had returned upon her like a boomerang!

Ginger Ella, although the youngest of the parsonage four, had from her babyhood assumed responsibility for her family's future. To be sure, things had not worked out according to her calculations. Helen had married a school-teacher, which was disappointing. The twins had engaged themselves to marry. But Ginger took some satisfaction in the knowledge that her plans had been glorious ones, and that their miscarriage could not be charged to her. And she still had her father, at any rate, under her protective little wing.

The Reverend Mr. Tolliver, under the combined burdens of ministering to his flock, raising funds for the erection of a new church, and fathering his small family, and under the additional strain of failing health, had, in a severe nervous breakdown, suffered a complete failure of his eyes resulting in almost total blindness. Threatened with retirement from his church upon a small pension, with three young daughters to be educated, he faced a prospect from which the bravest might well shrink. Ginger Ella, anxious as always to relieve her adored father of the slightest worry, leaped into efforts on his behalf which resulted in worries of which he had never dreamed.

Ginger Ella was no idle day-dreamer. Her desire to help took a practical turn. After a prolonged series of abortive attempts, which included the addressing of envelopes, the home-making of overalls, the taking of subscriptions for magazines, writing of words for popular songs, answering advertisements without end, solving cross-word puzzles for prizes, raising of ginseng and the writing of novels, she had hit at last upon a really lucrative venture.

Her father was blind, was he not? And then, in a brilliant burst of imaginative genius, Ginger Ella builded and maintained a Home for the Blind, and, knowing little and caring less for petty legalities and laws, convinced in her loyal heart of the justice of her appeal, she started a chain letter, soliciting ten-cent subscriptions for a vaguely hypothetical Methodist

Home, of which she was the ostensible treasurer, and became in time, to her sorrow, the genuine one.

Gradually at first, and then in a constantly widening flood of sympathy, Little White Angels of Help had come, letters of sympathy, first singly, then by ones and twos, and finally by hundreds, until a suspicious Post Office Department was led to make investigation, at which time Ginger Ella Tolliver, the daughter of a Methodist minister, was arrested for using the mails to defraud. Even her argument that her father did really constitute a Methodist Home for the Blind was of no avail, for in the shock that attended the disgraceful disclosures, Mr. Tolliver, instead of becoming permanently blind as the doctors had warned he might, suddenly regained his full vision.

Matters had been hushed up somehow, largely due to the help of a friendly banker who was also a trustee in the church, the bags of Little White Angels were taken away from her, and the postmaster at Red Thrush was instructed to return all future donations to the senders. While for Ginger Ella the whole experience had been both painful and humiliating, she was not one to dwell at length upon her past defeats. Her one concern, when it was over, was to hit upon some other form of enterprise that would prove as profitable without coming into conflict with the silly laws.

Now, however, to have her misadventure thus forcibly, even brutally, flung into her face, was devastating to her pride as well as to her sympathies. But, however pained, she was not one to shirk. This had come as a result of her own folly. She would make the best of it.

Ginger's seventeen years of parsonage life had endowed her with a quick sure shrewdness in estimating types, and as her pitied but unwelcome guests climbed from the cab, with the grinning Iry offering glad assistance, she appraised them one by one.

"A tartar, I'm afraid," was her quick decision as the first woman planted herself firmly upon the ground, a woman of pronounced efficiency despite her affliction, slow, sure-moving and grim.

"A vamp, if there ever was one," she thought, her eyes upon the small figure that followed her from the cab, scorning a cane and placing her entire dependence upon the human hand for help. Ginger's eyes swept the small pale face with its light touch of rouge high upon the cheeks, the bright smiling eyes and the fringe of curls showing beneath the soft hat.

After her came a small, hushed, chronically meek man, huddling himself inconspicuously near the women, his very cane seeming to apologize for the sound of its slight tap upon the curb. "Poor mouse," thought Ginger.

But not all her experience afforded any clue to the nature of the man who got out last, a man of medium height, medium size, ingratiatingly officious, so conversationally friendly that Ginger was sure he must have something to sell. "He'd see everything if he could see at all," she thought, staring into his face and trying to read the blinded eyes behind the thick black glasses. "And maybe he does, anyhow."

She gazed helplessly at Iry. "Will you please help us up to the porch?" she begged. "The flagstone path will be hard for them to follow."

Iry was grinningly willing to oblige, quite satisfied to prolong the sight of Ginger's discomfiture, and planted himself helpfully between the two women, lending a hand to each. Ginger—an unrecognizably crushed and humbled Ginger—slipped between the men, her fingers upon their arms.

The cock-sure one on her left sniffed the scented autumnal air appreciatively.

"Nice," he commented. "Very nice. I like this. Some dumbbell stacked his hay too soon.—Damp.—Smell that damp hay, Benny?—Not much of a city, Red Thrush, judging by the country smell of things."

"Oh, it's a mere village," said Ginger, adding loyally, "but very nice indeed."

"You'll like us," declared Iry, over his shoulder. "Course, we ain't any Noo York for crowds, but we got awful warm hearts out here. What there is of us. And that's what counts, gents, hearts. Oh, you'll like us. Wild horses couldn't tear you away from Red Thrush once you get on to our little ways. And as for Miss Ginger here,—well, you'll just swear by that girl in no time at all. We all swear by her here. 'By Ginger' is our favorite cuss word."

Ginger groaned irrepressibly, but forced her face to a haggard smile as she assisted her guests to chairs on the cool veranda.

Miss Jenkins, hearing the confusion of the cab at their gate, had witnessed the arrival from an upper window, in no way comprehending the deadly significance of it all, and appeared now in the doorway, eager to lend what assistance she could, as seemed fitting in one who was at last an established member of the household.

"Come out, Jenky," cried Ginger, and ran to her, catching at even this feeble straw for support in her dilemma. "This is Miss Jenkins, dears," she said. "Miss Jenkins—this—this is a Home for the Blind, you know.—These are the passengers—I mean the inmates—I mean, they have come to be company for a while. Iry Ford brought them."

The cock-sure man in the checked suit rose to the occasion. He stood up and bowed. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am," he said brightly. "Permit me to

introduce my companions, to get us all well acquainted, since we are going to live together from this on, as you might say.—Now, this here lady over here—you can always tell where she sits by the perfume—this here is Miss Phally Hartley. Awful nice girl, Phally is, good disposition, good-looking and a social asset to any institution. But lazy. Won't soil her lily-whites if she can help it, and she usually can."

Miss Phally giggled with a rosy blush. "Oh, Brag, how you do talk.—I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Jenkins. Don't you mind what Brag says. Of course I will work—I am not very strong—I can do no heavy manual labor—but I am only too happy to assist in anything that my strength is equal to.—Don't you mind what Brag says."

Ginger's "tartar" in the stiff-backed chair snorted derisively. "Putting on airs, as usual," she hissed to the meek male mouse in her shadow.

"And that there woman that snorted," went on the official announcer pleasantly, "that's Janie Jarvis.—Well, her bark's worse'n her bite—and both is plenty. But she's useful. Very. Darns all holes—and most people, too, you might say. Heh, heh! And scrubs, and mops, and cooks. And snorts. Considerable. But useful. And you do get used to them little ways of hers in time. Ladies, meet Janie Jarvis."

"It's a good thing there is one useful person in this outfit," snapped Janie Jarvis heatedly. "A uselesser set than the rest of you I never laid eyes on.—But anyhow, I'm glad we're here, and I think we'll like it first rate. Brag, there, ain't got any sense, but nobody minds him, and Phally's kind of soft-headed, but she means all right. Benny, here, is a poor fool, but anyhow he's never any trouble to anybody."

"I was just coming to Benny," interrupted Brag quickly, not willing to forego any of his rights as spokesman. "Benny—that's Benny over there.—Cough, Benny.—We call him Violet for short, cause he's so shrinking. Awful good sort, Benny is. If he's got a dime, he'll loan it. If he finds a crust, he'll share it. If he comes into a fortune, he'll divide it. Trouble is, he ain't never come into nothing yet. But you never can tell. Stand up, Benny, like a man, and bow to the ladies."

Benny slid from his chair with a sheepish grin and a low apologetic cough, and slunk at once back into the obscurity, from which he came, in the shadow of Janie Jarvis.

"As for me, ladies,—Miss Jenkins, I believe was the name, and Miss Ginger,—I'm glad to know you. I may say, I am happy to know you. Baldwin is my name, Bragdon Baldwin, and the ladies is my specialty, God bless 'em. If there's anything goes wrong, you come to old Brag. If things

get hooked up unexpected anyway, Brag will unhook 'em for you. If Janie goes on a rampage, Brag is the one as can calm her. If Phally, bein' a bit soft on the male sex, goes highsteppin', Brag is on hand to trip her up in the proper place and bring her back to terra firma.—Ladies, I'm happy to know you."

He sat down with a pleased air, fanning himself with his hat. Ginger looked at Miss Jenkins. Miss Jenkins opened and closed her lips a few times carefully, moistened them slowly and nodded her head.

"How do you do?" she said perfunctorily, and then turned briskly to Ginger.

"What are you going to do with them?" she inquired, under an evident impression that they were deaf as well as blind.

Ginger frowned her into silence, and turned pathetically, pleadingly, to her visitors.

"Now, I think we had better have a perfectly frank understanding," she began gently. "How did you hear about Red Thrush, anyhow? Why did you come here? Where did you come from?"

Brag Baldwin stood up. He liked conversation, and made an event of every important sentence. "Well, it's like this," he began. "We lived in the poor—I mean, we lived in the Home for the—er—General Homeless, at Curtiss, Iowa. Just we four were blind, all the other—er—guests were old, and poor, and—er—homeless.—Well, it burned down.—They put the—the homeless ones out around town, on farms, and wherever, until they could build it up again. But the blind is kind of inconvenient to have around, or some thinks so, and so, as we'd heard of this here Home, they said we'd better come here until they get built up. They're going to write you a letter after while. The stationery was all burned up."

"But, you see," remonstrated Ginger feebly, "this is a Methodist Home. Just Methodist. All Methodist."

"Oh, we're Methodists, devout," declared Brag proudly. "Particular. In fact, it was our Methodist minister at Curtiss, Brother Gimlay, who told us about this Home. He was a contributor. He didn't say how much."

"Besides," stammered Ginger, who was fishing wildly for ideas as well as for words, "this Home was unexpectedly—er—put out of business—or closed, anyhow—as a Home, that is by—by the authorities. I mean, by circumstances. Unavoidable circumstances. And besides, our blind got well and —"

"Got well!"

A sudden breathless thrilling whisper arrested her words. "Got well?" Four tense figures bent in the direction of Ginger's voice. "All—of them? Have—have you got a cure?"

Pitying tears flooded Ginger's kind eyes. "Oh, my dears," she cried, "how I wish I had!"

The four tense figures drooped back into their chairs, the four faces lapsed into fatuous disappointed smiles.

"Ours was more a home for nervous cases—for nerves, you know. And when the nerves got strong, and quiet, and healthy, the eyes got well, too. See?"

She looked from one to the other of them, pleadingly, begging them to understand, not to blame her. They smiled vaguely in the direction of her voice. She looked at Miss Jenkins.

"You see how it is, Miss Jenkins," she implored.

"Yes, of course, of course," fluttered that excited woman.

"We haven't got a Home any more," went on Ginger firmly, despairing of support, even moral, from that weak source. "And of course we can't take inmates—"

"Open it up again," encouraged Brag warmly. "Here's a good running start for you. Open 'er right up. Here's your Home. Here's your inmates. What more do you want?"

"But you see—my—father—he is only a preacher.—We haven't any money. It takes lots of money for a family of—of seven! We can hardly support ourselves—"

Ginger's eyes narrowed suddenly. Her small chin thrust itself out into an aggressive determined angle, her brow settled into reflective lines, her rosy lips pursed up together purposefully. Money? The disagreeable inspector from the absurdly indignant Post Office Department had said there were hundreds of letters at the local office; hundreds, maybe thousands of them, and more coming in every day. Little White Angels, willing and eager to administer help to the unfortunate blind—Little White Angels, with dimes in their wings.

As long as she had no blind, and no Home, even Ginger, loving and needing money as she did, was bound to admit the justice of the Government's argument that these dimes must be returned to the senders, and, failing addresses, the rest were to be turned into a fund of unclaimed moneys to enrich an already quite-rich-enough government. Ginger thought fast. Here were her blind. Here was a Home ready made for them. And in

bulky sacks at the post-office were the Little White Angels with dimes in their wings.

She stood up. "Jenky," she said briskly and with all her usual calm assurance returned to her, now that she was ready for action, "I'm going to see about this. I have an idea. We'll keep them till Father comes, anyhow. You move into the room at the head of the stairs with me. Give the ladies the spare bedroom, and put the men in the twins' room. You help them get unpacked and settled down. I've got business to attend to."

"That's the spirit, Miss," approved Brag warmly. "A good, game, fighting spirit, that is, if ever I saw one. Girl after my own heart, she is." He turned to Benny. "Five Camels she turns the trick," he said.

Benny pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his pocket, and carefully fingered the contents, counting noiselessly with his lips. "Well, all right," he assented, with an apologetic little cough.

Miss Jenkins stood up, highly outraged. "Cigarettes!" she announced in sepulchral tones. "Ginger, they smoke!"

"We'll draw up our rules of government later on," countered the girl quickly. "I'm in a hurry now. We have to find out about funds first."

She ran down the steps and started down the flagstone path at a light trot, her bright hair shining in the sunshine.

"The parsonage'll probably be gone when you get back," Miss Jenkins called after her dolefully. "No wonder the other Home burned down. Like as not they're the very ones that set it on fire."

Ginger stopped in her tracks, frowned back at them.

"How can you smoke, if you can't see?"

"By feel, Miss," answered Brag promptly. "We got a sensitive touch. We smoke by feel."

"No smoking except under the apple tree in the back yard," she announced briskly.—"Make them do their smoking there," she charged Miss Jenkins, and ran on. Her mind at that moment was soaring to the greatest heights.

Miss Jenkins, with responsibility thus thrust upon her, arose to it with something very similar to firmness.

"Absolutely no smoking on these premises except on the bench under the apple tree in the back yard."

"Smoking? We're not smoking, Miss. We're just betting on — —"

"Betting!—Laying wagers, you mean? Why it is expressly forbidden by the Discipline of the Methodist Epis — —"

Brag interrupted her with a loud and breezy laugh. "My dear Miss Jenkins," he cried gaily, "my very dear Miss Jenkins! Can't you take a joke?—Betting indeed! We just call it betting between ourselves in sport to sort of liven up an otherwise tame life, that's all. Betting indeed! Good Methodists like me and Benny here!—Why, this is just a friendly little pledge of confidence in Miss Ginger to turn the trick, that's all.—Betting!"

"Oh, excuse me, I beg your pardon—but you said betting," fluttered Miss Jenkins. "Do you want me to show you to the apple tree?"

Miss Phally broke in upon them with her soft little laugh. "I don't. I want to be shown to my chamber at once. I must be frightfully disheveled and grimy from travel. I must have a hot bath and a fresh gown at once."

The vague shadows faded instantly from Miss Jenkins' troubled eyes. She became strangely alert and vigorous. She turned and looked steadfastly at Phally Hartley, looked at her and saw, not a poor prospective inmate of the Home, but a woman, one who thought of clothes and appearances, and—no doubt—men.

The Reverend Mr. Tolliver would be home the next day. Miss Jenkins repressed an involuntary sigh. Miss Jenkins was always repressing an involuntary emotion of some sort, a sigh, or a laugh, or a tender touch. She was used to it. So she repressed the sigh, and helped her four charges gently to the base of the circular staircase.

"Follow the banister up," she said to them. "The stairs curve, but they are wide, and there are no rugs. You can feel the wall on the opposite side. There is no carpet in the upper hall-way.—This first door on the left is ours, Ginger's and mine. Your rooms are on the right. The first door is for the men. The second is the ladies'.—We are right across the hall from you—we will hear if you call us, at any time. We don't want you to feel nervous.—Mr. Tolliver's room is down at the other end of the corridor, in the front of the house."

"Who is Mr. Tolliver?—We have not met him yet, have we?" asked Phally Hartley, with interest.

Miss Jenkins repressed the desire to flounce impatiently. "Mr. Tolliver," she explained, "is the Methodist minister here in Red Thrush. He is Ginger's father. He will be home to-morrow."

"Men," said Miss Phally, with her light gay laugh, "are so sensitive to first impressions. I am glad he did not see us looking such a sight."

"This is your room, right here," said Miss Jenkins coldly.

CHAPTER III

LITTLE WHITE ANGELS

SPURRED on by rosy visions of Little White Angels which whispered sweet promises of fabulous prosperity in her avid ears, Ginger Ella, with never so much as the flicker of an eyelash to left or right, hurried down the quiet shadowy street and did not pause for breath until she stood, perspiring, gasping for breath, before the little barred window that screened the village postmaster from common citizens who came in pursuit of letters or stamps.

"Hello, Captain Cody," she said, when she could command her voice.

"Hello, Ginger.—More stamps, I suppose. If everybody in town supported the United States mails like you do, I'd soon be able to retire — —"

"No. No stamps this time. I came to see you. I want to talk."

"Good!" Captain Cody hastened to open the concealed door to the left of the window and admitted her gratefully. It was a dull day in Red Thrush. Not even the series of three postal cards to Mrs. Judge Smithers announcing, in quick succession, that her uncle had developed blood poisoning from an abrasion caused by a tack in his shoe, that the foot had been amputated and that gangrene had set in rendering further amputations imperative, had sufficed to satisfy the deep cravings of his extremely social nature. Captain Cody liked Ginger. She always brought news. Usually she made it.

He closed the window with an anticipatory bang.

"Maybe somebody will want something," she suggested.

"Then somebody can wait. Or come again, if they prefer," he answered cheerfully. "Guess I got to have time to sort out the mail, ain't I? Guess that's what they can expect of a one-horse administration like this here, when they don't allow a postmaster any help except for Christmas in a town our size. Let 'em wait then. That'll show 'em."

Captain Cody bore three high marks of distinction in the village of Red Thrush. He was postmaster, an office of no mean importance in Red Thrush, where official positions were rare. He was their last surviving veteran of the Civil War. And he was a Democrat, the sole representative of that party willing to make public declaration of the fact in Red Thrush.

"But, Captain Cody," Ginger had protested in the early days of their acquaintance, "I thought you fought in the Union Army."

“Yes, I did. I wore the Blue,” he said proudly. “That’s right.”

“But you say you are a Democrat.”

“Yes, that’s right. Being in the war made me a Democrat,” he explained enigmatically.

“But you were on the other side. You’ve got yourself all mixed up,” she objected, sure of her ground from recent studies in American history. “You were on the other side. You’re not a Democrat.”

“Sure I was. That’s why.” Then smiling at her evident confusion, he explained kindly, “I went into the war when I was too young to know what it was all about, or which side I was on. So whatever side I went in on, I was bound to come out against. And so I did.”

However, he did not fail to collect his pension with great regularity, and on Memorial Day and Fourth of July celebrations he was furnished the town taxicab, with Iry Ford to drive him in great state directly behind the Masonic band in the parades. And he was given his post-office appointment on the strength of his military record.

As for his title of Captain, that was a mere courtesy bestowed by Red Thrush itself, feeling, vaguely, that a village whose entire claim to the G.A.R. was vested in one person was entitled to a Captain at the very least.

Ginger Ella watched him affectionately as he filled his pipe, fingers trembling just a little with eagerness, and sat down on an empty grocery box, shoving the stool hospitably in her direction.

“Sit down,” he invited. “There ye are, now, cozy as can be. Go on—talk. What’s new?”

Ginger Ella leaned toward him eagerly. “Captain Cody,” she said, in a singing whisper, “what became of all my money?”

“Sent back—some of it. And most of it that there officious investigator left for me to do the returning of. When I get around to it.”

“Is it still coming in?”

“Still coming.”

“When are you going to send it back?”

“When I get around to it. Awful lot of work it is, opening all those envelopes, fishing out them little dimes, and addressing envelopes to send ’em back in.—Awful lot of work. And this here one-horse government— —”

Ginger smiled and hugged her knees. It was a nice world.

“Yes, but, Captain Cody, I have a perfectly good and legal right to that money now. I’ve got a sure-enough Home for the Blind!”

“Oh, Ginger, has your poor pappy— —”

"No, oh, no! Not Father. He's all right. He's at Conference. He will be home to-morrow.—They sent us back to Red Thrush for another year, did you know it?"

"Yes. Your pappy uses such thin envelopes that—I heard it—when the first mail come in."

"Home for the Blind! Real blind," Ginger went on, nodding firmly. "Whole houseful of them, men and women."

And then, leaning far forward on the wabby three-legged stool, small hands tensely clasped, slender face glowing brightly, she told him all: told of the fiendish glee of Iry Ford; told of the four blind strangers who had come a-knocking at the door for the parsonage's hospitality; told how, without any connivance on her part, and indeed all shockingly unexpectedly to her, by the volition of a Divine management, as Captain Cody must admit, she found herself thus at the head of a genuine Home for the Blind and responsible for its daily bread.

"You'd better put 'em on the next train——" he began, cautiously mindful of the bills attendant upon the feeding of four extra mouths.

"Can't. They haven't got a cent. And I've got just two dollars left of the money Father gave me to run the house while he is at Conference."

"Well, make them as sent 'em send for 'em back."

"Can't. There's no place to take them back to. It burned down. And the poor, blind, helpless creatures—with winter coming on——"

Captain Cody shook his head and pondered. This was a situation beyond all imagining. What a girl Ginger was, to be sure! Always turning up something new and surprising for Red Thrush to get excited over.

"You're not goin' to keep 'em, are you?"

"What else can I do? They're going to rebuild the old home and take them back as soon as they can. But in the meantime—did you ever know a parsonage to turn its back upon any one in need? Not to mention four!—Well, in the meantime, then, here we are.—Four blinds! Me! Two dollars!"

Captain Cody shook his head wordlessly.

"You can come out to the house and see them yourself, if you don't believe it."

"Oh, I believe it all right, I believe it. You might make up a Home for One Blind, but I don't think even you could make up a quartet of 'em. No, I think you've got your blinds all right."

"And you've got the money to feed them. My money." Ginger's satisfaction was exquisite.

But the old man squirmed uneasily on the squeaking grocery carton.

"Well, yes, the money's here," he admitted. "Come and look at it."

Ginger exulted joyously over the stiff soiled sacks in the corner.

"Captain Cody," she said reverently, "doesn't it just look to you as if Heaven itself kept you from getting around to returning that money?"

Captain Cody was a very good Methodist. It sounded entirely reasonable to him. He was well aware that Heaven did things like that.

"I can just hear my dear father say, 'I see the hand of the Lord in this,'" continued Ginger.

"Yes," he assented doubtfully, "that's what your pappy would say, all right. But what is Mister United States Post Office goin' to say? That's the point of it, seems to me."

"Why, what can they say?" ejaculated Ginger. "We've got a Home for the Blind, haven't we? They've got to be fed, haven't they? They've got to be clothed, haven't they? They're good Methodists, aren't they?—I hope we're not going to be a certain Pharisee going down to Jericho, or like that. —Just plunk them down on the United States Post Office for a while, and let them see how much money it takes to support four devout blind Methodists."

"Wait till I read the rules," faltered the old man.

Ginger waited patiently, greedy young eyes caressing the stout bags that sheltered her Little White Angels as the old man thumbed the books near-sightedly. Rule after rule he read, page after page he turned, but nowhere could he come across a regulation designed to cover an emergency like this. As Ginger had said, to have a homeful of blind inmates and unused funds for the express use of the blind brought thus into juxtaposition pointed strongly to the machinations of an ever adroit Providence. To his troubled mind, it seemed the very sort of thing Providence would do. And besides, he didn't know when he was ever going to get around to sending back those letters.

"I tell you what," he compromised weakly, "you take one bag to start. And we'll see what comes of it. If nothing goes amiss, and you need more money, we'll know we're on the safe side of the law this time, and there you are!"

Ginger threw her arms about him delightedly. "You darling," she cried. "What a supper I will give the poor dears!—But how can I get that bulky bag home? I can't carry it."

Captain Cody scratched his head. He yearned to be helpful to her in this astounding crisis. "I tell you what. Have you got ten cents? You buy one of

them blue special deliveries and stick it on, and I'll get the boy to deliver it the first thing."

Ginger gladly produced ten cents and accepted the blue stamp.

"You got to stick it on yourself," he told her. "Them's the rules."

Ginger stuck it on. "How soon will you send it?"

"I can't send it till morning. Jimmy comes right after school, but we only had two specials to-day and he's gone now. It's near closing time anyhow. But I'll send him first thing in the morning. You don't need to address it, I'll tell him where it goes.—Come again, Ginger. You're awful good company.—Did you know that Mrs. Judge Smithers' uncle's got gangrene, and they're cutting him off section by section? Not much hope, says the last postal. I did hear that one of her uncles has got money, but I don't rightly know whether it's the gangrene one or not. Hope for the best, that's all she can do."

"How sad," said Ginger perfunctorily, with glittering eyes. No formal word of cut-and-dried sympathy could banish the serene satisfaction that radiated from her every pore. As she hurried along toward home, she smiled in happy harmony with the golden glow about her. What a very nice world it was! And how very exquisitely heaven worked, its wonders to perform.

But Ginger Ella had learned—not all the lessons, perhaps—but one or two at least, and very, very well.

"And believe me, this money is for the blind, and nobody else. And I will not use a single cent more than I have to. And if the twins came to me on their hands and knees with tears in their eyes and their tongues hanging out begging for a crust of bread—I wouldn't give them a dime of that blind money. And that's that!" she declared vehemently. "Why, I wouldn't so much as buy father a pair of horn-rims at the five-and-ten—not out of that money—I wouldn't even if he was blind, I wouldn't do it, for the United States Post Office doesn't count fathers, it seems. And I'm not going to get myself into any more trouble—not if I can help it."

Alas, poor Ginger Ella! She couldn't help it.

She turned in at the parsonage gate. The front porch was empty of occupants. The house was enwrapped in stillness.

"Oh, goodness, I hope they haven't gone back to Curtiss," she thought, quite panic-stricken. "I'd have to give the money back again."

But as she put her foot on the bottom step Miss Jenkins edged into view, hushing her with a sibilant whisper, beckoning her with the crook of a thin fluttering finger to approach noiselessly.

Ginger Ella, a-tiptoe, followed her into a corner.

"She's got bobbed hair," announced Miss Jenkins, in funereal tones.

"Who's got bobbed hair?"

"That highty-tighty. And I think she has a permanent wave. It frizzes up all over her head."

"Well, it is her head. And if it looks a little strange, remember the poor dear can't see her looks."

"Well, she gets way with them very well, whether she sees them or not. Such carryings-on for a blind woman that had better be thinking of her immortal soul," exclaimed the badgered woman.

"Oh, come now," urged Ginger in a tone of great tolerance. "A blind soul isn't any more immortal than anybody else's."

"Don't be sacrilegious, Ginger, don't," pleaded Miss Jenkins. "There's trouble in store for this house, and I see it coming. Poor dear Mr. Tolliver. Out of the frying-pan and into the dish-water—"

"Wrong," interrupted Ginger. "Shakespeare didn't say it that way.—And don't you worry about Father. I can run him, all right."

"That woman," Miss Jenkins went on, "is one of the rarest Christian characters I have ever seen. Took off her hat, washed her hands and asked for work. While you were gone she peeled the potatoes for supper, mended the lace curtains, and is half through the weekly wash."

"Highty-tighty?" gasped Ginger.

"No, indeed. Not by any means. That beautiful, high-minded Janie Jarvis. She told me to call her Janie." Miss Jenkins sniffed. "Highty-tighty indeed! *She* took a bath, with perfume in it, and shined her finger-nails. She's lying down now. Most worldly-minded creature I ever saw."

"And where are the boy-friends?"

"Ginger, how can you refer to those poor unfortunate souls in that flippant manner? The gentlemen are under the apple tree smoking cigarettes and sticking knives in the ground. Come and look."

They tiptoed off the porch and around the corner of the house. A little flicker of amazement, of amusement, swept Ginger's vivid face.

Benny and Brag were down on their knees, playing mumble-the-peg. All unaware that they were under observation they finished the game, got up, and carefully dusted off their trousers. Then Benny counted three cigarettes from a wilted pack and handed them to the other, who pocketed them silently.

"They're very kind to each other," explained Miss Jenkins in a voluble whisper. "They're always giving each other things. Mostly the meek one—"

most generous man I ever saw.”

As Ginger stepped out into the open, the crinkle of her feet in the cinder path heralded her coming.

“Hello,” she called. “Having a good time? How do you like Red Thrush so far?”

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t little Salt and Pepper back again,” cried Brag. “Did you fix it?”

“Of course I fixed it,” she said cockily. “That’s what I went for, isn’t it?”

Brag turned to his shrinking companion. “Benny, she fixed it,” he announced firmly.

Benny fished in his pocket for a fresh unopened pack of cigarettes, and from it he counted carefully five Camels and handed them to the smiling Brag.

“Most generous man I ever saw,” whispered Miss Jenkins, nudging Ginger’s arm to assure her attention.

“Miss,” said Brag Baldwin, with the first suggestion of anxious humility he had shown, “would you just take a minute to lead us around the works? So we can get on to the lay of the land, as you might say? That is if you’re not too busy.”

A wave of pity quivered upon Ginger’s sensitive face.

“Oh, my dears, I will,” she cried. “Of course I will. Whenever you want anything like that, you just ask me. I’ll never be too busy for you. Give me your hand.”

She took a hand in each one of hers.

“Miss,” called Miss Janie from the door, with great eagerness, “can I come too?”

“If you will wait until I come back,” promised Ginger, “I will give you and Miss—Miss—”

“Phally. Just call her Phally,” interposed Brag. “I’m Brag, and this is Benny. We ain’t got no call to stand on ceremony.”

“I will give you and Phally a personally conducted tour as soon as I come back.”

Carefully then she led the two men about the wide pleasant lawn, blanketed now with crisp fallen leaves, indicating to their touch the rows of trees, the rose-bushes, the barn, the dividing fences and the flagstone paths.

“No holes, no rocks, no nothing,” said Brag complacently. “Nice sensible yard for a Home. Them that planned this showed sense.”

There were tears in Ginger's eyes. How nearly had her father been like this! Ginger could not decide whether that great swelling sob in her young heart was gratitude for her father's restoration, or pity for these less fortunate. Her voice was tender, and her heart yearned over them as she patiently explained the lay of the house, warned them about the cellar doorway, the bay window and the jutting porches.

"Three steps up to the front porch, I remember that," said Brag, "and nineteen steps inside. Porch all screened. Nice sensible house for a Home. Awful good planning, eh, Benny?"

Benny cleared his throat agreeably.

Ginger left them at last on the bench beneath the apple tree and trotted up the cinder path to the kitchen door. Phally had come down, eager to share in the little exploration. Ginger smiled at her with spontaneous admiration, forgetting that she could not read the approval of her look. Phally, who scorned the use of a cane, likewise refused to avail herself of the protection of black glasses, and from the brightness in her small blue eyes, with the crinkles of laughter at the corners, it was impossible to discern any suggestion of blindness besides her straight unseeing look. The fringe of fair curls about her face gave her an air of young appealingness, and she relieved the pathetic pallor to which the blind are commonly so prone with the faintest touch of rouge upon her cheeks.

"Oh, you look so nice," said Ginger warmly.

"Do I, dearie? It's nice of you to tell me." Phally flushed with pleasure. "You see, dearie, unless we are told, we never know whether we look nice or not."

"It is very nice for those who have nothing to do but make themselves look nice, if you ask me," put in Janie crisply.

Ginger had a smile for her as well. "Miss Jenkins tells me that you are the world's first, if not its only, wonder. If you keep on doing as much work as you have to-day, none of the rest of us will have anything to do but make ourselves look nice, and we'll get so ravishing that Red Thrush can't stand us."

"I like to keep busy," said Janie frankly. "When I have nothing to do but sit and think I get wild and have tantrums. Don't I, Phally?"

"Yes, you certainly do," agreed Phally emphatically.

"I'll keep you busy all right," promised Ginger. "I'm the best little busy-keeper you ever saw."

But when she returned at last to the house, leaving Janie in the kitchen again, and Phally in the hammock on the front porch, her face was sad. She

went carefully through the entire house, room after room, and removed all light bits of unnecessary bric-à-brac, pictures, vases, treacherous small rugs and stools, and stowed them carefully away in the closet under the stairs.

She smiled whimsically to herself as she did so. "I boasted that it was my parsonage," she confessed to Miss Jenkins, "and I said I was going to run it to suit myself, and run you and Father, too. And now, you see, on the very first day it is all being run to suit somebody else. Which serves me right for my bragging."

CHAPTER IV

THE WOMAN WITHOUT

SERENELY unaware of the drastic upheaval in his home, Mr. Tolliver continued his quiet attendance at the meetings of the Annual Fall Conference of the Methodist Church in Southeastern Iowa. He was pleased and gratified at the announcement of the Bishop that he was to continue his ministry at Red Thrush for another year. He had worked hard in raising the funds and superintending the construction of the handsome new Methodist Church, and he acknowledged that he took a worldly pleasure in the prospect of ministering to his people for a while from that beautiful new mahogany pulpit. But his chief satisfaction lay in other, more personal, less worldly grounds. He was glad for Ginger Ella to have a chance to finish her work in the high school where she had started, for this was her senior year. Also he realized that their need of Miss Jenkins could be filled with less difficulty in their remaining than would have been possible in their removal to another pastorate.

As soon as the assignments had been announced he was eager to return home, to talk it over with Ginger Ella and to assure himself by the light in his members' eyes that they rejoiced that his service among them was to be continued. So he did not wait for the closing session of the Conference on Saturday morning, but took the early train for Red Thrush, arriving there, unexpectedly to the members of the household, at eleven o'clock on Saturday morning, unannounced and not informed of the events that had transpired in his absence.

As he walked out the quiet street from the station toward the parsonage, acknowledging the pleased greetings of his parishioners with cordial pleasure, he was surprised to observe that the village taxicab was drawn up before his gate. Unconsciously he quickened his steps.

"That is a queer thing," he thought. "I hope the twins——" And his voiceless fears lapsed into the troubled vague uncertainty of the fond parent with children away from the family roof.

As he proceeded quickly up the flagstone path, voices came to him from behind the house, strange voices, masculine.

"Sweet baby, come to your daddy. The baby's shoes——"

Mr. Tolliver stood stock-still. He looked up at the house. Yes, it was the parsonage, shabby, dingy and dear. There was the faded old hammock behind the leafless Rambler vine on the front porch. Those were the threadbare old curtains waving at the windows. The same front door stood open to the golden air.

“Don’t hide in the bulrushes—come right out in the open—and talk, baby— —”

There was a low metallic sound, the money clink, it seemed to the astonished minister, something like the clink of coins into the collection plate on Sundays.

Automatically he moved forward and around the corner of the house, where he paused again to look and listen, while his amazement grew. Under the old apple tree in the back yard, down upon their knees, intent upon the small circle of ground they were enclosing, a group of men formed a tight little ring. On their knees—yet there was nothing at all prayerful in their attitudes. It reminded him, somehow, of the groups of men which withdrew into the shadow of the barn at farmhouse funerals.

“Listen, dice, you’re my frens. Gotta have that seven—or anyway, eleven. A six and one’ll do it. Or a five and a two—just a little four and a three. Feel ’em, sports! Hot dog, six and five—and pay me! They’re hot now—let it all ride! Who’ll fade it? Atta boy! Lemme feel that quarter; I ain’t in the lead business to-day.—Come on, you gay gamblers, take a ride. What, ain’t there enough sports here to fade me? All right, let’s go anyway. Dice, be good! Just another six and five—it’s high, but we gotta have it!—Wham—a five and a two, and the bones are still true! Fade this two bits, you pikers — —”

Mr. Tolliver did not move. Not all of the men in the tense little group were strangers, he realized, as he studied the kneeling figures on the ground, studied the backs of the heads intently bowed. There was Iry Ford, who drove the taxicab. There was Gar Haven, the postman—Mr. Tolliver could see the mail pouch lying open on the ground behind him. And there was Walter Main, the janitor at the grammar school down the block. Besides these were two others, one large, pompous, confident, who did the talking; the other wilted and small and hushed. These two he had never seen before, and they gave the impression of a large crowd of strangers grouped beneath his apple tree.

“Hah! Six and two—eighter from Decatur—Roll, bones, roll me that eight! The tides goin’ out but I’m a good swimmer—zowie, just a coupla fours—an’ I let it all lay! Act quick, gents, before these bones cools off. All

down? Here comes that seven again! What? Little Joe? A three and a one'll do it—two little twos'll do it! Roll, bones— —”

“Good morning,” cut in the quick clear voice of the minister, still professionally cordial despite his boundless amazement. “Good morning. Hello, Iry.—How are you, Walter?—Hello, Gar. Good morning, sir.”

The men stood up sheepishly and fell to dusting their knees. There was the quick light ring of unseen coins on coins. Gar Haven swung the mail pouch over his shoulder. Walter Main stared significantly down the street in the direction of the forsaken schoolhouse.

“Good morning,” repeated the minister.

Brag Baldwin broke the embarrassing silence with a loud laugh. He held out his hand. “Brother Tolliver, as I live,” he ejaculated. “You are home sooner than we expected. We didn't look for you until evening.”

The Reverend Mr. Tolliver, used by a lifetime of experience to astounding exigencies of every description, was speechless.

“Girls, girls,” called Brag, unabashed and jovial as ever, “come out! Come quick! Parson's home!”

“Well, I guess I better be goin'—looks like I must 'a' missed that train,” muttered Iry Ford, with a sheepish grin, as he slunk off.

“Letter for you, Brother Tolliver,” said Gar Haven briskly, as he drew it from his bag and set off quickly on his neglected rounds.

“I'll just move along with you, I reckon. Must be about time for me to wash them winders,” added Walter Main.

“Wait, wait,” begged Mr. Tolliver. “Don't go—tell me—I do not understand— —”

“Oh, that's all right,” cut in Brag Baldwin cheerfully. “Let 'em go. Just an early morning call, as you might say, to show their neighborly spirit. Us being new arrivals. Let 'em go. We can talk things over by ourselves.”

“I don't think I have the pleasure— —” began Mr. Tolliver doubtfully.

“Not yet, Brother, but you will, you will,” promised Brag heartily. “We're the Inmates.”

“I haven't the least idea what you are— —”

“Oh, Mr. Tolliver,” came the horrified voice of Miss Jenkins from the kitchen door. “Ginger's gone to the store.—Oh, whatever will she say to this? Oh, why in the world didn't you wait until we expected you? Dear, dear!”

“I can't believe I am entirely unwelcome, although appearances are certainly against me,” he said, laughing.

“Oh, my dear Mr. Tolliver, not unwelcome, never unwelcome! But so—so unexpected. We’re not ready for you. Let me tell you how it happened—although Ginger told me to keep still and let her do all the explaining—dear—dear—dear— —”

“I see there is something here for me to get to the bottom of,” said Mr. Tolliver quietly to Brag. “If you will excuse me— —”

“Oh, certainly, certainly, Brother Tolliver, go right along in; don’t mind us. I don’t wonder you’re surprised. But you’ll get used to us.” His voice sank to a hoarse whisper. “And we’re not all, Brother Tolliver, we’re not the worst of it. Two more up-stairs. Females, Brother Tolliver.”

Mr. Tolliver could only shake his head, abjectly speechless, as he followed Miss Jenkins into the house.

“You see, it’s like this,” she began. Then her voice sank. “Oh, dear, I always forget they’re not deaf. They’ll be sure to hear me, and Ginger warned me particularly not to hurt their feelings.”

“Miss Jenkins, what in the world are you talking about? Whose feelings? My own feelings merit a little consideration, I should think, in my own house. What has Ginger been up to now?”

“Oh, the poor child! Such a shock to her, too. But don’t blame Ginger, Mr. Tolliver, it was no fault of her own. And she rose to the occasion—like—like— — Well, she rose to it.—Oh, I know they’ll hear me. They’re all over the place every minute.—Can’t we go out to the barn?”

“No, we can not. Come up to my room.”

And there at last, in his own room at the front of the long corridor, behind closed doors, he heard from the lips of Miss Jenkins, in hoarsely fluttering whispers, a story which Ginger herself had prepared, gently, with many helpful omissions and encouraging additions, for his astonished ears.

He burst into irrepressible laughter at the climax.

“It serves her right!” he cried. “Ginger’ll never be able to live down her little indiscretion after this.”

“Yes, but in the meantime— —”

He sobered quickly. “We must send them back, of course. It is just an absurd misunderstanding. We are no Home for the Blind.”

“Yes,” she cried triumphantly, “just what we said. But send them where? The place burned down. Send them how? They have no money, or hardly any. Here they are and here they—can’t be got rid of.”

“That is absurd,” he remonstrated. “A man’s house is his castle, even if it is nothing but a falling-to-pieces old parsonage. Four blind people can not

move in and make a home of it, willy-nilly—no, not in spite of Ginger Ella.”

“They did,” said Miss Jenkins with unconscious finality.

“Who’s going to take care of them?”

“Janie. She’s a wonder. We thought we’d have to hire a girl, but Janie can do everything. She cooks, and scrubs, and makes beds—she’s just a wonder. She can take care of them, and us, too.”

“It certainly is a good lesson for Miss Ginger,” he said, unable to restrain his laughter. “This will teach her to start rolling stones in that high-handed manner of hers! A rolling stone may gather no moss, but hers certainly gathered a houseful of Inmates.—Well, do not worry about it. We will keep them over Sunday, and I will write to the place they came from and arrange for their return. In the meantime, be as patient as you can— —”

“Really, they are rather nice,” said Miss Jenkins. “If only they were deaf instead of blind, so I could speak above a whisper. But they’re nice. That Brag is certainly a card, and Benny is as harmless and kind as can be. Of course, Phally is nothing but a highty-tighty flibbertigibbet that should have her mind on better things— —”

“I should never have left you two irresponsible young things here alone,” he interrupted, laughing again. “I had not realized how fast, and how eventful, and how upsetting, ordinary life in Red Thrush really is.”

On that same evening he wrote a very businesslike letter to the authorities of the Home at Curtiss, Iowa, explaining the state of affairs at Red Thrush as well as he could without going too much into the details of Ginger’s adventure, but the answer he received some three days later was disconcerting. As Brag had explained, he and his companions had been living, not in a Home for the Blind, but in a general retreat for the unwanted, unfortunate old. The Home was a private one, of ardent Methodist background, the institution itself and money for its maintenance having been donated by a philanthropically disposed deacon, long deceased. It had ample funds for its use and was, indeed, practically self-supporting, comprising over five hundred acres of rich Iowa farm land, cultivated at no expense whatever by the more robust inmates. After the fire, funds poured in upon them for its rebuilding, but while homes were generously opened to the other occupants, it had been found impossible to make provision for these four blinded ones.

The letter ended with a prayerful appeal to Mr. Tolliver, as one Methodist to another, not to turn these unfortunate members of their flock out into the winter storms and stress, but to proffer the cup of cold water in His name, for which Heaven would richly reward him.

But, not themselves disdaining to proffer a helpful financial hand, they proposed to allow each of their erstwhile tenants a monthly allowance of five dollars for spending money, and would also make payment to the Red Thrush home of the amount of twelve dollars per month, per capita, for the maintenance of the four.

Mr. Tolliver sighed and looked at Ginger. Ginger sighed—and looked into space. Miss Jenkins turned anxiously from one to the other. But when the two Tollivers broke at last into irrepressible, exasperated laughter, she did not join them.

“They know that nobody in the world can feed anybody on twelve dollars a month,” said Ginger.

“The Army does it,” came a sudden clear announcement from outside the bay window, into which the three had retreated for this private consultation.

“Brag,” whispered Ginger. “He heard us.”

“He hears everything,” hissed Miss Jenkins. “Deafness is a convenient kind of infirmity, isn’t it?”

But they were not entirely disconcerted, not grievously cast down by this decisive turn of events. In a way, they took a morbid satisfaction in the prospect of catering to these curious Inmates thus thrust upon them. After all, it was only for three months, and their presence lent an air of agreeable excitement to the old parsonage, to the Methodist Church, even to the village of Red Thrush itself.

Red Thrush was a small town, but a hospitable one. For the most part, life was drab and commonplace, uneventful. The arrival of these four afflicted ones, brought by one train, lodged under one roof, provided an element of romance, almost of adventure in the even tenor of their ways. The breezy bright sallies of Brag, with his horseshoes, his raised dice and his mumble-the-peg; the pretty vanities of Phally, with her dramatic recitations and her light high songs; the brisk assurance of Janie, who, blinded as she was, could cook and bake and darn; even the utter effacement of the shrinking Benny:—all these conspired to endow the parsonage with a vein of novel interest the like of which Red Thrush had never known.

There had never been a blind resident of the community within the memory of the oldest inhabitant. The arrival of four was simply climactic, it was unprecedented. Red Thrush took them to its heart. Callers dropped in at the parsonage every hour of the day, nor came they empty-handed. Man, woman and child, they came bearing gifts: fruits, vegetables and fowls; hot rolls and cold salads; luscious pies and thick-frosted cakes; barrels of apples

and bags of potatoes. As for the Woman's Home Missionary Society, it voted unanimously to contribute one-half of all funds, both on hand and those to be received, to assist in the support of these afflicted members of the wider fold.

Ginger Ella, taking account of stock, looked upon the largesse with glittering eyes. Why they could run the parsonage on gifts alone, if things continued to come in at this lavish rate. And things did continue. For the kindly folk of Red Thrush never tired of standing silent at the kitchen door watching the deft fingers of Janie as she cut and stirred and sliced; never tired of sitting in the wide living-room to listen to the tales, the verses and the songs of Phally and to watch her slender fingers weaving bits of fine tapestry.

"Why do you never get the colors mixed?" they would ask in wonder.

"Oh, nearly all materials are of different texture—not much different, but a little," she would explain patiently.

"These are not different," declared Ginger in her positive way. "These are the very identical same. Feel, Phally. They are exactly the same."

"Not to my fingers," smiled Phally. "My fingers see better than some people's eyes.—But, of course, some of them really are the same. This green is the same as this blue. I have to tell them by position. I keep the blue here, the green there. Don't you go mixing them up on me, Ginger, without my knowing it, or you'll have me turning out blue grass and green skies."

In the back yard, under the apple trees and in the wide field beyond the parsonage, Brag Baldwin held constant tournament with horseshoes, and knives, and a little coterie of townsmen was always to be found about him, Benny hovering silent in the outer fringe.

On Sunday, the new church was filled to overflowing. Visitors came from miles around, in every direction. Even Baptists had come, to say nothing of the more intimate Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Phally sang in the choir, pathetically pretty with her light curling hair and her softly pinked cheeks. Ginger, looking up at her, yearned over her like a mother.

"The dears," she said to herself. "They will only be here three months, and we're just going to show them the time of their lives.—Yes, if I flunk out my senior year to do it. We'll give them a three months they will remember as long as they live. They're going to be my Thanksgiving for father's getting well."

And Ginger Ella, with her mind made up, was equal to a thing accomplished.

It was that same spirit which animated the entire village, and the adjoining countryside. The time of their lives! Nothing was too good for them. Day after day, Brag and Benny conducted their constantly increasing rendezvous in the field. Phally reigned over her laughing court on the front porch and, on cooler days, in the shabby old living-room. And in the kitchen Janie made coffee and doughnuts for the men, sweet cakes and tea for the women and held her tantrums in abeyance.

Only Miss Jenkins wore a troubled mien. Phally Hartley, in spite of her sad infirmity, maintained an air of appealing sweetness, of brave pathetic gaiety well calculated to stir the sympathies of any susceptible male. Mr. Tolliver, by inclination, by profession, by very sex, indeed, was susceptible. And the stirring of sympathy is premonitory to more serious emotions.

Miss Jenkins' eyes wore a somber shadow when she saw the small pretty hand outstretched for guidance to the large unfailing one of Andrew Tolliver, for Phally persistently declined the use of a cane.

"I do not trust inanimate objects," she declared prettily. "I put all my faith in the human equation. I am sorry to be such a bother."

"Why, you aren't a bit of bother. It's a pleasure to help you," Mr. Tolliver would assure her, as he led her to the most comfortable chair and arranged the cushions for her slim shoulders.

Over all of which Miss Jenkins mourned wordlessly. But she mourned alone. The rest of Red Thrush, urban and rural, churchmen and townfolk, united to accord them royal welcome.

Even Eddy Jackson, who was somewhat inclined to take the general attitude of protecting Ginger Ella from herself, after the first shock of surprise when he learned of this new amazing adventure in which she had become involved, interposed no serious objections. Eddy was a Methodist himself, and he realized that the ministers of his church are often called to meet confounding emergencies. Especially is this apt to be the case when their parsonages give home to Ginger Ellas.

Eddy Jackson, to whom Ginger usually alluded grandly as "father's particular friend," called himself a farmer. At the state agricultural college they called him an agriculturist. He lived a few miles from town on his rich farm, which he flippantly named Pay Dirt, and there he had a laboratory, which Ginger always referred to as the Sacred Shed, fitted up with microscopes and plates and curious tubes, and many queer liquids, and where, with odd little boxes and bottles and cans of sand and soil, he did strange things with seeds and shoots and sprouts. And sometimes he wrote long articles abounding in technical terms and phrases, and these were

published in farm journals, and editors wrote about them, and other journals copied from them. But Eddy called himself a plain farmer and laughed at the notion of further aggrandizement.

Ginger Ella liked Eddy because he was regular, like her father, no mere pretender laying false claims to romance.

But there had been a day when Ginger Ella, for the first time, lay crushed, humiliated, weeping in the shabby old parsonage living-room, an innocent offender against a rigid law, tangled in legal toils, disgraced in the eyes of her townfolk, a confusion to her beloved father, and sobbingly wished she were dead. On that day, it was Eddy Jackson who took her in his arms and calmed her with his caresses, until Ginger, with sudden realization, gazed into his eyes, exalted and amazed and was not offended.

Ginger was not yet seventeen, however; her father was firm, and Eddy Jackson was a wise and patient young man, willing and glad to await the time of the young girl's full fruition. In the meantime, he tried to make himself pleasing and indeed indispensable to her, was unfailingly sympathetic and helpful in her fabulous schemes, and aided her whenever her desires seemed to be within the realm of human accomplishment.

When, therefore, even Eddy Jackson yielded to the charm of the inmates, it was a triumph worth boasting.

But the greatest triumph of all befell on a certain afternoon, at about five o'clock, when Brag Baldwin was conducting a famous horseshoe tournament in the field some distance removed from the house. So intent were the men concerned upon the game that they did not hear the slow footfalls of an approaching horse upon the soft grass. They did not hear the chirruping cluck of the rider, nor the light tap of a crop on the horse's flank. The first they knew of an unexpected witness to their operations was when a low crisp voice broke in behind them:

"Yes, it's true. Lost me ten to the foreign missions. I simply didn't believe it."

The horseshoes clattered to the ground, and six men wheeled about to face the speaker.

"Why, Miss Phil," ejaculated Iry Ford feebly.

It was Miss Philadelphia Van Doorn, setting foot for the first time upon churchly territory, for Miss Van Doorn was not what is known in Iowa as a churchgoer.

"Is he really blind?—Are they all blind?" she demanded of Iry, without conversational preamble. "He does a good job with the shoes. Are you sure they are blind?"

“Honest to gosh,” insisted Iry Ford as proudly as if he owned them. “Blind as a bat. The big one there—the one that took the money—he’s Brag Baldwin. And the one they call Vi’let over there—that’s Benny. Both blind as a door-nail. Gents, this here is Miss Phil Van Doorn.”

Miss Van Doorn swung lightly down from her horse, a tall woman, finely erect in her smart riding clothes, a soft wave of bronze-colored hair touched with gray showing under her smart brown derby.

“Awfully glad to meet you,” she said pleasantly. “You’ll never know what a godsend you’ve been to Red Thrush. How much are you playing for?”

“Oh, nawthing, Miss, nawthing at all,” said Brag Baldwin in some confusion.

“So I noticed.—Well, it’s none of my business. I’m no good with horseshoes. But I’ll sit in with anybody at mumble-the-peg—and name your own stakes.”

“Oh, well, just a friendly little back and forth between—er—us Methodists as you might say,” he admitted. “You know how it is, all in the church, as the saying goes.”

“Oh, sure, I know all about it.—Well, don’t let me interrupt you. I’m on my way to make my first formal call in Red Thrush.—Bring them out to see me some time, Iry. Make it soon.”

She nodded the high-held head in a friendly way and set off toward the house.

“Five Camels she’s no Methodist,” hissed Brag.

“Well—all right,” assented Benny amiably.

“Gosh, no! Not her! You lost again, Vi’let,” said Iry Ford, not without sympathy. “Her, she’s nothing.—You heard what she said about losing ten to the missions.—Well, that’s the way she bets, Red Thrush not being what you would call a betting town. I take it she’s against missions.”

“What do you mean—ten to the missions?”

“Well, when she bets, she bets ag’in’ the society. Not Camels—money. And when she wins, she spends the money on some foolishness or other. It’s her own private system, and it’s a good one.”

“I think I’ll be going along up to the house,” said Brag thoughtfully, “if you gents will excuse me. Maybe Janie would like some parings done, or whatever.”

He set off at once in the direction of the house, tapping his way briskly through the crisp gray grass. Benny followed him. And the others, after

tossing the shoes neatly over the stake, cut off across lots toward town.

CHAPTER V

OVER-SOULS

MISS PHIL VAN DOORN was in, but not of, the Middle West and the State of Iowa. The death of an uncle of surprising wealth had effected her translation from a life of brilliant poverty in a small smart New York apartment to one of lonely luxury in the rambling old mansion set in a thousand acres of priceless Iowa land fringing Red Thrush. Red Thrush fitted Phil Van Doorn like a policeman's glove. And she had her revenge by loving it.

Two months of every winter she spent in New York. Three months of every summer she whiled away in Canada or in Europe. The rest of the time she lived in solitary grandeur alone in the rich old house in the maple grove, served by two devoted Chinese servants who never left the house. Of the social life offered by Red Thrush she would have none. She accepted no more invitations than she offered. She received no callers, ignored all cards.

During the first five years of her residence, Red Thrush had been wildly excited over her presence, for the succeeding five years mildly indifferent. Of late it had developed a biting bitterness toward her. If she wanted none of Red Thrush, Red Thrush wished she would go away and stay away. Her mocking absent presence was an incisive insult. Joplin Westbury, the banker and the richest man in Red Thrush, respecting the size of her inheritance, had incited his wife to assiduous homage to the new tenant at Doorndee. But Phil Van Doorn recked as little of bankers as of butchers.

Five o'clock on Monday afternoon in the first week of October was an hour to date from for many years to come in Red Thrush. It marked her first social overture in twelve years.

Miss Van Doorn herself took the innovation with her customary coolness. She had heard surprising stories of the occurrences at the old Methodist Parsonage, and she, being first amused, then interested, determined to see for herself. With Phil Van Doorn, an interest was a thing to be cultivated, encouraged and coaxed. This was her first Red Thrush interest in twelve years.

"Don't be uneasy, Firefly, it's just a parsonage," she said affectionately to her horse as she slipped the bridle over the post and climbed the fence. The field, although adjoining the parsonage, was not of its possession, and there was no connecting gate. A mere fence did not serve to deter Miss Van Doorn. She climbed it nonchalantly as though she were seating herself on

her own divan, and walked slowly up the cinder path under the apple tree, flecking the dust from her boot with her riding crop. Her approach was witnessed by Miss Jenkins from an up-stairs window.

After one helpless moment of breathless fluttering, she pulled herself together and sped down the corridor to Mr. Tolliver's room, which she entered abruptly, without the formality of knocking, an unprecedented liberty for her, as she was the soul of maidenly reserve.

"Go down—go down," she gasped. "It's that woman."

"Phally? Or is Janie in a tantrum at last? Or maybe it's only Ginger breaking out again?"

"No, no. That—that red-headed minx—from Doorndee."

Mr. Tolliver yielded to a mild interest. "Pass her to Ginger. I'm writing a sermon. I don't feel up to the requirements of Doorndee to-day."

Ginger had heard the light clear voice at the kitchen door and was on her way to meet the newest of the unexpected developments.

"I've come calling," said Phil Van Doorn. "I hope you will forgive me for making a back-door entrance, but I smelled the doughnuts."

Janie's large figure turned away from the stove.

"I don't seem to know your voice," she said doubtfully. "But they let anybody at all in here, so it's all right."

Phil Van Doorn laughed with pleasure. "That lets me in then, and it's the only thing that does, I fancy. Otherwise, I do not qualify. Are you responsible for that perfectly delicious odor? How marvelous!"

"Shall I call Miss Jenkins? Or the pastor? Or Ginger?" asked Janie confusedly.

"Oh, Ginger, I think. Yes, Ginger by all means. May I sit here and revel in the odor?"

At that moment Ginger herself appeared in the doorway.

"Oh, Miss Van Doorn, this proves that you are just as clever as Red Thrush thinks you are. Nobody but a clever one could pick our kitchen on doughnut day in such an offhand manner.—But every day is a good-odor day, since Janie came to live with us." She held out her hand. "I'm Ginger Ella. I've seen you lots of times. You nearly got thrown off on your head the time Iry Ford backed his cab into your horse, didn't you? I saw you."

Miss Phil laughed good-naturedly. "Yes. And you got more than you bargained for when a whole Home was thrust upon you, didn't you? Doesn't that about square us for misadventures?"

“But I like mine,” said Ginger. “Everything’s turning out just great. Why, we’re making money on this crowd. And I’m beginning to count my calories, too, for Janie chefs everything in the world that’s good to eat.”

“Yes, so my nose tells me,” said Phil Van Doorn, as she took one of the crisp doughnuts from the plate Ginger Ella extended.

But for all her air of nonchalance, Ginger Ella was in a state of breathless excitement. She had not the faintest idea what to do with this unexpected caller. The appearance of Philadelphia Van Doorn was far more disconcerting to her than the arrival of a mere houseful of blind visitors.

“Would you like to come into the drawing-room and be formal?” she began tentatively.

“Isn’t it too late for that?” countered Miss Van Doorn. “Of course, I simply shattered all rules of correct procedure by taking to the back door. However, from this moment I will be the perfect caller and do whatever you suggest.”

Ginger meekly led the way, praying for the appearance of her father, of Miss Jenkins, of the voluble Brag, any one to relieve her of the curiously exciting responsibility for this amazing woman.

“I wonder if it would also be contrary to the rules for me to suggest that I should like to see the other one—the one who is bobbed and does dramatic recitations?”

“I think it might have been better for me to produce her of my own accord if I wished to show her off,” said Ginger with mock gravity. “You see,” she went on more mischievously, “she may be the kind of person who does not like company and lets everybody, even ministers, stand on her step and leave cards without ever getting a chance to set foot inside her door.”

Miss Van Doorn turned directly and looked into the girl’s bright piquant face.

She smiled, but her face flushed slightly. “What a fool I have been,” she said. “I never dreamed you were like this. I thought I was probably the only real human being in Red Thrush, with the single exception of Iry Ford.”

Ginger laughed. “Then, my dear Miss Van Doorn, you are not so clever as they thought. Why, there are any number of us. Did you ever meet Gar Haven, the mail carrier? And old Jop Westbury is simply fit to put in a book, unless you are poor enough to take bankers seriously. And as for Eddy Jackson——” Ginger was largely wordless.

“I am humiliated and cast down,” confessed Miss Van Doorn. “Let us have a convention and get ourselves together.”

Janie came out, slowly, surely, with a tray of small cakes and tea.

“Ask Phally to come out too, will you, Janie,” suggested Ginger, adding slyly, “since Miss Van Doorn expressly asked for her—and I do not mind saying that if there is anybody else around here you want to see you will have to ask by name. I shouldn’t dare to run the risk of having anybody brought into your presence without an especial invitation for fear you might get up and walk right straight off the porch and go home.”

Miss Van Doorn had the grace to flush again. “I suppose I might say—I should like to meet your father.”

Ginger’s rosy lips tightened firmly. “I am so sorry. Father is quite busy to-day.”

“I assure you, I mean it, Miss Ginger. I should like it very much indeed.”

“Perhaps some other time—if we know in advance you are coming,” said Ginger crisply.

“Ginger, you stop that!” came a clear command from an open window over the porch. “I can do my own insulting, thank you. I’m coming right down to do it, now.”

Ginger laughed, rather ruefully. “I forgot his window was above us. Now I’ll catch it. You know we preachers are supposed to lick up insults like taffy, and turn the other cheek.”

“Ginger, you do not understand,” said Miss Van Doorn with some earnestness. “I do not get along very well with people—and they do not take to me as they do to—you, for instance. It is much easier not to meet them in the first place than to seem unfriendly later on.”

“I was not begging you to meet my father. There is nothing compulsory about us, you know. You brought it on yourself,” said Ginger stoutly.

Mr. Tolliver came out then, serene and suave and smiling. “How do you do, Miss Van Doorn?” he said pleasantly. “We pay Ginger Ella an extra allowance to do our little family snubbings for us. She’s quite good at it. I hope you feel properly squelched and all.”

“Well, yes, I really do,” was the sober answer. “I have not meant to be rude, I assure you. I honestly thought that the best way to keep from seeming unfriendly was simply not to meet people at all.”

“Yes. And it is the easiest way to keep from friendliness, too. Perhaps you did not think of that?”

“Well, I very foolishly thought there was no one here I would especially care about being friendly with. But your Ginger has shown me my folly. She and the postman and Iry Ford and Eddy Jackson and I are going to form a union of Iowa Over-souls.”

Phally came to the door, feeling her way, gently smiling. “Janie says you want me— —”

Mr. Tolliver hurried to meet her, took her hand. “Of course we want you. We have a rare treat in store for you. We want you to meet one of our rare Over-souls, Miss Van Doorn. This is Miss Hartley, Miss Van Doorn.”

Phally sank into the cushions in the corner of the porch divan beside Mr. Tolliver and turned her soft smile upon Miss Van Doorn. But Miss Van Doorn was a woman of some persistence, not to be lightly turned from a subject in her mind.

“The trouble about meeting people, Ginger,” she said gravely, “is that once you have come into any real contact with them, you can never quite drop them again. You can’t get rid of them. A little part of you belongs to them, and you can’t get it away from them!”

“That,” said Ginger loftily, “is what we like about being in the ministry. It makes us meet everybody and get all mixed up with everything and everybody else in the world. And we,” she declared, with a nice distinctiveness upon the pronoun, “we like it.”

“I don’t. I like to belong to myself. To the things I like—the books I like, the pictures I like, the music, the food, the clothes.”

“Oh, we would be ashamed to belong to just plain things like that,” cried Ginger Ella explosively. “We’d rather belong to folks.”

“Anyhow,” said Miss Van Doorn, “these cakes of Miss Janie’s are delicious, and I should like to belong to one more of them, if I may.”

CHAPTER VI

HARVEST HOME

ON the second Saturday night in October, the Ladies' Aid Society of the Methodist Church gave its annual Harvest Home Festival on the lawn of the parsonage. This had been an honored custom of the society for fifty years, but justifiably popular as the occasion had always been, on this year it had endowed itself with a peculiar, irresistible interest. Indeed, it was confidently predicted that everybody in Red Thrush, regardless of religious affiliation and social status, would attend that dinner. "Admission, Fifty Cents. Children, Twenty-five."

Miss Phally Hartley was going to recite. Miss Janie Jarvis had promised to bake her richest cakes. Mr. Brag Baldwin had assumed full charge of the entertainment and sports. And as if these three items were not sufficient inducement for one occasion, the news had been widely broadcast that Miss Phil Van Doorn, of Doorndee, had stated publicly in the Candy Factory that she herself intended to be present at the Harvest Home Supper on the lawn of the Methodist Parsonage, and that she had ordered ten dollars' worth of fine candies delivered there on the morning of that day, and the bill to be sent to her.

As was to be expected, from the first moment of sunrise on that second Saturday in October, the household was in a state of breathless excitement. A hasty breakfast was partaken of, standing, in the kitchen, for even at that early hour all chairs and tables were covered with provisions for the gala event, with cars constantly pulling up at their gate, wagons, carriages, bicycles, and many small boys on foot, all bearing boxes, baskets and bags of food for the evening's feast.

"Now the first thing to do," said Ginger Ella, as she sugared and creamed her oatmeal, "is to corral some boys to rake the leaves. We've got to end with a big bonfire."

"Let us do it," offered Brag quickly. "Benny and me'll do it. Pack of Camels, Benny. Have you got two rakes, Ginger?"

"No, we'll have to borrow one.—But can you rake—how can you rake when you — —"

"Us, sure we can rake. By feel, Ginger. Oh, we may miss a few—but we'll do as good a job as most. Pack of Camels, Benny."

“Well, all right,” coughed Benny.

As soon as breakfast was over, Ginger ran to the next-door neighbor to borrow a rake, and she and Miss Jenkins stood on the porch and watched with great interest as the two men carefully paced off the entire front lawn.

“What’s that got to do with it?” wondered Ginger.

“Dividing it, I suppose. So one won’t have to do more than his share.”

When the two had come at last to an agreement of distances, they planted themselves at the opposite, outer corners, bodies bent alertly, rakes poised for action.

“You count, Ginger. One, two, three, ready go!” called Brag excitedly.

And at Ginger’s “Go!” the rakes at opposite ends of the lawn flew into the crisp leaves. And from that moment neither of the workmen would pause for a moment, not so much as to light a cigarette, nor for a word of conversation with those coming in, not even Brag, who, of all things, confessed to a love of conversation upon any subject and at any time.

With the two fully involved in their undertaking, the women retired at once to their own share of the day’s work. Miss Phally washed her hair, and manicured her nails. Miss Jenkins assisted Janie in the kitchen, and checked off the articles of food as they were delivered in correspondence with lists given her by the committee in charge. Ginger Ella polished silverware, counted dishes, and rubbed the red-cheeked apples to a brilliant hue. And upon these special labors, an hour or more later, the great voice of Brag, in triumph raised, called them to make decision.

“Done!” he roared. “I’ve finished. Am I through, or am I not?” he demanded.

“Yes, you’ve finished. He beat you, Benny. He is through.”

Benny stopped to mop the perspiration from his brow. Without a word he pulled a pack of Camels from his pocket and handed it over.

“Most generous creature I ever saw,” whispered Miss Jenkins. “Always giving things away.”

Ginger pursed up her lips and said nothing. Her fertile young mind was beginning to trace a logical sequence between these curious bursts of generosity and the general activities of her two male inmates.

A little later Eddy Jackson came with a group of young men from the church, and they put up long tables under the trees, with benches on either side, and among the branches of the trees they swung Japanese lanterns. The women followed them, laying the tables with white cloths, arranging the

silver and placing baskets of apples, candies and nuts in mathematical precision down the lengths.

By four o'clock in the afternoon the lawn was gay with a laughing crowd, and on the porch, where the piano had been drawn for the occasion, a cluster of young people gathered and sang late popular airs which they interspersed with favorite old Methodist hymns by request. *Yes, We'll Gather at the River, Muddy Water, What a Friend, and That's My Weakness Now*, vibrated in the golden air with all evidences of equal zest and enjoyment. And in the field behind the house Brag Baldwin conducted his private tournament for "gents only."

In the early dusk the lanterns over the tables were lighted, and the crowd formed itself into long lines to march from the house to the waiting banquet. Mr. Tolliver led the way with Phally Hartley, whom he had taken under his particular charge for the evening. His place was at the head of the first table, and about him naturally gathered the more ardent and active members, the trustees and deacons with their wives, the enthusiastic Aiders, the presidents of the two missionary societies. And at the foot of that table sat Miss Jenkins, with Janie beside her to receive what assistance she might require.

"Save a place for Doorndee," whispered Ginger to her father. "She said she was coming."

He shook his head and laughed. "We save no place for Doorndee until Doorndee arrives. That woman's a will-o'-the-wisp."

Ginger Ella and Eddy Jackson took Brag and Benny under their protection, and by some natural unerring instinct they sought out the lowest table of all, most remote from that of the truly elect, and their friends followed them silently, the gayest of the village youth, with, indeed, the nearest approach to a rowdy element that the town afforded, the postman, Gar Haven, Iry Ford and the janitor of the schoolhouse.

Silently they stood, with heads bowed, while Mr. Tolliver asked a brief blessing upon the food that was placed before them and gave thanks for the bounties of a provident year. As they sat, at the lowest table, the youth of the church broke again into lilting song.

"Seems to me we've drawn the cream of the crowd," Eddy whispered to Ginger. "And since you are here, with your well-known appetite, we are bound to get the cream of the food."

"Oh, I do not think so much about food any more," protested Ginger. "Responsibility seems to have taken the edge off my appetite."

"I'll give my verdict on that later," he said, and smiled appreciatively at the strangely assorted group about him.

Hardly were they seated when the low thrum of a high-powered motor announced the arrival of Phil Van Doorn, and a moment later, stunning in a costume of warm-toned red and brown, she was walking toward them with her high and undisturbed composure. Ginger ran to meet her.

“Don’t stop here,” she said, as Miss Van Doorn paused. “They want you at the first table. We’re just the lowbrows down here, and making a terrible racket.”

Miss Van Doorn permitted herself to be led until she caught full sight of the table to which she was being conducted, with the minister, the deacons, the Aiders, all in glad array.

“See here, you little fiend,” she said, stopping short, “you’re not herding me with the sheep, are you? You know very well I don’t belong there. You take me right straight back with you and the rest of the goats.”

But Mr. Tolliver had seen, and came to greet her—a stranger—the only stranger in all the friendly town. Far more strange was she among the Methodists of Red Thrush, after her residence of twelve years, than the four blind Inmates who had been among them but a scant three weeks.

“You’ll be bored,” Mr. Tolliver said regretfully. “We’re discussing a new church carpet, and it is not a gay subject. Take my chair—Eddy is bringing me another.” He sat down presently beside her, next to Miss Phally, carefully mindful of his responsibility to her. “Now, Miss Van Doorn, tell the truth, did you ever before sit at the head of a Methodist flock like this?”

“Don’t show any interest in anything they say,” Ginger warned her in a laughing whisper, “or they’ll get a contribution out of you for something or other.”

As she returned to her own place between Brag and Eddy Jackson she was just in time to hear the loud cheerful voice of Brag lifted up.

“Is that a fly on my hand?—Ginger, is that a fly?—It is! Good. We’re in luck. I got a grand game for us to play, but we got to have flies. This game is called Fly Poker. But mostly us Methodists refer to it as Sugar Pool. Now you pass the sugar, Ginger, and see that everybody takes one lump. Just one, Ginger, don’t let ’em take more.” He waited quietly while the sugar bowl went the rounds of the table. “All ready now? Everybody got a sugar? Now we make a pool— —”

“A pool! How can we make a pool? We mustn’t spill water on the Ladies’ Aid table-cloth.”

“Not a pool of water. It’s a pool of nickels. Everybody contributes one nickel, and that makes up the pool. Or, as us Methodists say, the tank. A tank of nickels. See that everybody antes, Ginger, or as us Methodists say, tanks.”

Nickels were gaily produced, with much confused talk and laughter, and heaped into a pile in the center of the table, those without money borrowing from obliging neighbors.

“That’s right, that’s the idea. See that everybody chips in, Ginger. Them as don’t pay, don’t play. Watch ’em, Ginger. Now—everybody ready?—Now we put our sugars down in front of our plates—about three inches—like this. Now we waits. The first sugar that catches a fly, takes the pool. Or, as we usually has it, the tank.”

Gay little screams of laughter rose from the merry group. What an odd, amusing little game it was! Only Eddy Jackson turned curious quizzical eyes upon the beaming bright face of old Brag Baldwin.

“Did you say you were a deacon in the Methodist Church, Brother Brag?” he inquired with interest.

“Well, no, not just to say deacon, Eddy, no,” admitted Brag. “But active, very.”

“Come fly, nice fly,” coaxed Ginger gaily. “Here’s a nice sweet little sugar for you.”

“Yes, come on in and tank up,” said Eddy Jackson.

Miss Van Doorn’s arrival had put something of a restraint upon the spirits of the first table. The ladies lost interest in the church carpet. Their minds turned, instead, to the smart cut and the fine texture of Miss Van Doorn’s warm red and brown ensemble. Joplin Westbury left off his technical dissertation on the rate of interest on church debts and tried to lead Miss Van Doorn into a discussion of market fluctuations. Some few, more prominent in the spiritual than in the social life of Red Thrush, became acutely aware of their table manners.

Only Phally Hartley and the Reverend Mr. Tolliver remained entirely unabashed in her bright presence.

At the other end of the table Miss Jenkins quite forgot her responsibility to Janie Jarvis, forgot the tempting viands upon her plate, but kept her troubled brooding eyes upon the head of the table, where Phally Hartley, small, dimpled and smiling, sat beside the minister, her soft light curls touching his shoulder.

“Somebody must tell Miss Van Doorn a story about a Methodist preacher and a fried chicken,” said Mr. Tolliver. “She has never heard one—she has never seen the two in juxtaposition—the opportunity must not be wasted. Come now, bring out your best fried chicken.”

“I know a good one myself about a Mennonite and pickled pigs’ knuckles,” said Miss Van Doorn. “And I know a dandy about a Quaker and a

roast pig. And as for the one about the Baptist preacher and the Georgia 'possum— — You see, I know quite a little about the gustatory tendencies of some denominations.”

Miss Van Doorn's eyes were shining, her bright lips merrily curved. The novelty of the occasion was a delight to her.

A sudden burst of laughter from the lowest table drew all eyes in that direction.

“A fly, a fly, Benny got the fly,” chorused the gay young voices. “Give him the tank, give him the tank!”

“Aren't the goats having fun?” said Miss Van Doorn half enviously. “It sounds like amateur night at Keith-Albee's, with a tank taking the place of the hook.”

When they left the tables at last, Miss Van Doorn at once sought out Eddy Jackson.

“I know who you are,” she said. “I want to get acquainted with you. You, it seems, are a famous One out of Five, meaning interesting characters.”

“Yes, I am fascinating,” he agreed. “I can tell you how to raise bigger and better beans, how to make more butter from less cream, and how to persuade fewer chickens to lay more eggs. Are you becoming interested?”

“Not much. Perhaps Ginger did not refer so much to your profession as to your personality. You must have *it*.”

“I *am* it,” he announced complacently. “I've got so much sex appeal my mother will not keep a maid.”

“She's a smart girl, that Ginger Ella. She knows what she is talking about. And I am going to be friends with her, too, whether she likes it or not.”

Miss Eyres, the church organist, installed herself at the piano on the porch, Tub Andrews on a cushion at her feet with his ukulele, and the happy throng surged about them, laughing and singing, while the older women busied themselves with clearing away the tables.

But up-stairs, in the front window, Miss Jenkins sat somberly alone, her chin cupped in her hands, and stared moodily down into the brightness with sorry shadowed eyes.

She saw Mr. Tolliver detach himself from a laughing group and cross to where Phally Hartley sat, saw him take her hand and lead her out into a little cleared circle under the light from the Japanese lanterns. She could hear the little burst of applause with which the crowd encouraged her. Miss Phally bowed and smiled, entirely self-possessed, happy in the plaudits of those

about her. Her clear little monotonous voice floated out with dramatic emphasis.

“A huntsman, bearing his gun a-field,
Went whistling merrily.”

Miss Jenkins closed the window with a bang and pulled down the blind.

A little later, she thought she heard her name called faintly, huskily, from the foot of the circular staircase. She did not answer. She heard slow steps approaching, but she did not move. There was a knock at her door, and she paid no heed. It opened slowly, and a meek small voice asked hoarsely:

“Miss Jenkins? You there?”

It was Benny. Miss Jenkins crossed the room toward him quickly, forcing a kind smile to her thin lips.

“Yes, I am here, Benny. What do you want? Do they need me?”

“You sick?”

“No, I am not sick. But I am tired. I do not feel very gay to-night.”

From behind his back, Benny drew out a box, a gaudy red box tied with a great bow of red ribbon.

“Miss Phil’s prize at mumble-the-peg,” he said huskily. “I won it. You can have it. Cheer you up!”

Tears of gratitude came into Miss Jenkins’ faded eyes at the unexpectedness of his kindly sympathy.

“Oh, Benny, that—that is just nice of you—I didn’t think anybody would miss me.”

“Oh, sure—sure,” he stammered nervously.

CHAPTER VII

THE WAY OF THE WORLDLY

MISS VAN DOORN made good her threat to Eddy Jackson regarding Ginger's friendship. Miss Phil entirely understood her own somewhat erratic temperament, and when she had stated that a contact once formed could never be entirely severed, she spoke truly. Having, in a moment of rare impulsiveness, penetrated the parsonage precincts purely to gratify a sort of bored curiosity on her part in regard to the four recent arrivals there, the "Four Afflicteds," as they were affectionately called in Red Thrush, Miss Phil found her own interests deeply and warmly involved.

Ginger's unspoiled freshness, her daring raillery, her bubbling enthusiasm were a source of unfailing delight to the older, more sophisticated woman, who for too many years had been thrown upon books and music for her emotional outlet. In Ginger's sparkling effervescence she found a pleasant antidote for her aloneness, and never a day passed but she called at the parsonage to have a doughnut and a cup of coffee in the kitchen with Miss Janie; to engage Benny and Brag in a noisy game of mumble-the-peg under the apple tree; but chiefly to wait for Ginger Ella, to rehabilitate her slumbering wits by a verbal encounter with that unbridled young tongue.

Ginger, whose intuitions never slumbered, felt a subtle change in Miss Jenkins during those days, a pervading moodiness, a troubled restiveness, quite new to her. Ginger watched her closely, followed her about the house on one pretext or another and studied her with sharp inscrutable eyes.

"She is up to something," she confided to Eddy Jackson. "I only hope it isn't Father again."

On Friday of that week, while they were at dinner, Miss Jenkins electrified the household with the announcement that she was going to Burlington on the early evening train, going all by herself, and planned to remain overnight, not to return home until the eight o'clock train on Saturday.

"It isn't as if you would really need me for anything," she said apologetically, with a half-sigh. "You can get along."

"Of course we can get along, Jenky," said Ginger kindly, "but we always miss you. You do need a little vacation, though, and it will do you good. Have all the fun you can, and see all the bright lights and everything."

As she came home from school at four o'clock that afternoon Miss Jenkins saw Benny prowling about alone under the leafless trees and called a pleasant greeting to him. He drew up to her slowly, bowing diffidently, fumbling in a deep pocket. After many aimless gestures, he managed to produce a soiled old silver dollar, which he extended to her jerkily and with a deprecating grin.

"Go to a movie," he said abruptly. "Do you good."

"Oh, Benny," she protested. "You—you're just too generous—I can't take your money—you need it yourself—"

"'S all right, 's all right. Got more. Won this on a bet—Miss Phil—"

"On a bet. Oh, Benny. A real bet?"

Benny coughed anxiously, not committing himself to the indiscretion of further words.

"Benny, I am going to take this, and have a good time with it, for I know you mean it kindly. And thanks from the bottom of my heart. But, Benny—you shouldn't bet. You shouldn't, really. The Discipline expressly forbids it. You really shouldn't. It's all Brag Baldwin's fault, dragging you into such things."

Benny coughed meekly, lifting troubled brows skyward.

"You're a good generous soul, Benny, and you mean well, and I'll have a nice time with this. Would you like me to bring you something from Burlington? It's a large city, and they have good shops. Would you like anything?"

"Sweet-grass. Colored sweet-grass. I'll weave you a basket. I'm a good weaver." And he shuffled quickly away and around the house.

After an early supper, Miss Jenkins came down, dressed for travel and carrying a light bag, which Mr. Tolliver took, offering himself as an escort to the train. A going-away on her part was a real event among them, and a strange air of adventure pervaded the entire group. She bade each member of the household a warm good-by.

"Sweet-grass—colored—any color you like," said Benny huskily, as she shook his hand.

Ginger Ella sat with Eddy Jackson on the steps, huddled in a heavy sweater, for the night was cool, and stared after the two departing figures.

"She's up to something, Eddy, you mark my words," said Ginger, who had not failed to remark Miss Jenkins' strange air of excitement and the dark flush upon her sallow face. "She's got something up her sleeve. I only hope it isn't Father." Her voice sank to a confidential whisper. "I think she's

jealous of Phally—and I am not altogether sure of her complete harmlessness, myself,” she confessed ruefully. “Why is it, Eddy, that when a man gets to be around fifty he turns so weak-minded about women? And a nice man like Father, too—I suppose he caught it from the twins, that sex-appealingness. I did hope he would take after me and have some sense.”

Eddy smiled at her, but not without a few regrets on his own account. It was too much to expect, even of a rare regularity like that of Eddy Jackson, that he should not wish sometimes, just now and then, that Ginger Ella herself would show just a little less sense and a little more interest in “sex-appealingness.” But in those moments of regret, being a young man wise beyond his years, he comforted himself with the memory of that moment, a few weeks before, when Ginger Ella first awakened from girlish lethargy to the consciousness of his lips upon hers and frankly acknowledged her pleasure in the awakening. Making generous allowance for her youth, he was content, for the most part, to bask in her presence, to enjoy her frank if undemonstrative affection, to laugh at her merry wit and to bide his time. But being a man, he could not resist the occasional desire to probe her emotions and to gratify his own by proving to himself afresh that she did indeed respond to the clasp of his hand, the pressure of his arm, the touch of his lips. For the rest, loving her fresh innocence, he was glad her full awakening came slowly and was content to wait.

Not even Ginger, waiting for Miss Jenkins on the station platform at eight o’clock on Saturday night, for all her suspicions and her fears, was prepared for the latter’s return. Miss Jenkins—was it indeed Miss Jenkins who stumbled blindly down the steps, her light bag flapping at her knees, pale, dark-eyed, thin-lipped, quivering?

“Jenky,” gasped the girl, “are you sick? What is the matter? What has happened to you, Jenky?”

“Come away quickly,” whispered the haggard woman. “Walk fast—stay on the dark side of the street—hurry.”

“Oh, my dear, what is it? Are you being followed? Have you been robbed? Oh, whatever has come over you?”

But Miss Jenkins only tugged the low brim of her hat lower about her ears, and buried her chin more deeply into the furred collar of her coat as she urged Ginger on to greater speed.

“I should never have let you go,” mourned Ginger. “I might have known you couldn’t take care of yourself.”

“No fool like an old one,” muttered Miss Jenkins cryptically.

“Do you mean yourself? Or Father?”

“All of us. We’re all alike.—Well, if the good Lord will forgive me this once, I’ll be a better woman from this on.”

“Oh, don’t keep me in suspense. I can’t stand it! What in the world have you done?—Not that I care, Jenky. I don’t care what it is, I’m for you. I don’t care how much of a fool you are.”

“Wait,” was the low ominous answer. “Wait and see.”

She answered the pleasant greetings of the group in a corner of the living-room with a curt “Good evening,” and proceeded grimly up-stairs to the room she shared with Ginger, that amazed young person following her in an awed and speechless silence.

It was Miss Jenkins who closed the door behind them and locked it, closing the windows also and drawing every blind to its lowest extremity.

“Turn on the lights,” she commanded at last harshly. “Turn on every one.”

As in a daze, Ginger obeyed her. And then Miss Jenkins planted herself in the middle of the room beneath the brightest light of all and faced the young girl, despairing, defiant and pleading. Her thin lips sank from their grim outline into one of pitiful pain. With trembling hands she drew her soft hat from her head, and tears rained down her pale thin face.

Ginger stared and stared. Then she pulled herself together with a determined effort.

“How—how cute,” she said faintly.

Miss Jenkins had bobbed her hair and submitted her stern head to the rigors of a permanent wave.

“Go on,” sobbed the poor woman, unable longer to endure her silent scrutiny. “Go on! Tell me I’m a fool. I know it. Tell me I look like a street-walker. I know I do. Tell me I ought to be put out of the Primary and the Methodist Church. It would serve me right.”

“Why, darling,” gasped Ginger, struggling to regain her breath and her composure, “it—it looks—just nice.—Why, you look ten years younger—maybe more.—And oh, Jenky, how comfortable you are going to be. You will never wear it long again, once you get used to it. One bob will cure you of that nonsense.—Why, darling, don’t take it so seriously. Everybody’s doing it. You’ll get used to it—in time. It looks—great.”

Miss Jenkins, wiping her eyes, permitted herself after a time to be calmed if not comforted.

“I thought—I’d look like Phally,” she confessed weakly. “Softer and smoother—and not so grim.—She’s every day as old as I am. But when I

saw those waves all over my head and my scrawny neck——” She burst into heavy tears again. “Ginger, I wished I was dead. May the Lord forgive me.”

But Ginger’s nearly-seventeen years in the parsonage had made her an experienced and an efficient comforter. She circled the strange head critically, smoothed a crisp curl here, patted a wave into place there, clipped a loose end with the scissors, thrust in an occasional small pin.

“Miss Jenkins,” she declared at last, with an air of great solemnity, “it’s the most sensible thing you ever did in your life, and I’m proud of you. It’s time we women showed our independence of public opinion, and stood firm for our own comfort.—Now, you stick to it that you got tired of bothering with hairpins and combs and nets, and you decided it was no less than sheer worldly vanity for you to be a slave to so much hair. You had it cut for comfort, and you’re glad of it. Stick to your story, and I’ll stand by you. You look just great!”

Thus reenforced and somewhat encouraged by Ginger’s assurance, Miss Jenkins finally reached the point of moral courage where she consented to go down-stairs to face the assembled household.

“They’re blind, and I dare say your father will never notice, one way or the other,” she said hopefully.

“Oh, he’ll notice it, I know he will,” declared Ginger, and meant it kindly.

“Oh, what a fool he will think me,” wailed Miss Jenkins.

“See here,” demanded Ginger abruptly, “what do you want, anyhow? Do you want him to notice it or not?”

“I would rather he did not notice it at all,” confessed Miss Jenkins, “but it is embarrassing not to be noticed one way or the other.”

Ginger led the way down the circular staircase. “Oh, look, everybody,” she cried brightly, “Miss Jenkins has had her hair bobbed!”

The announcement was productive of no such cataclysmic upheaval as its subject had feared.

“Mercy!” ejaculated Janie. “Wasn’t she bobbed? I thought everybody was bobbed. They cut ours at the Home three years ago.”

“Saves a lot of time, bobbed hair,” said Brag cheerfully. “A bobbed cook gains as much as ten minutes on breakfast every day.”

“You’ll like it,” said Phally sweetly. “Everybody says it makes us look much younger.”

Only Mr. Tolliver stared abjectly at the strange and unfamiliar head. Ginger fixed him with a stern eye.

“I don’t wonder you hardly know her, Father,” she said encouraging. “Doesn’t she look—young?”

Slowly the astonished man recovered the power of speech, incited thereto by the sternness of his daughter’s glance. “You women are young enough as it is. With your bobbed hair, and what-not, you are making patriarchs of my entire sex, of all ages. I’m against it. Why should I look like Miss Jenkins’ grandfather?” His smile, if slightly forced, was pleasant. “It does look very nice indeed—now that we realize it is you. I think you will like it.”

Much later that evening, as they were all rising to go up-stairs to bed, Benny cleared his throat in an interested manner and said huskily:

“Me—I like bobbed hair.”

When Ginger was alone she stood silent for some time glowering sternly into space.

“Two of them,” she muttered. “Frizzed and bobbed and rouged within an inch of their lives. And Father wax, poor darling, simply wax.—Hum.”

It was for this, after a time of due consideration, driven as she felt to drastic measures in defense of her hearth and home, that she sought out Brag Baldwin, secretly, as she was setting off to school Monday morning. Ginger was quite sure that when she was actively present in the flesh, she could guarantee her father’s complete immunity to female wiles and wits. But Ginger was in school six hours a day. And besides that, being a girl of many varied and insistent interests, she was obliged to absent herself for yet other hours in the conduct of her personal and private enterprises in the privacy of her attic studio.

“I just don’t want Father bothered,” she explained to Brag with a volubility not entirely convincing. “When women of a certain age get a preacher by himself they simply don’t know when to leave off. Now if you could just sort of keep yourself on hand—and do your share of the conversation—and you’re good at that Brag.”

Brag was quite sure he could do it. But it would take time—valuable, productive time when he might be raking leaves, or digging potatoes, or playing mumble-the-peg, for pay. And his five-dollar monthly allowance was not sufficient for his needs, particularly of late when the usually pliant Benny had developed a strain of old-fashioned Methodist rigor and declined all tentative inroads upon his bag of Camels.

So Ginger was obliged to talk business, admitting at last that the service was worth fifty cents a week to her. She went so far as to pay one week in advance, counting out two dimes, five nickels and five pennies, laboriously, from her small worn purse.

“Now, don’t be too obvious about it,” she admonished him, shifting her books to the other arm and straightening her general appearance to be on her way, “but be effective. That’s all. Be on hand. And don’t be obvious.”

CHAPTER VIII

A VALUABLE ACQUISITION

CONSIDERING the smallness of the village of Red Thrush, and the spirit of thrift which animates the Iowa small townsman, considering also his own sad physical infirmity, Brag Baldwin was finding his residence there not entirely unprofitable. Between his adroit introduction of novel games at the psychological moment, relieving the janitor at the schoolhouse for an hour or two now and then between the periods of recess and dismissal, and serving surreptitiously as romantic overseer of the parsonage for a consideration, he found himself in the way of becoming something of a financier.

In common with others of his class, upon whatever scale may be the basis of their operations, the more he had, the more he wanted. Consequently he was constantly casting about in his all-too-fertile brain for ways and means of adding to his small, but growing, funds.

So it came about now and then, on a quiet morning, that he would amble off quietly with his cane, in search, as he indifferently explained, of the meditative solace of a solitary walk along the quiet lanes and roads bordering upon Red Thrush. On these occasions, once out of sight of the parsonage, he betook himself as quickly as he could to a remote crossroads intersection on the farther side of town, and seated himself conspicuously upon an old stump. His preparations for the part he proposed to play were simple enough. He turned his cap inside out and pulled it well down over his eyes. He removed his dark glasses, not wishing to present any similitude of blindness, knowing as he did that the blind were marked characters in that community. He turned his collar high around his chin, hunched one shoulder uncomfortably high on one side, one hip twisted slightly with a leg drawn up, and extended in a trembling hand an old tin cup, borrowed from the parsonage kitchen, in which reposed three small coins and three red pencils. Here he sat, patiently submitting himself to the charitable impulses of chance passers-by. Nor sat he there in vain. An hour and a half on the first day netted him a total of sixty-nine cents. Two hours on another occasion, some four days later, added fifty-eight cents to the old flannel sack in his hip pocket.

Not very much, but Brag philosophically consoled himself with the reflection: "After all, it's better sittin' for fifty-eight cents, than sittin' for

nothin'. And there ain't much else to do, but sit."

On the third morning of his secret essay, as he sat, half dozing, for passers-by were very few, he was aroused by the sudden clink of a coin against the pencils in his cup, and the salutation of a low, slow, drawling voice:

"Well, here's luck!"

Brag Baldwin was not one to miss such opportunity for speech. "God bless you, brother, as I do myself. And I thank you more, far more, for the luck you wish than the money you give."

"You stick to the cash," drawled the lazy voice. "I mean luck for me and money for you."

"Well, brother, you chose the best way to bring yourself good fortune," boomed Brag cheerfully. "Bread cast upon the waters, you know, bread cast upon the waters. Bound to return. Just the same with nickels in a cup. Bound to return. 'Cording to Scripture."

He stared painfully up in the direction of the lazy voice, which vibrated strangely, most pleasantly upon his eager ears. His very soul burned now within him, as many times it did, in a hot desire for sight, for just one seeing look.

"Say something, brother, speak.—I don't see just so very good.—I can't read still life."

Brag Baldwin, if he had been suddenly granted the sweet boon of vision, would have found something much to his liking in the face before him, a slim face, brown, a little haggard, the expression boyishly stubborn, with a sensitive mouth that drooped in weary discontent. The dark eyes were moody, and two narrow frowning lines cut the high forehead beneath the sleek black hair of the young bare head.

A tramp, one would have called him, for he walked wearily and carried a roll over his shoulder. He wore knickers, somewhat the worse for travel, and a soft soiled shirt, the sleeves rolled up, the collar turned back.

"I don't just seem to place your accent, brother," pleaded Brag. "You don't sound so Middle West to me."

"Gosh, no," agreed the lazy voice.

The young man let the roll slide from his shoulder to the grassy bank, and the wiry slim figure sprawled at full length, head pillowed upon it.

"Plain, unadulterated Yankee, that's what I am, uprooted from my stern and rockbound coast."

"You hoofing it, brother? You're a long way from home."

"I'm going farther. California. I never want to see another pine-tree nor another Plymouth Rock as long as I live." The voice trailed lazily away. "That's my last dime you're coddling there," he added, as an afterthought.

Brag promptly offered it back to him. "I won't take the last dime from anybody," he declared. "You take it right back. A Rockefeller or a Ford could build millions from that there dime."

"Yeh, but I'm a Roney," said the youth indifferently.

Brag Baldwin liked the lazy young voice, liked the lazy philosophy suggested by his words, the morbid discontent implied. He warmed to the young man. He put the three pencils briskly in his pocket, tossed the tin cup over the fence, turned down his collar and twisted his cap right side out again, placing it decorously upon his head. Then he drew out his thick black glasses, rubbed them on his sleeve, and set them vigorously on his nose. He fumbled behind him and pulled into view his stout walking stick.

"You're blind," ejaculated the young man.

"That's right. Blind."

"But, see here, that should be a great asset to you in beg—er—selling pencils."

"Not in Red Thrush. The blind here is prominent characters. Too much publicity.—Now, tell you what. Let's just walk down the street a ways, and we'll sit down in a nice spot and talk this thing over.—I don't rightly get you, brother."

"I think I'm beginning to get you." There was a smile in the lazy voice. "Remove from the scene of your activities, eh?—All right.—I won't take the dime back."

"Oh, I'm blind all right, blind as a bat," protested the old man cheerfully. "But I don't just have to go beg—er—peddling—or what-not. I get enough to eat and all. I'm just sort of putting by for a rainy day.—Come on. Let's get around the corner."

They walked silently, side by side, Brag tapping his way with his cane, the youth wearily packing his roll.

"Here's a good place," he said presently. "Is this far enough from the point of depredations?"

Brag sat down upon the grassy bank, and the young man lay beside him, his head on his arms, staring curiously at the brisk, ruddy old man who gazed back at him hungrily, fairly aching with the desire to read the soul that underlay the pleasant young voice.

"Now, buddy," he began hopefully, "go on. You tell Brag all about it. Found pretty slim pickings on your way out?"

"Gosh, I can't beg," said the youth explosively. "I just can't do it. I'll hike rides with the next one, and I'll bum it on trains, and swipe apples, and sleep in barns, but I'm darned if I can beg. I worked three days on a farm, darn 'em, but because I quit before the week was out they wouldn't pay me. But I ate for three days."

"What drove you out, buddy? You don't sound like a bum. What was it? Bad company—hooch—trouble with a woman—scrape over money—what was it?"

The young man leaped indignantly to a sitting posture. "Say, there's nothing crooked about me," he said. A surprising air of virtue settled over the discontented young face. "I'm teaching my old man a lesson," he announced with dignity.

Brag scratched his head. "I don't quite get that."

His companion grinned ruefully. "Well, it's like a spanking," he confessed. "I admit it hurts me worse than it does him."

"Your old man — —"

"Well, it's like this. They were all set to go on a trip — —"

"Who was, sonny? Who was set?"

"The family. My family. My father and mother and my kid sister. Round the world—stay nine months—and the old man promised I could stay out of college this year and go with them and finish up next year if—I didn't flunk out any courses."

"Well — —"

"Well, I flunked two and got a condition. And the old tightwad ordered me back to school, and the rest of them sailed first of September. Me at school like a baby led off to kindergarten. Getting picture postals of them seeing the pyramids, riding a camel, 'wish you were along.' I wouldn't stand for it. I took all the money I had and lit out. Just said I was going, and started. I'm going to California, and kindergarten be damned. I'll show 'em."

"Yeh—I guess so." Brag was sympathetic, but non-committal. It seemed a reactionary sort of discipline to him. But he liked the young and lazy voice.

"S'pose you ain't crippled, or blind, or nothin'?" he said hopefully.

"No, I'm all right."

"Too bad you ain't blind now. You could come and live with us. We got a swell place. Company every day, and fried chicken until you bust out crowin'. Barrel of apples standin' open day and night, and Ladies' Aiders sendin' in cakes and pies and what-not until even a ostrich'd get indigestion. Singin' every night, and speakin' pieces— —"

"Gosh," sighed the youth, "it sounds like Heaven."

"Awful swell place, sonny," went on Brag enthusiastically. "Horseshoes and mumble-the-peg in the back yard, tea-drinkin' and society carryin's-on in the parlor. Ginger Ella a-petting us, Miss Jenkins a-weavin' around, and the preacher prayin' for us, and the whole darn little town stuffin' us tighter'n a drum.—Gosh, if you was just blind now."

"Well, I'm not blind."

"No. You're not blind. Pity. Wait. I'm a-thinkin'."

He sat for a moment, immersed in thought, while the young man lay lazily at his side, regarding him with a comfortable interest.

"They're awful dumb," Brag said suddenly.

"They don't sound dumb."

"Oh, they're good. They're good as angels. But dumber'n they make 'em. They're so dumb they'd never know whether a body's blind or not.—Benny's a good sort, but he ain't no right company for a man of spirit, like what I am," he said discontentedly.

"No?"

"They're so dumb, they'd just naturally think 'course you was blind if you come hobblin' in with a cane and black glasses. Us, we ain't got eyes, maybe, but they're just plain blind in the brains. They never suspect nothing. They let anybody in that wants in, and asks no questions.—Now, I tell you how we could fix it."

The old man became wheedlesome. He was beginning to feel a sort of loneliness in the midst of the mild goodness of Red Thrush.

"You get a pair of thick black glasses like mine and keep your eyes shut. You come in about train time and say they sent you to the Home at Curtiss, and the Home wasn't ready yet, it being burned down, so they said would Brother Tolliver please keep you until they got the Home built up? This crowd here, how'll they know whether you're blind or not?"

The young man laughed. "Er—how about you, brother?" he inquired pleasantly.

"Me? Oh, I'm blind enough. I got mine in an explosion in a fire. But they'll never suspicion anything amiss if you come in like I say. You come

right after train time—that's eight o'clock—with the glasses.—No, it's such a dang small town somebody might get nosey and hear about you buyin' the glasses. You take my glasses. I got another pair home. You just lazy around here until that eight o'clock train, and keep out o' sight much as possible, and then mosey right out to the parsonage."

"I can't beg — —"

"You won't have to. This is a Lord-lovin' town, and they just naturally forces that cup of cold water down the back of your neck. You couldn't ask for nothin' in this town, 'cause they give you the whole darn show without asking. It's a cinch. Mumble-the-peg and singin' — —"

The young man began to show some interest. "I could bluff it through for a day or so and get a square meal. Maybe that dime did bring me luck. Who'll I run into when I breeze out there? What's the lay of it anyhow?"

Brag gave him the details of life at the parsonage with warming gusto. Brag was tired of Benny, tired of Miss Jenkins, and Iry Ford, and the Reverend Mr. Tolliver. Miss Phil Van Doorn and Ginger Ella were unfailing spurs to his interest, but he had little of their company. This lazy youth with his comfortable philosophy would provide a pleasant antidote to the mild monotony of his existence. Brag even went so far as to give him a dollar bill, to insure his arrival at the parsonage with some degree of éclat.

"You get Iry Ford to bring you out in the flivver—cost you a quarter. Remember you was sent first to the Home at Curtiss—burned down—rebuilding. You better say you lost your eyes pretty recent, for you don't know the works well enough to be born blind. Remember to keep 'em shut, will you? Brother Tolliver, that's the man's name.—Scarlet fever could 'a' done it, or any accident.—Even measles.—Maybe a firecracker.—You take my cane.—I'll stop in at the first house and telephone for Iry Ford to take me out—tell him I lost it.—What's your name, buddy?"

"Roney. Lane Roney. They call me Speed."

"They call you—Speed— —?"

Brag chuckled to himself half the way home. "They call him Speed."

By some not uncommon mischance, the Reverend Mr. Tolliver, delayed in his pastoral work in the country, did not reach home in time for supper that night, and the gray evening was darkening the parsonage lawn when Ginger Ella heard a cab rolling away from her gate, heard faint steps upon the flagstone walk. She ran around the corner of the house on tiptoe and sprang lightly out, catching the tall shadowy figure in both arms.

"Boo!" she cried. "Father, what airs you are putting on—taxying yourself home for dinner at this time of night."

"Ex-cuse me," stammered a low and unfamiliar voice. "I beg your pardon— —"

Ginger's rebound was even more precipitate than her assault had been. A walking stick fell upon the flagstones with a clatter.

"Oh, please forgive me—I am so sorry—I thought of course it was my father."

"My fault, entirely," reiterated the strange voice. "I—I did not see you coming."

Staring closely in the darkness, Ginger Ella saw that the stranger's eyes were sheltered behind the wide black glasses that had come to have such sorry significance for her.

"Oh, I am so sorry," she whispered compassionately. "Are—you—blind—too?"

"Temporarily—only temporarily.—It won't last long.—They—they told me to come here—the Home at Curtiss is not built up yet—and they said if Brother Tolliver would be so kind— — But perhaps you are all full."

"This," said Ginger proudly, "is not a Home, it is a parsonage. It is never full. Come right in.—I must have given you a terrible banging-up.—I was waiting for Father.—Here is your stick. Take my hand—I will lead you."

Ginger's hand upon his was as soft as a flower, as pitiful as an angel's. She had suffered for every one of her Inmates, had wept and prayed for them. But this was a youth, one of her own age, and her very breath was a sob of sorrow just for him.

When she came to introduce him to the members of her household, there was something akin to satisfaction in her air of proud proprietorship, for, after all, since one must have a Home for the Blind, this newcomer was a decided acquisition. And when he confessed that he had not dined, Ginger Ella, with her own hands, prepared a quick hot supper for him, seated him at the table and installed herself tenderly right at his elbow, yearning to lend assistance.

"I—I am not very good at this—yet," he said apologetically, as he fumbled clumsily with his fork. "I'll get used to it—in time."

"Oh, my dear, I hope you never have to," she said pathetically. "I mean, I hope you will get well so soon you won't need to get used to it."

After he had eaten, as they sat in a stiff little circle in the living-room, waiting for her father, Ginger asked a few polite perfunctory questions, which he answered confusedly.

"I think we'd better put a cot in father's room for him," Ginger announced to Miss Jenkins. "We're really getting rather crowded."

"Oh, don't do that," put in Brag quickly. "Crowd him right in with Benny and me. Your father has got to have a place to be alone and pray and what-not. Put him in with us. Us blinds, we understand one another."

"I'm afraid you will find it dull here," said Ginger regretfully. "We're very quiet. A church social now and then, and a supper, maybe. Too bad you weren't in time for the Harvest Home Festival. That was fun. But for the most part, there's not a thing going on. We haven't had any real excitement since Miss Jenkins bobbed her hair."

Conversation dragged a little. Brag smoked with an air of quiet contentment. Miss Phally polished her pink nails on the palm of her hand. Ginger stared pitifully into the slim brown face that showed pale, almost haggard in the soft light. Once the meek little voice of Benny broke the silence with its apologetic cough.

"You like bobbed hair?" he inquired faintly.

"What—bobbed hair? Yes, I like it—on some."

"Me—I like it on all," said Benny, and subsided happily for the rest of the evening.

Brag's opinion of the unsuspecting nature of the parsonage household was not without justification. When Mr. Tolliver came, the story was poured tumultuously into his ear in hot whispers by Ginger Ella, who met him in the hall for that purpose. And when he was introduced to the brown-faced youth, he had no questions of any searching import, but only a great kindness as he took the hard brown hand firmly in his large white one.

"We'll do our best to make you comfortable, my boy," he said heartily. "If I can do anything for you at any time, just come to me. We want you to be happy while you are with us, so that when you go back to Curtiss you will have always a friendly thought for those you leave behind in Red Thrush."

As they made their way slowly up the stairs, clinging for guidance to the curving banister, Brag nudged him slyly.

"Pretty dumb," he whispered. "You wouldn't believe it. But good as gold!"

CHAPTER IX

A SURPRISE FOR EDDY JACKSON

HAVING resorted to such intricate, even extravagant measures to provide himself with what he termed a proper companionship, Brag Baldwin was obliged to admit to himself that the results were not what he had fondly anticipated. Saturday dawned, crisp and golden, full of promise. Saturday was a busy day in the parsonage, and its inmates were early astir. Ginger Ella, from the first moment of his appearance, took Speed Roney under her especial charge, in spite of Brag's plaintive protest that "us blinds understand one another."

Ginger Ella was nothing if not firm, in spite of her tender sympathies. "Yes, I know, Brag," she said kindly, "but Speed is young, and that's a different matter."

She led him merrily about the place, guiding his steps, warning him of every pitfall for feet that walked blindly, despite his gentle remonstrance that he was not apt to move about much, but "mostly sat rather quietly."

"You'll go about when you get used to it," she said. "You're going to be happy here in spite of yourself."

She took him marketing with her, read the best part of the morning paper to him, kept him at her side while she helped with the household ironing and made him her assistant in all small domestic tasks.

Nor was Benny any mild sedative for Brag's increasing ennui. He excused himself from mumble-the-peg, from horseshoes and from matching pennies, and remained in his room working for hours at a time upon a basket he was weaving from the sweet-grasses Miss Jenkins had brought from Burlington.

The arrival of Phil Van Doorn, looking for passengers for a wild ride in the country, brought only a slight quickening of interest, and only Phally and Brag could be prevailed upon to accept her invitation.

Phil Van Doorn studied the newcomer with a great deal of interest.

"How very sad," she said cheerfully, bright eyes upon the downcast boyish face.

"It's only temporary," muttered Speed confusedly.

"I suppose he brought proper credentials and so forth," she went on, turning her quizzical eyes upon Ginger's glowing tender face.

“Credentials,” declared that young person broadly, “are not required in a Methodist parsonage. They sent him to us temporarily from Curtiss, and—I do not know how it is with those outlandish Pennsylvania religions you talk about—but it is the method of us Methodists to do what we can first and look up credentials when we find time.”

“Comfortable system, isn’t it, Speed, my lad?” Miss Phil inquired pleasantly.

Speed had nothing to say, but lapsed into a moody silence. Ginger frowned at her.

“Are you going driving now?” she asked pointedly.

“Ask your father if he will not go with us,” suggested Miss Phil. “I just burn to flaunt him in the face of Red Thrush—and on the Day before Sermons, too.”

Ginger hastened to call her father, who greeted the visitor warmly.

“My stock in Red Thrush has gone ’way up on your account,” he told her good-naturedly. “The members fatuously give me the credit for the change that is taking place in your somewhat erratic nature. They do not realize that it is the more worldly fascination of Brag Baldwin’s society which brings your car so often to my gate.”

Phil smiled at him in her direct, half-daring way. “That is your own fault. You have neglected me. You have shown no proper zeal at all for the affairs of my soul.”

“Somehow I can’t work up much worry about that soul of yours. It seems pretty much on the job on its own account.”

“You should at least offer me the consolations of the church by inviting me to divine worship. Why don’t you?”

“The reason I do not is that I do not really want you. You are not of my fold. I preach to my own—my seed would fall on stony ground in those cocky ears of yours.”

“Just for that, I shall come.”

“When you come,” he said quietly, and she noted that he said “when” and not “if,” “please remember that I have studied the members of my flock, and I preach to them. I give my people bread, but to some others it might easily seem a stone. The wise preacher caters to the hungering void of those he serves.”

“Is that good religion?”

“It is good ministry.”

“But the truth is eternal. It can not be changed.”

“No, but it can be served in different styles. It is like milk and fine flour. To one appetite it is served up as wholesome bread, to another as spicy hot muffin, and to yet another as rich and indigestible pastry.”

Phil laughed at him, rarely enjoying the aptness of his illustration. “Then I shall take your wholesome whole wheat bread, and toast it crisp and brown, and pile it up with nice chicken à la king—and there you are!”

But when she invited him to go driving, he declined reluctantly. He said he was busy with his sermon, and besides, from what he had seen of her driving, he felt he owed it to his members to safeguard his person until after the Sunday services. Nor could all her urging prevail upon him to accompany them. He walked with her to the car, however, and Ginger, following with her eyes, could see them talking earnestly together, a little apart from the others.

“Father’s too easy,” she said to Speed. “Her soul could stand a lot of chevying up, if you ask me.” And then she added quickly, “She’s really perfectly fascinating. Not like us Methodists, of course.” And to amuse him she gave him a long gay account of the affairs of Phil Van Doorn, of Doorndee.

That crisp, cool, golden October day was not golden in the memory of Eddy Jackson. On Saturday afternoon, as every Saturday afternoon since the Tollivers first came to Red Thrush, he had one of the “hired men” wash the car while he put on his best clothes; then selected a basketful of the best offerings his ample stores afforded, and, thus accoutered, drove in to the parsonage to pay his weekly homage.

His knock upon the front door being unanswered, he walked slowly around the cinder path to the rear of the house. And there, beneath the bare old apple tree through whose leafless branches the sun glinted warmly down upon a much-loved golden head, Eddy Jackson saw two kitchen chairs, drawn together, facing each other. In one of them sat a slim and brown-faced stranger, with black glasses shielding his eyes from the golden light. In the other sat Ginger Ella, a towel across her knees, a bowl of warm water upon an upturned box at her side. Ginger Ella was nothing if not thorough. She was giving the finger-nails of her newest Inmate a careful manicure, and she was very gay in the giving.

“That Phally person keeps us all keyed-up about our looks,” she told him. “We’ve just got to be a bit swell to hold our own with her. But I shan’t insist on curling your hair, Speed.” She lifted a slim finger and ran it lightly down the parting of his black hair—Ginger Ella herself had perfected that parting line. “Chiefly because I like it all slicked back the way you wear it.

—You have nice nails, Speed.—Don't I talk like a professional? I almost deserve a tip.—Where were you in college, Speed, when—when— —"

"Last year. I was a senior—just starting my senior year that is—but I had some conditions to make up. Then—it happened— —"

"Don't worry about it, Speed. You'll go back, and finish off with honors. I know you will. You wait. You see how father came out of his! Oh, Speed," her voice was yearning, "I just know you're going to be all right.—It—it seems so important."

Upon this sweetly peaceful scene came Eddy Jackson, unannounced. Not unnaturally, he was surprised. Quite naturally, he was not pleased.

"Well, hello. Seems a new wrinkle here that I'm not up on," he said in a tone of profound amazement.

Ginger flushed ever so little. "Oh, hello, Eddy. Come and sit down.—Yes, this is new, you haven't heard about it.—You can put the water on the ground and have the box.—We're almost through.—Eddy, I want you to meet our newest Inmate, Speed Roney. Speed, this is our fairy godfather who produces our pumpkins and apples and fried chickens—Eddy Jackson."

Speed Roney put out a hand, slim, brown, well manicured. Eddy Jackson took it grimly in his.

"I didn't know you had a new one," he said abruptly.

Ginger shook her head at him, enjoining discretion. "He just came yesterday," she explained volubly. "He—he has never been in a Home before. He is only temporary anyhow—like father.—Our chicken and eggs and Iowa air will have him on his—er—eyes again, in no time."

"What was it—an accident?" asked Eddy, not without sympathy, recovering his customary equanimity after a moment of discomposure.

"Well, yes, in a way—and a lucky one for me, on the whole."

"Lucky you weren't killed, eh?"

Speed's answer was an inarticulate grunt.

Ginger came to his rescue. "Eddy," she said kindly, "we don't like to talk about it. It is still so new and painful.—He isn't used to it, like Benny and Brag. We—we just don't talk about it."

"Oh, I see." Eddy did not fail to notice the use of the plural pronoun.

When he asked Ginger to go up-town with him for a movie and an ice-cream soda, to be followed in the dusk by a short ride, Ginger said she could not go. She was entirely too busy.

"But it's Saturday afternoon," he protested. "You always do go on Saturday."

“But I’m getting busier every day. With a houseful like ours, Eddy, new things keep coming up every hour — —”

“Yes, so I’ve noticed.”

“And I haven’t had time to do any of my own personal work in my studio for days and days.— But if you are going up-town, Eddy, will you do a small errand for me?”

Eddy professed his complete willingness to oblige her, and Ginger, from the pocket of her smock, after some fumbling, produced a silver coin.

“Will you please stop at the post-office and buy a special delivery stamp for me?”

“That’s not much of a job.”

“No. And give the stamp to Captain Cody, in person, and tell him I sent it.”

“What for?”

“Never mind about that. He will know what it is for. Just buy the stamp, and tell him I sent it.”

“But, Ginger — —”

Ginger frowned at him. “I’ll do it myself, busy as I am, if you have any objections — —”

“I have no objections, of course. I am glad to do it.” He laughed a little. “I suppose you sent something special delivery and forgot to put on the stamp, and he’s been dunning you?”

Ginger smiled, non-committally. “Just tell him it is quite important,” she called after him. “And tell him I sent it.”

CHAPTER X

METHODIST MINISTRATION

THREE days passed quietly, happy days for every one but Brag Baldwin, whose discontent with the monotonous mildness of parsonage life was growing apace. Benny could not be induced to return to the sporting life which he had so surprisingly abandoned. When Ginger was at home, she absorbed every moment of the new acquisition's time, soliciting his help with her lessons, reading to him and keeping him in constant attendance upon her during her household labors and errands. During her absence at school, he sulked rather moodily in his own room, showing for the most part peevish petulance toward his benefactor.

One evening, after an especially pleasant and merry time in the parsonage living-room, when the other inmates went up-stairs, and while her father was putting Miss Phil in her car, she indicated to Speed by a whisper and a slight nudge that she wanted to tell him a secret, told him to wait till they were alone. When her father returned from the car he started directly up-stairs.

"Getting late, Ginger," he reminded her.

"Just a minute, Father," she said. "I want to tell Speed something important. We'll be right up."

She waited in silence until she heard the closing of his door at the front of the corridor, and then she crossed the room quickly and sat down on the arm of the big chair where Speed slouched among the cushions.

"Will you do something for me?" she began.

"Yes. What is it?"

"Take off your glasses. I want to see your eyes."

He squirmed uncomfortably. "They—they look all right, Ginger. Just like anybody's. They aren't scarred or injured in any way, not even bloodshot. Everybody says so."

"I know. But I want to see them. I have a reason."

"What reason, Ginger? You—you do not doubt—"

"It is this. Speed, I have a great idea! I am going up in the attic to-night, to my studio, and I am going to stay up all night, like they did in the Bible, and pray for your eyes. And I want to see them first, so that when I am

praying I can picture how they are going to look when they are quite all right and seeing again.”

“I don’t want you to pray for me, Ginger. I’d feel—I’d feel very queer about that. Don’t.”

Ginger laughed. “You’re not a very good Methodist, Speed, or you’d be used to it. We’re always praying for something for somebody or other. But I never made an event of it like this before. This is special. It would be better if I could go out into the woods or the mountains, but we haven’t any mountains in Iowa, and—I don’t think Father would like me to stay in the woods alone all night.”

“Will he like you to stay up in the attic all night?”

“Well—anyhow—there’s not so much reason for his not liking it,” she countered. “Please, Speed, take off the glasses. Just for a minute. The light won’t hurt you, will it?”

“No, but—but I don’t like the idea, Ginger. They’ll be all right, I know they will.—It won’t be long.—Don’t stay up and pray about it. I can’t tell you how I—hate the idea of it.”

“Ah, but that’s because you don’t know,” she said wisely. “Praying does a lot of good if you believe in it. You’d be surprised. We will not tell anybody about this—we’ll have it for a secret just between us two. I feel sorry for the others, too, Speed, as sorry as can be. I’d do anything to help them. But they are used to it, it doesn’t seem quite so terrible some way. But, Speed, I just can’t stand it about you. You are so young—and petulant—and so nice—I just can’t stand it. So I made up my mind to do something and do it quick.—Take them off, Speed.”

He fumbled nervously with the glasses. “They look just like anybody’s eyes,” he muttered. “You’d never suspect I was blind.” He jerked them off with some impatience.

And Ginger looked—looked into great brown sober eyes that stared moodily up into hers. Speed looked at Ginger, too, and saw a slender vivid face with quivering kind lips, with great blue eyes which, as he looked, welled suddenly up into tears of pity. She stood up, then, and bent over him.

“Don’t tell anybody,” she whispered. “Father might not let me if he knew—but he believes in praying. I’m going up right now—I told Jenky—I can work her.”

She bent over him suddenly, cupped his shamed young face in her two kind hands and pressed her lips, softly, sweetly, first upon one eye, then upon the other.

“Don’t you be afraid, Speed. Great good will come of this. We all prayed about Father and just look at him now.”

At the door she turned and smiled back at him. Smiled, but tears ran down the shining, sorry little face. She blinked them away, laughing.

“You’ll see!” she called to him triumphantly.

CHAPTER XI

GINGER'S VIGIL

WHILE the parsonage lay enwrapped in silence, a great black shadow in the black night, behind the closely shuttered dormer windows in the attic, Ginger Ella made her preparations for a night of prayer. She was curiously excited over this devout adventure, sublimely confident. The great dark attic, seeming all the darker for the one small circle of its single electric light, with its impenetrable corners and its fitful shadows, held no terrors for her.

The one light, indeed, was a recent innovation, engineered by Eddy Jackson, who extended the wiring upward from the floor below and installed a switch over her desk in the studio, thus abolishing the constant menace of fire to which her prowlings with an oil lantern had constantly subjected the household.

Her arrangements for the night were simple enough. Over her thin smock she wore a heavy sweater, for the October nights were cold. For sustenance she took with her a pie plate, on which were three red apples from Eddy's farm, two doughnuts and a left-over slice of custard pie. In addition to this she had a small tin bucket of milk.

She placed her supplies carefully upon the desk and bent herself immediately to the business in hand, kneeling beside the chair. For a long time she prayed, softly, fervently, even passionately.

She began broadly upon the general subject of physical afflictions, known and unknown, narrowing gradually to the pitiful state of the blinded, and in a moment was waxing eloquent upon the particular estate of Speed Roney. Everything that Ginger believed, or knew, or hoped for that young man, was poured warmly into the still and throbbing Presence that waited upon her petition.

She wearied eventually of her own words. She got up and looked at the old alarm clock which graced her desk. It was half past ten. Feeling that there was no use in flagrant immoderation, even in so good a thing as prayer, she busied herself for some time with her correspondence, writing with a hot haste page after page. Then she ate an apple, the piece of custard pie and drank a glass of milk. When she looked at the clock it was eleven-thirty.

The house was heavily silent. The occasional creak of the rafters, the crumbling down of bits of plaster within the walls, startled, but did not

alarm her, being, as she was, well used to the night silences and the night noises of this attic, home of all her secret enterprises.

Presently she knelt down beside her chair again, but conscious for the first time of the extreme hardness of the floor, and the thinness of the old piece of carpet with which she had covered her corner of it, she placed the three old shabby cushions comfortably beneath her, and leaned back restfully upon her heels as she prayed.

The silence in the attic was tremendous. Ginger prayed dreamily on and on, relaxing more completely upon the cushions. She was aroused from drowsy abstraction by a nervous, involuntary shudder.

“Amen,” she said hastily.

She raised her head. There was no denying that she had been asleep. She looked at the clock. It was twelve-ten.

“I shouldn’t have eaten,” she decided. “I should have fasted. They always fasted for religious orgies like this. I forgot that. Now I suppose I’ll be dropping off to sleep every time I close my eyes.”

She thought of Speed Roney, wistful, brown and blinded, and the warmth of her interest, the greatness of her pity, sufficed for a moment to drive the growing heaviness from her weary lids. She prayed hotly, in an audible whisper for her own reassurance. But nature had its inevitable triumph. In the end, a worn and wearied Ginger sank down upon the cushions on the floor and fell into a profound but troubled slumber.

Light streaming through the cracks of the shutters awakened her. It was seven o’clock. She stood up, stiff, cold, just a little cross, thoroughly ashamed, and shook herself soundly, like a dog.

“Oh, well,” she decided presently, “I prayed quite a lot. And one good prayer has as much right to be answered as a whole night of it.”

Before she left the attic, she knelt by the chair again for one last brisk petition.

“Please, God,” she whispered, “he is too young and too nice to be blind for ever. Unless it is Thy will to insist upon it,—which of course it isn’t,—please let him see again—for Jesus’ sake. Amen.”

Rather satisfied with herself on the whole, for all her aching joints and outraged muscles, she descended the attic ladder, had a hot bath and dressed for school. When she sat down at the breakfast table a little later, she was a Ginger dark-eyed and wan but gloriously confident.

“Where’s Speed?” she demanded anxiously, when her favorite failed to appear.

For it had been her intention to take his hand, that thin brown hand with its manicured nails, in hers for just one rapturous moment of vibrating confidence that he was almost as good as well now and that the rest was a mere matter of time. It disappointed her that he was not there to receive this pledge of her faith.

“Speed—I think he’s not so well,” explained Brag volubly. “He flounced and muttered and tossed all night. Kept me and Benny awake. Kept muttering and grunting things under his breath that we couldn’t understand and wouldn’t answer us when we spoke to him. Kept getting up and looking out the window and then pitching himself back into bed again. He didn’t get up this morning at all. Just lay with his face to the wall and his head on his arm and said he didn’t want any breakfast and not to bring any up ’cause he wouldn’t eat it. Said he had a headache, or something.”

For one frightened moment crushing doubt swept over Ginger Ella. But she rallied quickly and was prompt to find an explanation for this most surprising development.

“He’s probably beginning to get well already,” she told herself stoutly. “I dare say it is quite natural for it to begin with a headache. Now I think of it, Father had headaches, too, when he was beginning to get well.”

She entirely overlooked the headaches her father had long before he began to get well, but it was like Ginger to overlook details that did not dovetail with her desires.

She ran up-stairs after breakfast and knocked hopefully upon Speed’s door but received no answer. As she walked off toward school, dangling her books dejectedly at the end of a strap, she turned and looked wistfully back at that window of the room where he lay alone, tossing and troubled. As she looked, the curtains moved, and Ginger never suspected that the movement was caused not by the stirring October breeze but by Speed himself who stood there, deeply dejected, to observe her departure.

When she returned for luncheon and was greeted by the news that Speed had not come down and would admit no one to his room—not even Benny and Brag, who certainly had rights within—she went up-stairs and rapped firmly at the door. But when she spoke, her voice was gentle.

“Open the door, Speed. It’s only Ginger.”

“I don’t feel very well, Ginger.—Oh, I’m not sick.—No, I don’t want a doctor. Just got the dumps. I’m low, that’s all.—You won’t mind if I don’t open it, will you? Just this once?”

“Yes, I do mind. Please open it. Don’t have the dumps, Speed.—I want to tell you about last night.”

Speed's voice was an inarticulate moan.

"Please, Speed. I won't let any one else in. I just want — —"

"Ginger, I—I don't feel like hearing about it to-day.—Won't you forgive me—I know I'm a bear—but I just can't stand to talk to-day."

Before she returned to school, Ginger drew her father secretively into a far corner of the living-room.

"Father," she whispered, "did you ever know prayer to—well—sort of back-fire on any one?"

Mr. Tolliver was always cautious in answering Ginger's inquiries connected with things spiritual. "Prayer is a very delicate tool in the hands of the unskilful," he said guardedly. "What do you mean, Ginger?"

"Well, I prayed for Speed to get well. I stayed up all night and did it—except part of the time.—And now he's blue and low and headachy and won't come out and won't let me in.—Do you suppose a cure would begin like that?"

Mr. Tolliver's smile was broad and beaming as he pulled his daughter on to his lap.

"What a rare old Ginger it is," he said appreciatively. "Tell me more about it. Did you, by any means, confide your prayerful project to the young man?"

"Yes, I told him about it. He didn't want me to. I stayed up in the studio all night and prayed and prayed—except when I accidentally went to sleep. He didn't like it a bit, but he doesn't understand about those things. But I didn't fast. I should have fasted, shouldn't I?" And Ginger sighed for her unspiritual appetite, but her father's smile was a caress.

"Ginger, my dear little girl," he said, "don't fear for the results. Prayer—why, prayer is the surest thing in the world. And don't you worry about the outcome. Yes, I fancy the young man has begun in good earnest to feel the effects of your devotion."

"I wish he would come out. I want to see how he looks." Ginger's voice was wistful.

"I think perhaps it would be more tactful on our part to leave him alone to-day. Let him meditate all by himself and think things over. Perhaps his frame of mind has something to do with his condition. I am sure a day of silent meditation on his part will help the good work along."

Ginger quite brightened. "And he is fasting—he hasn't eaten a bite all day—maybe that's why."

As her father stood at the window and watched her on her way to school again his eyes were luminously tender, although his smile was broad. "What a little brick she is," he said to himself, and said it gratefully.

But from that other window, the one up-stairs, the eyes that followed Ginger's departing steps were moody and black.

"What's she want to sit up all night and pray for?" he demanded morbidly of the world at large. "Messing things up for no good reason. That's what girls do to you, anyhow."

CHAPTER XII

EDDY'S INTERFERENCE

IT was an inauspicious time for Eddy Jackson to put in an unannounced appearance at the parsonage. Ginger Ella was tired from her night's vigil in the attic, she was worried over her protégé's prolonged seclusion, and she was lonesome. For Ginger had to acknowledge that after so very brief a sojourn among them, the retirement of the newest Inmate had a decidedly repressing effect upon the general spirits of the household and robbed it of a very enjoyable zest.

When Eddy Jackson knocked at the front door and received no answer, as was usually the case, the family activities for the most part centering in the rear, he sauntered along the cinder pathway, as he always did, and came upon real activity.

Benny was sitting on the low step of the back porch helping Miss Jenkins hull beans for supper. Ginger Ella was engaging Brag Baldwin in a fast game of mumble-the-peg under the apple tree.

"Hello, Home, Et Cetera," he called cheerfully. "Where is a Certain Young Man?"

Now, while Eddy's words flavored reminiscently of Scriptural narrative, there was a thinly veiled sarcasm in his tone which Ginger Ella, in her none too agreeable mood, was quick to resent.

"Who wants to know?" she demanded unpleasantly.

"I do."

"Your mumble, Brag," said Ginger, burying herself in the game.

"I came to pay a call upon your Recent Acquisition, if you have no objections," continued Eddy.

"He is not receiving to-day," was the cold retort. "He has a headache.—My peg, Brag."

Eddy turned without a word and went into the kitchen, where they heard him exchanging pleasant greetings with Janie Jarvis. Ginger, although she fairly burned with mingled curiosity and resentment, stuck doggedly by the game. She thought she could trust Speed not to open to Eddy Jackson a door which had been kept sternly closed to her all day.

But even while her fingers deftly spun the knife, her ears yearned for revealing sounds from within the house, and it spoke volumes for Ginger's spirit of determination that even when she heard the start of his motor at the gate and realized that Eddy was taking himself off without further overtures in her direction, she did not so much as lift her head.

But when the rumble of his car had entirely died away, she said she was tired of the game and went quickly indoors. To her knock upon Speed's door she received no answer and sighed dolorously as she went to her studio to await the call to supper. For such an ordinarily amusing character, Ginger said to herself that Brag Baldwin was a terrible bore, sometimes.

Supper was a stupid ordeal through which Ginger Ella glowered moodily, brightening but a very little when Eddy Jackson appeared once more, cheerfully, at their front door.

"Come in, Eddy," called her father warmly. "Will you have supper with us? You chose an auspicious moment to come."

"Yes, thanks, I will," he accepted promptly, and Miss Jenkins hastened to lay a place for him, while Ginger gazed calmly off into the remotest space the room afforded.

"I suppose you noticed," said Eddy, with maddening calm, as he helped himself generously to two potato cakes, "that I took the liberty of chucking out your Certain Young Man."

Ginger Ella came back to her immediate surroundings with a painful start. Her knife clattered upon her plate. Her eyes widened. "You—what?" she ejaculated.

"Chucked him out," repeated Eddy succinctly. "Told him to beat it and took him myself to make sure he did it. He is well on his way by now."

"Do you mean," stammered Ginger, unbelieving, "that he is not up in his room? That he is gone from here?"

"Just that. I left him half-way to Middleton, and headed west."

Ginger stood up. Her face was white.

"He was doing you, Ginger," explained Eddy kindly. "He wasn't blind at all. He was just hiding out here for some reason of his own and working you for what he could get out of it."

"Did—he explain—how he happened—?" began Brag Baldwin anxiously.

"He explained nothing. I asked him, and he said it was none of my business," admitted Eddy. "He said he would write to Ginger, and I told him he darn well didn't need to."

Slowly had Ginger Ella regained control of her faculties. "And you turned that poor sick boy out into the streets—with night coming on—?"

"Oh, I set him on the railroad tracks. He'll bum a ride—that's all he is, Ginger, a bum. He'll get a ride."

"That poor boy without a cent to his name—"

"I gave him ten dollars, and he threw it in my face."

"—who hasn't eaten a bite of food for twenty-four hours—sick—and faint—and weak—"

Eddy looked uncomfortable. "I tell you he will get a ride. I drove him out to the Bailley crossroads, and it is not far from there to Middleton. He admitted he was bumming his way west and just stopped off here because it looked such easy pickings."

Ginger Ella turned herself calmly about and walked out of the room slowly and with a grand air.

Eddy turned to Mr. Tolliver apologetically. "I thought it was best to get rid of him without a rumpus and without attracting too much attention," he said. "He really was a bum, Mr. Tolliver. I suspected him from the first and so I wrote to the Home at Curtiss—they had never heard of him. He admitted it himself when I accused him. He wasn't blind at all, I give you my word of honor—"

"Oh, you needn't bother about that," interrupted Mr. Tolliver mildly. "It isn't necessary. Besides, I already knew it."

"You knew it!"

"Yes, oh, yes. I knew it."

"You knew he wasn't blind?"

"Yes, of course."

"He told you!"

"No, oh, no, Eddy, he did not tell me. I dare say he never thought of it."

Eddy burst into sudden laughter. "Mr. Tolliver, I beg your pardon. I never dreamed you had caught on to the fraud. I thought you were much too easy to suspect anybody."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I was," admitted Ginger's father calmly. "Miss Phil told me."

CHAPTER XIII

IN PURSUIT OF THE TRUANT

THE feeling which drove Ginger Ella from the dining-room was one of sheer unthinking amazement and blind resentment. Speed was gone—Speed was not blind—Eddy Jackson had imposed an officious finger in the pie of her personal affairs. The depth, the height, the magnitude of the emotions aroused by these astounding revelations sufficed to impel her quickly, unhesitatingly from his presence. It is rare, indeed, when a member of a parsonage group yields, in the presence of outsiders at least, to the passionate desire to stamp a furious foot, to shake a defiant fist, or to loosen a torrent of angry words. The kindly deference due to “members” is too deeply ingrained for that. It was really the innate spirit of restraint instilled by her nearly seventeen years of habit that took Ginger Ella off without a verbal explosion. But she was not one to remain long in the throes of unthinking astonishment. Before her light feet had traversed the brief space between dining-room and front door, her vigorous mind had swept itself free of the cobwebs, and she was ready to resume her control of conditions.

After all, looked at in one way, was not this surprising dénouement practically an answer to her prayer? She had besought God to vouchsafe to her youngest Inmate the blessed boon of sight, had she not?—And he could see, couldn’t he?—Then, in the long run, her prayer was as good as answered. And there you are!

Thus reasoned Ginger Ella, whose sympathies and interests were too deeply intrigued to be crushed by the mere announcement that he had deceived and tricked her. In fact, most unfairly, her entire resentment was centered in the person of Eddy Jackson who had discovered the deception—Eddy Jackson, sitting there, smug and serene at her own supper table, surrounded by her family and her Inmates, eating her food—Eddy Jackson, ruddy and rugged and quite content with the turn of events.

For poor Speed Roney, wistful and thin, moody and weak from a day of fasting, she felt only a yearning desire to be helpful. But it was not until she caught sight of Eddy’s old Ford car at the end of the flagstone path that she had a definite working idea of materializing that desire. But there stood the car! And off somewhere, alone in the graying night, her Certain Young Man, without food, without money and without friends, turning his boyish face west along the tracks of the C. B. & Q.

Ginger flew down the flagstone path, swung herself over the door of the car into the seat behind the wheel and started the motor with a loud explosion. Immediately, then, in a cloud of dust, she was on her way to find her Prodigal Inmate and bring him back to the fold.

As fast as the engine power of Eddy's Ford would permit, she tore along the country roads until she reached the Bailey crossing, where Eddy had put the young man down upon the tracks and had seen him head toward the west. Ginger swung up beneath the big cross sign, "Railroad Crossing, Beware of the Cars," and stopped with a suddenness that shook her dust-covered head. In a moment she was over the door of the car, and up in the center of the tracks, stared off to the west. But there was no sign of her protégé, moodily tramping the ties. Straight and far stretched the narrowing rails until their shining lengths were absorbed at last in the steadily approaching dusk.

It was not long since Eddy had left him there, he could not have covered many miles in that brief interval. Perhaps the poor tired hungry lad had fainted beside the road—perhaps upon the very rails, with trains due any minute—she shuddered violently. He was sick—he must be—

But still she took time to consider, for in spite of her leaping enthusiasms and her burning activity, she was a logical young person. She realized that Speed had a good hour's start in advance of her, and that he could walk as fast as she, if not faster. Also, she would not be able to cover much distance before the full darkness of night descended, and if by any sad mischance he had fallen by the wayside—Ginger Ella writhed at the thought—she might pass him by unseen. Certainly she had not a moment to lose, and for that reason she could not continue the pursuit on foot, but must take the car.

Quick as the thought itself she was back in the car and had the motor pounding again. With great care, but without hesitation or misgiving, she turned the nose of the old Ford straight down the Burlington tracks toward the west, straddling one rail.

Bump, bump, bump!

"I hope it doesn't hurt the old car," she thought rather anxiously. "But he always said a Ford could go anywhere.—Now I'll find out."

Bump, bump, went Eddy's car over the ties! Bounce, jounce, went poor Ginger Ella in the none-too-fatly upholstered seat. Perspiration streamed from every pore, so that her smock clung to her hot body. She bit her tongue until a little touch of salt warmed her throbbing lips. Once her head hit the cross-bar in the top of the car with a resounding and painful thud that

brought a faint ejaculation from her scorching throat. Her bobbed hair, wet with perspiration, streaked with dust, strung about her hot wet face.

Bump, bump, bump, went the old Ford! And now and then there was a strange new sound, the sound of wrenching tin, of cracking steel, but Ginger Ella gave no heed.

So she came at last to the bridge over Rabbit River. Ginger had forgotten the Rabbit lay between Red Thrush and Middleton. The sight of it shocked her. Not much of a river, the Rabbit. Ginger herself had often indulged in smart witticisms at its expense, calling it a poor imitation of running water. Now suddenly it seemed very big, a serious matter, a real obstacle in her pursuit of a steadily tramping Inmate.

For one moment she hesitated. There was no traffic bridge over the river at that point, only the railroad bridge, a very short one, but the only footing it offered for the small tires of Eddy's Ford were the thick wide stringers on either side. They looked very narrow indeed at that distance, the car seemed suddenly large. She raised herself over the wheel and looked out at it apprehensively.

"I can do it as well as not," she said aloud, but her voice was strained. "It's plenty wide enough.—Anyhow, I've got to."

She forced the car, slowly, pulling it almost by her own physical will, up on to the great beams. Her hands trembled.

"Don't shake, you baby," she told herself sternly. "Silliest thing you could do—and most dangerous.—Not that there is any danger."

She stopped again to look carefully along the tracks in both directions before she ventured upon the bridge, whence there was no escape. She had no fancy whatever to be caught on the Rabbit bridge with a train coming. But the track showed clear and shining in the soft dusk. Slowly, slowly, in low gear, she inched the car along, the small hands gripping the wheel turned suddenly cold and tense.

The pulses pounded painfully in her temples and her throat, her heart throbbed in her aching breast. Once she glanced down, hoping to remind herself what a very little river it was, the Rabbit!—But suddenly how dark it seemed, how dangerous. How slowly the car crept beneath her hands! How loudly the familiar old creaks and groans of it beat upon the still air!—How the wheel wobbled beneath her touch.—Eddy Jackson should have done something about that play in the wheel.

When at last she saw the safety of solid ground right before her, instinctively she gave the car all the gas it would take, so that it leaped ashore like the frightened animal which gave the river its name, and stopped

there, seemingly of its own volition, half exhausted. Ginger looked back. Suddenly she was weeping, a perfect rain of tears streaming down her grimy face.

“I knew—all the time—I could do it,” she said, with a feeble attempt at bravado, and started the car again.

Bump, bump over the ties, Ginger sobbing now, sobbing and sniffing and dabbing with the back of her hand at the tears which blinded her eyes.

Bump! A different bump that was from the million others that had preceded it. Something snapped somewhere. The motor hummed, then idly died. Ginger started it courageously; the engine ran, but the wheels did not turn. She tried again and again.

“Well, that’s that,” she said at last, and got out.

She mopped the tears and dust from her face, the perspiration from her throat and arms. She even smoothed the tossed bright hair with a little fastidious gesture and adjusted her smock, shaking herself loose from its soiled and sticky folds. Then she set out sturdily on foot, her face to the west, the direction Speed Roney had taken.

The last stains of rose from the sunset had faded from the gray, and in the steadily narrowing arc of light about her Ginger realized the swift approach of night. Her steps quickened instinctively.

“Speed,” she called softly, and then, reassured by the sound of her voice, she called it again more loudly, “Speed! Speed!”

But not for a moment did she slacken her gait, but rather increased it, until presently she was pounding down the track at a dead run. Ginger was not used to walking the ties. Her eyes searched the closing shadows with some apprehension. The brief bit of track before her looked a little sinister, the shining rails swallowed up in black.

“I’ll bet he hooked a ride,” she said anxiously. “Eddy said he would do that. He’ll ride into Middleton and stay all night.—How dumb of me. I should have driven right to Middleton and looked for him around the station.”

A freight train stood on a siding to the left of her, the engine smoking, men calling indistinguishable words of direction to one another and signaling with lanterns. The train—even an empty freight train—seemed a safe and sheltered thing, very comfortable to her after the lonely terrors of the long track. She knew it was waiting for the passenger train to pass by, and she looked at it with longing eyes.

“If I could just hang on to the steps, I’d reach Middleton as soon as he does—maybe before him. I’d find him lounging about the station I suppose.

I dare say he will sleep there to-night—on those hard seats—he has no money.”

Very still stood Ginger Ella, staring wearily, hopefully, daringly, up at the great black cars. She would not like anybody to know—but—such a very little way—she thought she simply could not drag her burning, blistered feet another mile in the darkening night along those endless ties.

“They always slow down for towns, and I could just tumble off in the grass before we get to the station. Nobody would ever find it out.”

She pulled herself up, tentatively, on to the ladder. She had done that before. Sometimes, on winter days, when the freight trains held the crossings too long at Main Street, she and the other girls on their way to school—with any number of boys—had pulled themselves up like that on the steel ladder and clambered through between the box cars to the opposite side. The daring unconventionality of the act always stirred in them a sense of reckless adventure that thrilled and pleased them, although there was no real danger attached.

“I wonder if I could hang on when she starts,” thought Ginger Ella. “Freight trains wobble so—and I am so tired. Maybe I couldn’t hold on.”

Ginger Ella, usually so brave, was beginning to feel a faint timidity, even a shamed doubt, at the final outcome of her adventure.

She dropped from the ladder back to the cinder path, and trudged on, her feet dragging wearily, her heels blistered.

“That,” she said suddenly and stopped in her weary tracks, “is the Hand of Providence. Father himself would say so.”

For there, right at her side, a shelter from the ominously black night, a rest for her travel-worn feet, a refuge for her frightened spirit, an empty box car stood open, fairly begging her to accept of the harborage it offered. Ginger looked up the tracks and down the tracks. No one observed her.

“I’ll just slide in—and when we slow down for Middleton—I’ll just slide out the same way. I’ll gain a lot of time that way. And while I am not afraid—exactly—I do not think Father would like to have me walk the tracks alone this time of night.”

She caught hold with both hands stoutly, and swung herself up from the ground, kicking vigorously as she did so, to assist in propelling her body upward. Ginger was an active girl, used to all forms of brisk and quick-moving exercise, to riding the horses bareback on Eddy Jackson’s farm, to hopping bob-sleds on winter days, to sliding hay chutes and to hazardous coasting. And so, without serious difficulty, she presently got herself up on

to the floor of the empty car—very dirty it was—and pulled herself quickly back into the protective shadow.

“I’d better keep myself out of sight,” she thought. “Not that I’m proud—I’d ride in a police patrol rather than tramp any farther—but they might order me out.”

So she wriggled her way carefully back into a corner, and crouched there, giggling nervously to herself, both small hands clenched together,—a more excited, frightened, quivering Ginger Ella than she had ever been before in all her life.

CHAPTER XIV

SPEED'S RETURN

THAT GINGER ELLA did not return to the supper table occasioned no real surprise, although Eddy Jackson did voice a mild wonder that, with her well-known appetite, she could resist the allure of apple dumplings and cream. It was not until later, when they wandered out to the porch and noticed the absence of the Ford from the end of the flagstone path, that they realized the turn her petulance had taken.

Her father smiled understandingly. "A very good idea," he declared. "She'll drive like the wind and bounce all the bad disposition out of her and come home our usual sweet Ginger."

"It's taking a lot of time to bounce it out—she must have been chock-full of it," said Eddy. "And it's getting dark. I really don't know how much gas there was—and she was too mad to look."

"She'll find out however," said her father confidently. "And if she has to walk home, why, there'll be just that much less pepper left in her. She'll be here before dark. I'm particular about that, and Ginger never disobeys, even when she is mad."

But the darkness did come, slowly, surely—and Ginger Ella came not.

Mr. Tolliver paced the porch, unwilling to voice his growing uneasiness.

"I dare say she did run out of gas," he said. "And of course that will take longer. But there's no reason to worry. Ginger can take care of herself, all right."

The thud of Firefly's hoofs on the hard dirt road broke pleasantly upon their troubled reflections, and the brisk voice of Phil Van Doorn was a welcome diversion.

"Hello, Home!" she called, before she was half-way to the house. "Hello, Inmates.—Company's come."

"We're glad of it," said Mr. Tolliver cordially. "Come and sit down. You were never more welcome. Eddy and I are getting all fed up with each other's company."

"What—two Over-souls boring each other? It doesn't seem possible. Ginger must do something about this. Where's Ginger?"

"Ginger—oh, Ginger. She went for a ride."

"In my car," added Eddy Jackson.

Phil was quick to sense an undercurrent of anxiety in their voices. "Who went with her?"

"Nobody. She went alone. Nobody is with her."

"And heaven only knows who'll come back with her," added Eddy.

"Well, what happened? Go on and tell me all about it. Who quarreled with her? Since she went in your car, it is evident she was not under arrest."

"She may be by this time," said Eddy moodily.

"It was like this, Miss Phil," explained Mr. Tolliver. "The little blind boy, as you shrewdly surmised, wasn't blind at all."

Phil laughed.

"So Eddy chucked him out — —"

"Why, what did he do that for?"

"Well, why not?" Eddy countered crossly.

"Why, he was a nice boy. No harm in him."

"He could see as well as I could. Maybe better. Why should he be led about from pillar to post, and combed, and manicured, and fed — —?"

"And by the hand of Ginger Ella. I see."

"Anyhow I chucked him out. Took him to the Bailey crossroads and set his steps beside the Burlington that goes west."

"And Ginger?"

"Ginger got mad and walked out on us. Took my car and galumphed away to relieve her feelings. And hasn't come back."

Phil grew suddenly thoughtful.

"She has gone to look for Speed, of course," she said.

Eddy got up at once and crossed to the edge of the porch.

"She couldn't," explained Mr. Tolliver. "He is walking the ties."

"She is probably doing the same by this time."

"I'll get a car from the garage and go after her — —" began Eddy.

"It will do no good, Eddy. Come and sit down now, and let's figure this out. Ginger drove down to Bailey's, left the car and took down the tracks after him.— Well, I'll just ride out that way myself. Firefly can do the tracks like any other hobo. She's a born bum, that horse."

"Let me go. Will you trust me with Firefly? It's very dark, and the tracks are full of tramps this time of year — —"

"I'll go myself. I can make better time. Firefly knows my riding. Oh, nothing can happen to Ginger, but I'll just dash along out and see what she is doing. I'll probably meet her on the way, hoofing it back. And don't you get the sheriff after us, if we're a bit late. It will take quite some time, and you can just cool your heels here until our return. And serve you jolly well right for chucking out the pet Inmate. And don't forget, walking the ties takes time."

Briskly down the flagstones again, and then, a chirk of steel at the bit, a chirk of her low crisp voice, and Firefly was galloping down the road she had come.

"Eddy," said Mr. Tolliver thoughtfully, "did you ever notice how very sure of themselves these women are getting to be?"

"Yeh. Some women. Ginger, for instance."

"Yes. And Phil Van Doorn. Less effeminate, I suppose sex analysts would say it is. But have you noticed any diminution of charm on that account?"

"No," said Eddy moodily, "I can't say that I have."

"Neither have I," agreed the minister meekly.

"I should have gone myself," said Eddy anxiously. "There are a lot of hoboos on the tracks this time of year. And Phil's no safer than Ginger herself. I can get a car at the garage—"

Steps sounded on the walk, briskly approaching. The two men went hopefully to the front steps.

"Phil missed her—she did run out of gas—" began Mr. Tolliver.

The steps turned in upon the flagstones.

"Well, I'll be darned," said Eddy Jackson.

It was Speed Roney, walking briskly, needing no guidance now for his quick sure feet. He stopped at the foot of the steps and stared up defiantly at Eddy Jackson.

"May I speak to Ginger Ella, Mr. Tolliver?" And then, to Eddy, he added doggedly, "I'm not going west. And I'm not going to beat it out of here like a bum without telling her how it happened, either. And if you don't like it you can darn well lump it. It's not your Home."

The other members of the harassed household, hearing the familiar voice, hurried out from different parts of the house and clustered about him, exclaiming and asking questions.

"Now, Speed," remonstrated Brag feebly, "there's no hard feeling anywhere. Why not let bygones stay dead, and not go dragging up cold

ashes, as you might say?"

"Oh, I'm not spilling anybody's beans but my own." Speed's voice conveyed a subtle reassurance. "I only want to tell Ginger how it happened."

"But, you see, my lad," explained her troubled parent, "Ginger is not here. She went for a ride—presumably to find you and bring you back—in Eddy's car. And we have not seen her since."

"Not down the tracks?"

"Probably down the tracks—she wouldn't be above it."

"Down the tracks!" repeated Speed Roney. "All by herself? This time of night?—And," witheringly to Eddy Jackson, "you let her."

"Let her!" shouted that much driven young man furiously. "You don't see Ginger asking my permission about anything, do you?"

The two young men, actuated by one thought, plunged simultaneously down the steps and in the direction of the road, after Ginger Ella. Mr. Tolliver ordered them back at once.

"There's not a bit of use for us to go tearing off in different directions, trying to find her," he told them mildly. "She'll probably come limping in on a flat tire in a few minutes. Besides, Miss Phil has gone to look for her."

"You see, Mr. Tolliver," explained Speed diffidently, "I—I am not blind at all."

"Yes, I knew that all the time, Speed. A very smart woman—Miss Van Doorn."

"You knew it! And you didn't throw me out? You let me stay here and — — Did Ginger know it?"

"No, oh, no! Ginger did not know it. In fact, I understand that she was undertaking your physical restoration along spiritual lines."

"You are her father—and you let me fool her— —?"

"Well, nobody gets very far fooling Ginger. We talked it over, Miss Phil and I, and decided you were a nice enough boy on the whole, but evidently caught up in some temporary jam. We decided it would be best to let you flounder through it in your own way. It was her idea—Miss Van Doorn's. She thought it would work out best in the long run."

"It's too bad you did not take Eddy Jackson into your confidence," said Speed, with a grim smile. "You—you don't suppose she would walk down the tracks, do you? Don't you think I'd better go and— —?"

"I think," said Mr. Tolliver quietly, "that Miss Phil will find her. I can't see what good would be accomplished by half a dozen walking parties in the same direction down the same road. Besides, she may not have reached the

tracks at all. She was pretty cross, and an angry driver is usually a poor one."

"Do you mind if I wait till she gets home?"

"Mind? My dear boy, of course we don't mind. We are glad to have you, aren't we, Eddy?"

"We'll try to stand it, if you mean me."

The two young men glowered grimly across at each other in the darkness.

"And to pass away the time, while we are waiting," suggested Mr. Tolliver, "you might, if you wish, regale us with an account of your experiences. But only if you wish, you understand. It is not obligatory."

"I do wish. I want to get the whole thing off my chest, once and for all."

"Now, Speed," interposed Brag quickly, "why get yourself all upset dragging up past misdeeds, or whatever? Anybody can see you ain't no real nefarious character—"

"You seem curiously interested in the telling of this story, Brag—or perhaps the not-telling of it," said Mr. Tolliver shrewdly.

"Well, me, I like Speed. I think he's a nice young feller, blind or no blind. I don't see no call for subjectin' him to any such humiliatin'—"

"Well, it is a lot more humiliating to leave it unexplained. It's not much of a story anyhow. Just fool nonsense. I don't see how I could have been such a dunce."

Omitting only all reference to his encounter with Brag Baldwin on the road that morning, Speed gave a faithful account of his peregrinations, down to the present moment.

"And when I heard about the Home for the Blind, and how easy it was to get in, I just—borrowed some glasses and tried it myself—for a lark, really. —Yes, and a square meal. I meant to clear out after a day of it, but—I liked it. I didn't want to go."

"We shall not inquire how you learned about the Home for the Blind, and how easy it was to get in. As Brag says, that might prove humiliating. The real point is that you liked it when you got in. Ginger will be honored. It proves that, in spite of her tender age and her inexperience, she made a grand success of her first institutional undertaking."

Eddy Jackson sniffed a little, but said nothing.

"And don't forget us when you reach California. You must send us a picture of yourself picking an orange. Ginger will enjoy that."

"Aw, I'm not going to California. I never did like oranges."

“Still they say it is a nice warm place—and winter is coming on fast, now— —”

“Well, I am not looking for a warm place to loaf through the winter. That’s over. I’m going back to college. Oh, I know I did not spite my old man any by this nonsense, nor anybody else but myself—but I am glad I did it just the same. I wish she’d come.”

He walked impatiently to the head of the steps, and leaned against the gray pillar, staring moodily down the path where the white stones shone in the darkness.

“Is it worth ten that she’ll come through without a scratch nor scare?” suggested Brag to Benny hopefully.

“Naw,” said Benny with a deprecating cough. “I’m off betting.”

CHAPTER XV

GINGER COMES TO GRIEF

ALAS for the confidence of her trusting friends. Ginger Ella was not coming through her evening's adventures as triumphantly as those who loved her fondly hoped.

For some time she crouched, quivering, in the corner of the great black car, staring fearfully into that square aperture of the open door where the blackness softened to a dusky gray. Suddenly, framed in the opening, there appeared a man, indistinguishably gray, a cap drawn low over his forehead. Ginger Ella did not cry out, for the single reason that she could not. Her throat froze as if it were solid ice, and her heart stood still. Helpless in suspense, she waited.

Was this another tramp of the tracks, a regular one, snatching a ride, like her luckless self, from the careless hospitality of the Burlington?

While she waited, holding her frightened breath, paralyzed with fear, suddenly there was a rumbling crash, the rattle of a steel bolt, and the face was gone. With it disappeared that square of friendly gray light that had marked the open door by which she had entered and through which she had hoped to fall to freedom later on. It left her enveloped in a tremendous unbroken darkness, alone and locked in the empty car.

For the first moment, her relief in the knowledge that the stranger had not vaulted in to share the privacy of her coach was so great that she did not realize that her position was now far more serious than before. Her breath of satisfaction that the man was gone was almost a sob.

"Th-that was a close call," she whispered. And the sound of her own voice, hushed and husky as it was, brought back something of her usual cock-sure confidence. "No box car," she continued more sturdily, "is big enough for two hoboes at the same time."

But when she looked about her, seeing only the intense blackness of space on every side, feeling it rather, for sight was out of the question in that impenetrable pall, it seemed very large indeed, large enough for a hundred frightened, huddled hoboes like herself. She squirmed uneasily.

"I wonder where they are going to take us anyhow? Maybe away out west. Maybe to New York. I hope it doesn't take long—I've nothing to eat—and not a cent to my name—I must be a terrible-looking object, too. I

suppose they would take me to the police station, and they would send Father a wire. He will worry. And won't Eddy Jackson be mad?—And serve him right, too, if you ask me!—Oh! but whatever will become of that poor blind—if he is blind—and what will become of him anyhow, blind or not?"

Presently Ginger Ella was considering the situation in quite a consistent and practical manner. She quickly decided that Eddy Jackson was right about one thing—Speed was not blind, had never been blind. But although she accepted the fact, it aroused no resentment within her.

"There was something the matter with him, that's sure. Christian Scientists say that all sickness is mental blindness, and maybe it is. But if he was sick, why should he pretend he was blind? To get in the Home, I suppose, for we are not a Hospital for the Sick. But how did he find out about us in the first place? Oh, well, I have troubles of my own to worry about."

Carefully, half crawling, not daring to stand fully upright, she made her way to the closed door and tried in vain to open it. Acting upon a sudden impulse, she began to beat upon it with her fists and call for help, but quickly thought better of it.

"As long as I am here all by myself, nothing very bad can happen to me. But any kind of a bum might hear me, and try to get in, and that wouldn't be so good. There must be some way out of these things."

But there was no way. Ginger Ella felt her way all about the car, from corner to corner, hoping for some means of escape, and finding none. The car started suddenly, and she was thrown violently, face downward, upon the floor. She cried out faintly, just once, and then lay very still, waiting. Another terrific lurch, then a creaking slow advance.

"Anyhow we are on our way—I only hope it is not far. Fancy how Father would feel to get a wire from me: 'Just arrived in Salt Lake City.' I wonder how long it takes to go to Salt Lake City?—I wonder if this road runs to Salt Lake City, anyhow—Chicago, Burlington and Quincy.—Chicago isn't far. And Quincy—that is in Illinois, too.

"It's a good thing I'm on our own little old Burlington and not the California Limited or the Canadian Pacific.—I wonder how long one can go without food? I feel very hollow, but not hungry.—I wonder how long it will take me to breathe up all the air in here."

The train crashed to a sudden stop, jerked forward, stopped again. Then, very noisily, with a great puffing of steam and smoke it began to back.

Ginger brightened a little, and hunched herself up on the floor, hugging her knees.

“There, that’s better,” she thought. “Maybe they’ll back as far as Red Thrush. I hope they back as far as Eddy’s car anyhow, and I can sit there and wait for them to find me—if I can get out, that is.” She squirmed uneasily at the thought. “I hope nothing runs into Eddy’s old car. I’d hate to have that to pay for.—Not that Eddy would let me!—Not that I wouldn’t insist upon doing it!” she added, with considerable vehemence. “It’s all Eddy’s fault, anyhow. What business has he throwing out my Inmates, blind or not blind? I guess a body doesn’t have to be blind to get into a parsonage!”

Another terrific crash, and the train stood still. Faintly, as from afar, Ginger could hear the crashing of iron upon iron, the sliding of great bolts into great rings. She could hear the re-echoing voices, calling orders, but could not distinguish one word from another. But presently, listening intently, she heard the reverberating crash with which a freight train gets into motion, heard the roar of wheels and heard all noises alike fade faintly off into silence. The train had gone on, with its engine and its crew, but Ginger’s box car remained motionless. It had been thrown off on a siding and abandoned.

As the realization of this fact sank gradually in upon her, Ginger was far more terrified than before. There had been a form of safety in the long train—there had been engineers, firemen, brakemen. There had been lights, and signals, and plans. Now suddenly she was entirely alone, in the black night, somewhere upon some deserted track, and she screamed aloud in a nameless terror she could not control, and beat upon the doors until her hands bled.

The echoes of her frightened cries in the empty car terrified her the more. For the first time in her life, she was a helpless prey to a perfect passion of fear, and sobbed and prayed incoherently, wringing her hands. These physical evidences of her own terror added fresh fuel to her fears, but when, from sheer exhaustion, she fell silent at last, the great impenetrable stillness that beat pitilessly down upon her seemed still more terrible.

CHAPTER XVI

TOURISTS OF THE TIES

IN the dusk of that same October evening, but a scant half-hour later, three tired tourists of the ties trailed slowly westward, dragging heavy feet in travel-worn shoes inertly through the cinders that lined the roadbed of the Burlington. They walked, not three abreast, as friends and comrades, but single file, one after the other, a trio, not of affection, but mere convenience. One of these was a Philosopher. As he slouched along he descanted at great length upon subjects of infinite variety—politics, religion, points of interest and hygiene. He was not conversing. He neither received nor wanted an answer to his diatribes. In fact, any attempt at repartee would have annoyed him. He was merely airing his views, chiefly for his own entertainment, without hope that they were either heard or comprehended. When the early evening passenger train thundered past, he merely paused, with his breath suspended until its roar had waned, and continued onward without so much as the use of a comma.

The man in the rear was a Misanthrope. He hated. Broad-minded, he, bounded by no petty prejudices, one who hated largely and on the most liberal lines. He was against. He aired no views, because he had none, advanced no arguments, because he conceived none. Pinned down to a straight opinion, one way or the other, he shifted his tobacco from right to left, or vice versa, and said tersely, "I'm ag'in' it." Apart from that, he merely tramped the ties, as much an automaton as any mechanical device contrived to expedite travel or insure safety.

The small man who led the way was neither for nor against, but sublimely indifferent to all interests in life but the paramount passion of food. And as he walked, his soiled hand fondled the newspaper bundle under his arm wherein reposed a loaf of rye bread and a thick ring of Bologna sausage.

"Women," said the Philosopher largely, "is fools. Liars, too, of course, but in the main, fools.—Look how they is with men. Now, a man by his very nature is got to be working to overcome something.—Born overcomers, men is.—Long as a woman holds out on 'im, or makes 'im think she is, he's hot on the trail and eatin' from her little finger, 'cause he's got somewhat to overcome. Them's men. 'S long 's he thinks she's got one principle he can't trample down, one ideal he can't ride herd on, or one little niche he can't

break into, he is on the job. Born overcomers. It's just when she shows she's got no more fields for him to conquer that husbands goes foragin' a-field. Fools, women."

"The back porch is the curse of civilization to-day," broke in the Bologna fondler. "Sit on the back porch and guzzle up a plateful of victuals under the gorgon's eye. Never nothing in a poke to take along for a rainy day. Never a nice hand-out to wish you Godspeed down the road. Five back-porch platefuls I et yesterday. None to-day," he added with a sigh.

"Women," continued the Philosopher, as though there had been no interruption, as indeed there had not, he having paid not the slightest attention to the interposed remark, "women is — —"

He stopped. The Bologna fondler stopped too. The Misanthrope looked up.

Down the tracks, a little ahead of them, they saw—or seemed to see—a motionless Ford car. As one man, they looked down at the tracks beneath their feet. Tracks—certainly those were tracks. This was no highway, but the road of the C. B. & Q. But was not that before them then the common Ford that it appeared to be? They advanced toward it, cautiously, without quickening their steps, but without turning their eyes from the surprising apparition lest it disappear. Closer approach, however, confirmed their impression. Yes, it was a Ford, carrying an Iowa license plate, and empty of occupant.

They stood beside it for a while, gazing unconcernedly off in all directions, whistling with an air of studied unconcern. But the car remained void of proprietor as upon their first approach. No group of vandals burst into view with clusters of wildwood flowers and shrubs ravaged from the country lanes. Not even a delinquent driver appeared to lay claim to the abandoned car.

The Philosopher, reassured, got into the car, and started the motor. The Misanthrope and the food fancier, carefully retaining his newspaper bundle, got into the back seat, closed the doors, and leaned back with quite an air. The Philosopher manipulated the machinery with a fine and casual skill, and when he had the motor running warmly, put it deftly into gear and gave it the gas. The wheels did not turn. The Ford stood still. He tried it three times, and then, without a word, he turned off the motor. The two men got out from the back seat and closed the doors, and the Philosopher swung down to the ground.

Still without a word, the three of them plunged into a minute and systematic ravage of Eddy's old Ford. Its most obvious content was a basket,

neatly covered with a white cloth. The Bologna fondler had it in a moment, and his eyes glittered, and the eyes of the Philosopher and the Misanthrope glittered also when they fell upon its contents, a jar of home-made jelly, a dozen luscious ripe pears, a glass of tomato pickle and a deep, thick-frosted, cocoanut cake.

Even this rich plunder did not turn them from further investigation, however. From one pocket of the door they salvaged two flash-lights, quickly shown to be in good working order, three fresh handkerchiefs, which they divided impartially among them, and a pair of soiled gloves, which the Philosopher thrust into his pocket. In the other pocket they found three folders of matches, a pack of cigarettes and a recent copy of *The Saturday Evening Post*. From among the tools they silently selected, as the most suited to their probable purposes and mode of travel, a monkey-wrench, a screw-driver and a four-bladed jack-knife.

Then, quickly collecting this odd assortment and parceling it out among them, they set off, quite briskly for them, down the tracks, still going west. And when they were some little distance beyond the car, they cut down the embankment on the right into the grassy low furrow beside the tracks, and there they laid out their treasures and prepared to eat. From their small rolls they brought out a coffee-pot, cups and spoons. The Misanthrope had coffee, sugar and a tin of milk. The Bologna fondler built a small fire, while the Misanthrope prepared the coffee, and the Philosopher, after the way of his class, lay back upon the grass and smoked and ruminated.

“Pears,” he said suddenly, his eyes upon Eddy’s basket, “is one of the most luscious of fruits. We don’t do fruit justice in this country; we make it play the part of a low-born country wench. Now in France, they makes a specialty of fruits and treats ’em like the royal blood they is by right. They eats ’em with cheese, all by theirselves, in style. When I was in Paris—in the war—and out of it—I become addicted to the cheeses of Paris. There was one little rolled-up cheese that you covered with sugar — —”

“The coffee is boiling over,” exclaimed the Bologna fondler.

Also, down the Burlington tracks that night rode Phil Van Doorn on her spirited, high-stepping Firefly. Guiding her with an unerring hand upon the rein, she held her to a gallop along the cinder tracks until she came to the bridge over Rabbit River. Firefly hung back, whinnied and pawed the cinders, Phil got off and looked about her.

“Now, would that little spitfire drive the old Ford over that bridge?” she wondered. Then she settled to serious reasoning. “Now, if he were my little

Inmate, and my Boy-Friend chucked him out, I'd cross that bridge if I had to do it on my hands and knees." Phil laughed a little. "And so did Ginger Ella!"

She patted Firefly encouragingly and drew the rein over her arm. Firefly still hung back, but Phil succeeded at last in coaxing the dainty feet upon the stringers.

"Now, Firefly, trust me," she said encouragingly. "Surely my Firefly will do what Eddy's old Ford has done. Come along now—be a nice baby."

Talking cheerily, with the bridle over her hand, Phil led the way bravely over the bridge, the horse whimpering nervously behind her and pawing the thick beams with distasteful hoofs.

"There, you see," she said triumphantly, when they had reached the other side, "Phil knew you could do it," and she hugged the sleek neck warmly in her strong arms. But in a moment she was up in the saddle again and galloping lightly down the darkening tracks.

She did not see the Ford until she was close beside it, and reined up sharply, slipping to the ground.

"Ginger," she called anxiously. "Where are you?—Ginger!"

A moment later she, too, was trying the motor and learning, the third person to do so that evening, that the rear axle was broken. She looked down the tracks, which disappeared such a little way before her in the thickness of night.

"Now, Phil Van Doorn," she said quietly, "you would be ashamed to turn back, after acting so foolishly at the start. And so," she concluded, "was Ginger Ella."

When she saw the glimmering fire in the hollow beside the tracks, she reined in sharply.

"Ginger," she called again. "Oh, Ginger!"

Three faces shone ruddily in the ruddy light, looking interestedly up at her. But she received no verbal answer.

Carefully she reined Firefly down the cinder bank and drew up beside them.

"I beg your pardon," she began, "but have you seen a young girl wandering along the tracks, bareheaded, I think—quite pretty—?"

"No, Miss," they declared, in strong unison, "we ain't seen nobody at all. Not anybody."

"Did you notice that Ford car down there?"

The food addict shoved the cocoanut cake out of sight in the shadows behind him.

“Ford?” echoed the Philosopher dumbly. “Ford car? This is the Burlington track.”

“That Ford car right back there, which you couldn’t have helped seeing. Of course you saw it. Well, the girl was in that car. And I think you must have seen her.”

The tie tourists breathed restively. This was putting a bad face on what had seemed a providentially lucky adventure. A young girl—pretty—gone from her car—and they, three frank hoboes, in possession of her food and all the movable contents of her machine.

The Philosopher rose bravely to the occasion and stood beside her. “Well, now, Miss, between friends, it’s like this. We saw that Ford, we admit it. We took its cake and its pears. And we took its flash-lights and three clean handkerchiefs. We tried it, and it wouldn’t run. But there was nobody in it. Not a girl, and not nobody. It was empty.”

“Miss,” said the Misanthrope anxiously, “if we had done anything off-color to that girl, is it likely we’d be sitting here in sight of the car eating our suppers like club men? Wouldn’t we have took to our heels in the timber?”

“That does seem reasonable. But on the other hand, since you thought of it, perhaps you were clever enough to realize in advance that it would be shrewder for you to stay right here in sight. You would know a great hue and cry would be raised after her, and they would be sure to take you in.”

The three men moved restlessly.

“But, Miss,” insisted the Misanthrope, “if we croaked off one, what’s to hinder a duplicate now we got our hand in? We’re three to one.”

“You wouldn’t dare. You know they are on the trail now, and you could never account for my disappearance because they know I came this way.”

Phil smiled grimly. She was not afraid. She realized that at heart, unless sorely driven, the tramp is a coward. A vicious criminal does not resort to the uncertain hazards of the road, but remains in the city where opportunities are plentiful, and rewards are rich. When he travels, it is by Pullman, not by ties. But while Phil realized that it is only under stress of a great emergency that the tramp can be driven to flagrant crime, she realized also that there might have been such an emergency in this case. She did not know that Ginger Ella herself had driven the car to that point down the tracks. For all she knew, they might have thrown the resisting girl—and Ginger Ella would be apt to resist—into the river for riddance.

“Come,” she demanded briskly, “you’re going back to Red Thrush with me. You may be all right, but I’m going to find out.”

“Lady,” said the Philosopher, “I give you my word of honor we never saw the girl.”

“Gentlemen,” said Phil, “I give you my word, which is worth a great deal, that if you have not seen the girl you will not suffer, but will profit by going back, for I will pay you well. But in the meantime you are right on the spot, you have goods from the car in your possession, and I dare not let you go. As soon as you prove your innocence, you may go.”

“Yes, but it ain’t so easy proving how innocent you are,” said the addict, carefully gathering up the remains of the supper. “Especially to them as don’t want to believe it. However, me, I’ll go back if you say so, but I’ll expect my three squares a day. And double pay for overtime.”

Slowly, backward along the ties, the three dejected tourists made their way, Phil riding behind them, alert and on her guard, on Firefly. When, as now and then happened, one or another of them dropped a stolen flash-light, a monkey-wrench, or a pair of Eddy Jackson’s gloves beside the road, hoping to clear himself of damning evidence, her sharp eyes saw, and her brisk voice commanded that it be recovered at once. Meekly enough, they obeyed her.

When they came alongside the abandoned Ford she pulled up sharply.

“See here,” she said, “there’s bound to be a train along soon. Just lend a hand there, boys, and boost that car clear of the tracks.”

“Boost a car!” ejaculated the Philosopher. “You mean boost it ourselves—lift that there automobile?”

“Certainly that’s what I mean. Two of you could do it all right—I could almost do it myself. Hurry up, and don’t argue. You have an interest in that car, what with your flash-lights and tools. Heave to!”

Grumbling a little, but without real objection, the three men bent to the task and propelled the small car over the steel rail and clear of the tracks until Miss Phil declared herself satisfied.

Then, slowly along the ties again they continued in the direction of Red Thrush, where lights were showing faintly in the darkness.

And in the abandoned box car, half a mile away, Ginger Ella, terrified into complete unconsciousness, lay in a huddled heap, soiled with dust and wet with tears.

CHAPTER XVII

CAPTAIN CODY'S DILEMMA

HAVING sorted out the morning mail, and turned over to Gar Haven the portion designed for house delivery, Captain Cody was enjoying a peaceful session with his pipe on the stool beside the fire before opening the window to the rush of the general delivery. Even at that early hour a crowd had gathered around the window, schoolgirls, never in groups of less than five, women with parcels to be weighed and stamped, men anticipating an influx of business by letter.

But after all, a postmastership, even in a town the size of Red Thrush, is entitled to its own small privileges. So Captain Cody sat and smoked, whanging down with the rubber stamp now and then, between deep pulls at his stale old pipe, just to remind the waiting line that his was a busy office and must not be rushed.

His peaceful and semi-somnolent reflections were disturbed by a sudden smart rap on the glass of the window, a sharp rap, businesslike, as if made by the head of a cane in the hand of one who knew what he wanted.

Captain Cody started violently, flushing with indignation. After nine years of postmastering in Red Thrush, he thought he had made it pretty well understood to his townsmen that when the window was down, rapping did no good. He re-filled his pipe, defiantly, and his hands trembled a little.

Rap, rap, rap, went the head of the cane upon the window again.

Captain Cody rose slowly, placed the pipe carefully upon the thick square of zinc matting under the stove, took a pile of letters in one hand and the rubber stamp conspicuously in the other and teetered to the window, which he opened ever so slightly, and glared through the bare inch of aperture.

"Sortin' mail. Ready in about five minutes," he snapped curtly.

The impatient one with the cane made no answer. But he flung back his coat and revealed to the one visible and glowering eye of Captain Cody a small steel badge. Captain Cody was entirely too near-sighted to distinguish from that distance what the badge stood for, but he was quick to realize that it represented authority of some sort. All badges were authoritative to Captain Cody.

“Oh, got a badge, eh?” he muttered. “Come to the door. Matter of official business. Let you right in.”

The man with the badge and the cane, followed by his companion, an immense silent man who neither rapped nor spoke, crossed to the door, and both were admitted to the private office. Captain Cody kicked his pipe a little farther under the stove where it would be less in evidence, and produced from under a pile of letters and magazines two chairs, which he offered to his visitors, seating himself sociably upon the stool.

The two men, moving with impressive slowness, crossed the room, looking up and down and in all corners of it, with a sort of spying interest with that intent affectedness which is the outer badge of the secret service and nodded grimly one to the other. Captain Cody clenched his thin blue hands about his thin knees and gazed at them with a sort of appealing apprehensiveness. When left entirely to his own devices as the village postmaster, he was a person of some dignity, one generally looked up to. But in the presence of any person representing things official, he became on the instant a mere buck private of the Civil War and out of step with the times.

“Awful nice day, gents,” he said ingratiatingly. “Crisp and cool—just right kind of October for the right kind of a winter.”

The man with the badge shoved his hat to the back of his head, leaned himself far backward in the rickety old chair, his legs thrust out before him.

“Uh, how about that mail for that Home for the Blind? Got it all sent back yet?”

Captain Cody cupped his thin hand behind his ear. “What say?” he inquired feebly.

“The money for that Home for the Blind. What did you do with it? Sent it all back, I suppose?”

Captain Cody answered deliberately. “Well, no, not just to say all of it. Not just yet. Didn’t get around to it—lots of work in this office—pretty busy town, this is. Lots of letter-writing goin’ on here.”

“How much have you got left of it?”

“Well, now, you see, it’s like this,” stammered the old man evasively, “they’ve got a Home for the Blind there now. They can prove it, I’ve seen ’em myself. Heh, heh, reckon you hadn’t heard about that. Four of ’em, blinder’n bats. Real home it is, too, and all stanch Methodists.”

“How much of their mail have you got here now?”

“Seein’s it’s a real Home you’d think they was entitled to the money that was honestly give ’em,” he went on anxiously.

“Law says no soliciting funds by chain letter. Well, where’s the evidence? Fetch it out.”

Captain Cody tottered to a corner and pulled out a worn old mail pouch which was perhaps a third full. “This here is for them — —”

“And you’ve sent back all of it but this? You swear to that?”

“Well, not to say just exactly sent it back, as you might say. Not all of it. But this here’s here, and it’s all theirs — —”

“Where is the rest of it?”

Captain Cody considered. Evidently, there was trouble in store for him and for Ginger Ella also. But Captain Cody was a gentleman and a soldier. He would not involve an innocent young girl in this scrape if he could help himself. A slumbering sense of chivalry stirred within him as he cast vainly about for ideas, for words, for inspiration. And then, as if in answer to the greatness of his need, there flashed into his mind an admonition he had read in the newspaper reports of a criminal case:

“Anything you say may be used against you.”

Captain Cody, who had absolutely no desire to say anything, saw temporary salvation in that legal phrase.

“If there’s going to be any sort of a mix-up about this,” he said craftily, “seems to me I better wait and see what my lawyer says.”

“There’s not going to be any mix-up if you have carried out your orders.”

“I got to see my lawyer,” he reiterated feebly.

The two men bent over the pouch and examined its contents. The letters were unopened, and all bore recent post-marks.

“Come now, Captain,” said the inspector kindly, “just give us the facts. That’s all we want. We only came to check up on this business. Have you returned the rest of the mail, or haven’t you? We know that a great many letters came in—more than this. If you didn’t return them, where are they? If you did, why, say so.”

“My lawyer,” repeated the old man stubbornly, “my lawyer.”

The two men stood up. “We’re putting up at the Brazelton. We’ll wire for instructions. Now you better get your head together with your lawyer’s, and fix up a stiff alibi to get out of this if you’ve been up to any funny business.”

They sauntered slowly out, still staring about them with the professionally unpleasant casualness of their kind. As soon as they had gone Captain Cody rushed to the telephone and called the parsonage.

“Send me Ginger Ella,” he begged when he heard a voice on the wire. “Send her quick. To the post-office. Tell her to come quick. It’s a terrible mess we’re in.”

Miss Jenkins’ voice fluttered back to him tearfully.

“Oh, Captain Cody, haven’t you heard the terrible news? Ginger is gone. She walked down the railroad tracks last night and hasn’t been heard from since. They’ve had searching parties out for her all night, but they can’t find her.”

The receiver fell from his nerveless hands and he tottered back to his stool, mopping a cold wet brow.

“Well, I’m dumb-gasted,” he ejaculated. “She’s absconded with the funds, and I’m up against it plenty. Like as not they’ll have me in jail for this.”

CHAPTER XVIII

MISS JENKINS' INSPIRATION

OVER the shabby old parsonage hung a pall of sheer and silent terror such as it had never known before. Fourteen hours had passed without a word from Ginger Ella. Apparently no human eye had seen her since she turned Eddy's old Ford car west on the Burlington tracks at Bailey's crossing.

The twins had come home from college on the early morning train, and Hiram Buckworth had hurried down from his pastorate in Chester to lend Marjory the solace of his presence. From New York, Alexander Murdock had answered Miriam's telegram with one to her announcing that he was leaving for Red Thrush on the first train west and another to the county sheriff ordering him to spare no expense in the search for the missing girl.

Horace Langley had excused himself from his classes at high school for the day and had joined one of the searching parties operating in the woods down the track, while Helen hurried home to share the sorrow of her distracted family. On that day, also, all boys were dismissed from their classes in high school to swell the searching parties with their presence.

From midnight until morning Eddy Jackson and Speed Roney had conducted rival parties on opposite sides of the track in an equally fruitless search, and early in the morning they had returned to the parsonage together, dejected and worn, to make their discouraging report. Miss Jenkins served them with hot coffee and doughnuts, and they drank gratefully, but could not eat.

"I just can't believe she's out there alone," said Speed Roney. "It's just not possible. Don't you think maybe she's around the house some place? Maybe she slipped back and went up into that studio place where she goes to pray and everything? Can't I go and look?"

"Ginger would not hide and let us worry about her like this, no matter how angry she was," said Helen quickly. "You don't know Ginger. She always thought of everybody else first."

"We are sort of on honor not to go to Ginger's studio without an invitation," explained Miriam. "It was her sacred retreat, and we never intruded."

"She took me there once," said Marjory. "The time she told me about starting her Home for the Blind. Dear Ginger—how happy she was—always

so burning-up with good intentions— —”

The twins subsided in a burst of nervous tears. Speed Roney stood up.

“I’m going to look. She didn’t put me on honor not to go there. She stayed up there—all night—praying for me—and I’m going to have a look. Maybe she fainted or something.”

They watched in silence as he went slowly up the circular staircase. No one offered to follow him. He climbed Ginger’s ladder slowly, pushed the trap-door above him and pulled himself through. He was obliged to make his way carefully over the treacherous old rafters so easily traversable to her familiar feet. In the small corner under the dormer windows, that she called her studio, he stood for a long time. There was a mail pouch on the floor beside the desk, and upon it was a plate of apples, her small thumbled Bible and a pad of paper with pencils beside it. “Bright Sayings of Children,” the page was headed boldly, but the space below was void of writing. Three shabby cushions lay on the floor beside her chair.

“That’s where she kneeled and went to sleep.” He moved uncomfortably. “Aw, gee!” He looked about him, and then, awkwardly, his face stained a dark red, he got himself down upon her cushions and buried his face in her chair.

“Dear God,” he began, his voice an indistinguishable mutter, “don’t let anything happen to her—it’s not fair—it was all my fault. L-let’s do something. Amen.”

He got up, still blushing, but he felt better as he made his way back over the rafters and down the ladder again. He did not go back to the group in the dining-room, but set out, at once, to join the searching party down the tracks.

At ten o’clock, having hurried his rounds to this end, as he did not usually reach the parsonage before eleven, Gar Haven called at the door to deliver the letters.

“Awful terrible thing this is, Mr. Tolliver,” he said gloomily. “Awful things goin’ on these days. Country full of crooks and what-not. Nobody knows what’ll happen next. And nobody knows what’s happened to her, neither. I reckon them three tramps of Miss Phil’s knows more than they’re admittin’ offhand.”

“Thank you, Gar,” said Mr. Tolliver. “It’s pretty terrible, but I can’t believe that anything—very horrible—has happened to Ginger. We’ll have her back all right.”

He fingered the letters mechanically as he returned to the group at the table in the dining-room and passed his cup for more coffee. The shocked

Inmates sat about, helplessly frightened and still. Miss Jenkins whimpered constantly into her handkerchief. The three girls faithfully tried to hide their fears in smiles bespeaking faith and hope.

Mr. Tolliver studied the addresses on the letters intently, as though his eyes could barely decipher the words they bore.

“Oh, for Ginger,” he said. “Two for Ginger.”

The girls’ eyes clung in tearless pity upon Ginger’s letters. Oh, when would the eager eyes of Ginger peruse those friendly messages?

“And one for me,” he went on perfunctorily, as he broke the seal and pulled out the letter. “Why, it is from the Home at Curtiss. I hope they are not — —”

But he quickly silenced his own thought. Not for worlds in the bitterness of his own sorrow would he have carelessly admitted to these unfortunate ones that he hoped his home was to be spared all further inroads at this time.

He read it anxiously, even brightening a little as he did so.

“Well, here is news,” he announced. “We’re to lose our Inmates again. They want you back at once.”

Even in the terrible absence of Ginger, this was news that could not fail to create a stir of interest. Mr. Tolliver read the letter aloud, in the midst of their exclamations of surprise.

A kindly Methodist in Curtiss, who owned a large farmhouse adjoining the Home which had burned, had generously offered it for their use during the process of rebuilding and restoration. The apportioning out of the Inmates, it seemed, had been the occasion of considerable trouble and discontent, for which reason they were calling them back at once to their own friendly confines. The letter announced that they would meet any train chosen by the four sojourners in Red Thrush for their arrival.

On the whole, the news was pleasantly received by those whom it most concerned.

“Except for losing Ginger, and outsiders like Speed breaking in sometimes, there’s nothing going on here,” admitted Brag. “The food is good, and the citizens is hospitable. But it’s an awful podunk little town. Me, I like life.”

“There is always something going on in a general Home for everybody like ours at Curtiss,” explained Janie. “The old folks are always trying to marry some of the young help, the demented are always running off, and the delinquents are always in a scrape of one kind or another. Exciting, the Home is.”

"I like it because it is close to Des Moines," added Phally, with a faint flush. "I like Des Moines. I have friends there. When we are at Curtiss, I go to Des Moines every month for a visit. At Christmas I stay two weeks. I couldn't go from here. It is too far, and costs too much. And I'm sure they couldn't afford to send for me."

"Me," said Benny with a troubled cough, "I like it here. At the Home, there are too many. I might get lost in the first shuffle and never show up again. I like it here."

Late that afternoon Miss Jenkins came upon him sitting alone on the bench beneath the bare old apple tree, his elbows on his knees, chin in his hands, in uttermost depths of dejection.

"Oh, Mr. Benny," she fluttered, "are—are you feeling sorry about Ginger?"

"Well, yes," he admitted. "I'm feeling awful sorry—and it's part about Ginger."

Miss Jenkins sat down beside him. She was desperately lonely and sad. The Inmates were deep in their preparations for departure as soon as Ginger could be found. Mr. Tolliver was surrounded with the tender sympathy of his three daughters. Miss Jenkins stood outside both groups, alone.

"I hope you're not in any trouble," she said.

"Well, in a way, yes, and in a way, no. I'm in trouble because I don't want to go back to the Home. And I'm not, because I'm lucky to have a Home to go to."

The afternoon was breathlessly still. The old brown parsonage was enveloped in a brooding sadness. Miss Jenkins sighed. And Benny began to talk.

"I'm a no-account sort of person," he admitted. "In a crowd, nobody ever hears me. I always get out of sight behind some one else, some big person, and get lost sight of. I'm the one that always draws the chicken neck at Sunday dinner, and my piece of cake is the one without any frosting. If the amusement hall is full, I'm the one that has to sit on the bench. And if the bench is full, I'm the one that stands up. Sometimes I don't get in at all. I'm like that—worthless. But down here there's more room, and even worthless ones like me get to feeling like real folks. I was getting all chirked up."

Miss Jenkins was suddenly trembling with a great idea.

Then she laid a hand upon Benny's, a kind hand, fluttery, but a capable one, and one that craved the privilege of service.

“Benny,” she said in a brave whisper, “you don’t have to go back if you don’t want to. You can stay right here. You are not a mite of trouble, and I can do for you mornings and evenings after school.”

“B-but—preacher— —”

“We won’t stay here. We’ll move back to my old rooms across the street. I can get the spare bedroom for you. They don’t need me here, anyhow. Ginger always ran everything, and me, too. She never really needed me.—I had two nice bright rooms over there and did my own cooking. We’ll move right back. I’ll be right pleased to have you to do for.”

“It’s an awful bother having blind ones around,” he warned her generously. “Stumbling into things, and spilling, and what-not—terrible bother. Everybody says so. At the Home they say we’re even worse bother than the nutty ones.”

“You won’t bother me, Benny, not a bit. And if you do, I’ll be glad of it,” she declared, immoderately excited over the prospect. “I haven’t ever had any bother of my own in my whole life. I don’t care if you do drop and spill things. I haven’t ever had any picking-up to do, and I’ll be downright glad of a chance.”

Benny squeezed her hand in his. “You’re an awful good woman, Miss Jenkins,” he said humbly. “I liked you first-rate right from the start. I was awful glad you had your hair bobbed. If I wasn’t blind, I’d marry you and take care of you like—anybody.”

Miss Jenkins sat very still. Something strange and unaccustomed stirred suddenly within her. She became hotly conscious of her hand pressed so tightly into Benny’s hand.

“What—difference—does that make?” she whispered breathlessly. “I could take care of you just as well, and maybe better—I’d be right pleased to do it.”

When Miss Jenkins was again capable of coherent speech and thought she went at once to Phally.

“You may think I’m an old fool, and I know I am,” she confessed frankly. “But it’s not for foolishness I’m doing it. Benny doesn’t want to go back, and I want somebody to do for the rest of my life. I’ve got paid-up insurances that’ll take care of us when I can’t work. I hope I haven’t been mean to you, Phally. For sometimes I did feel pretty upsettish, the way things went, but I’ve made up my mind, and I’m satisfied. You can have Mr. Tolliver and welcome. He’s a first-rate man, Phally, first-rate. I’ve lived with him, and I know.”

“Mister—Tolliver!” gasped that amazed woman. “I can have him!—Miss Jenkins—listen—I’ll tell you a secret. You won’t tell anybody, will you? Not a soul knows it.—I’m married—it’s not just friends I go to visit in Des Moines. It’s my husband. And children—I’ve got two children. We haven’t got much money, and they can’t take care of me at home. But they wouldn’t have me in the Home, if they knew I had a family. So I pretend I’m going to visit friends. When my daughter is old enough to take care of me, I’m going home to live.—That’s why I try to make myself look as well as I can—blind and all—so they won’t think I’m too ugly, my husband and the children. Why, I’ve been married fourteen years!”

CHAPTER XIX

MISS PHIL FINDS GINGER

In the dusk of the early evening, the parsonage became once more a sad rendezvous for those returning from the day's search. Hopelessly they came back from their own fruitless efforts, yet always hopeful of an encouraging word to be found at home.

The indomitable courage, the unflinching activity of Phil Van Doorn proved invaluable in the emergency. She was not to be discouraged, not to be deterred from any effort.

"Miss Phil says to go through the tents of that road gang"; "Miss Phil says to send a party to Middleton to work back." And what Miss Phil said was an order. It was Miss Phil who had ordered the men to get Eddy's car off the tracks and who sent Iry Ford to tow it home and have the broken axle repaired. It was Miss Phil, in person, who submitted her three tramps to a keen and searching examination, but to no avail. She refused to install them in the county jail under the control of the sheriff, but kept them in her own kitchen under the charge of her Chinese cook. If they were really innocent, she was unwilling to get them into needless trouble. But she would not permit them to go free until that innocence was proved.

All day long her car was to be seen at different points along the road, and here and there was Miss Phil herself to be found, offering suggestions, inciting others to greater optimism and more speed. It was late in the evening when Eddy Jackson announced that it was her car pulling up before the parsonage.

Even in their fears for Ginger, the twins could not repress a little stir of interest in the coming of Phil Van Doorn, for they had often seen her about town, but had never spoken to her, and Ginger's vivid accounts by letter of her growing friendliness had aroused them to keen curiosity. But the Miss Phil who appeared in their doorway that night was not the stunning woman of their fleeting glimpses about town, nor the fascinating creature of Ginger's wordy descriptions. Miss Phil was dragged from head to foot with mud and water and a long red gaping wound across her face dripped blood upon her blouse.

"I just stopped by to see if you had news—no?" She sighed a little. Then she remembered her dragged appearance. "Oh, excuse the way I look—"

Mr. Tolliver was at her side, real anxiety in his voice.

"Miss Phil, what in the world has happened—you are hurt— —"

"Not a bit. Just a little clumsiness on my own part."

"But you are wet—what happened?"

"Oh, they were dragging the river, and of course I thought I could do it better than any man. Got myself jerked in. But they jerked me out again. Served me right— —"

"Dragging—dragging the river— —" Marjory's voice was frightened.

"Oh, don't worry. There wasn't a thing. I just thought it was a good idea to make sure. You are the twins, aren't you?" She smiled at them.

The twins struggled after their fleeing composure. "Y-yes. I'm Marjory, and this is Miriam."

"I'm Phil Van Doorn." She smiled again. "You're just as sweet as Ginger promised," she said, "but oh, my dears, I still like Ginger best."

The twins kissed her, giving tearful assent to her partiality.

Since they had no news, Miss Phil permitted herself to be hurried back to the car, enveloped in a heavy coat of Mr. Tolliver's over her wet frock.

"I think I had better take you," he said, "to make sure you go home and no place else."

"Oh, I am going home. And you can not go with me. You must stay right here to get the first word of her when it comes. If you do hear, will you call me up?—I am going to try something else.—Oh, nothing special—just a glimmer of an idea. I'll see what I can do.—No, Eddy, you can not go with me—nor you either, Speed, you bad thing!—I'll come again in the morning."

But for all her disheveled appearance, for all her dripping clothes and her bleeding face, Miss Phil did not go directly to Doorndee. She ran her car up beside the railroad station and went into the office of the Western Union, where she spent some minutes composing the longest telegram which was ever sent out of Red Thrush. She addressed it to a very prominent lawyer in Chicago, and in it she recounted, with not the slightest attempt at abbreviation, nor so much as counting the words when she had finished, the full story of Ginger's strange disappearance and demanded complete information of all train movements between Red Thrush and Middleton between the hours of six o'clock and midnight on the night of October nineteenth, promising ample remuneration for all services rendered and urging the greatest haste.

The name of Philadelphia Van Doorn was one to conjure with, even in Chicago. Within an hour the prominent lawyer was in touch with equally prominent railroad officials, and the wires both ways were hot with messages, Miss Van Doorn being informed of their movements and results by telegraph every half-hour. Telegrams of inquiry were dispatched to each member of every train crew which had covered the ground that night, but with discouraging promptness the answers reported that no such young person had been sighted at any time. But in the early morning Miss Phil received another message:

“Report five empty freight cars side-tracked three miles east Middleton approximately eight-thirty. Worth investigating.”

In less than ten minutes from the receipt of the message, Miss Phil’s roadster was humming back into Red Thrush. At the station, she collected, by sheer force of personality, the station agent himself, a brakeman, who had been on night duty and was just ready to go home for his day’s sleep, and Iry Ford. With them as passengers, she drove quickly out the familiar old road and pulled up at the tracks, a little over three miles from Middleton. Down the tracks before them, but a few yards distant, they could see the five empty box cars on the siding, silent, and big, and black. And coming from the woods on either side, they could see the wearied searchers as they returned from their second fruitless night. But they did not pause to speak to them, but hurried, running, Miss Phil leading the way, toward the box cars on the siding.

Miss Phil was not one to be satisfied with any but her own efforts, and as soon as the brakeman had opened the door of the first car, with Iry giving her a helpful hand, she clambered in and turned her flash-light into every one of its four dark corners, sighing her disappointment at its emptiness. One, two and three. But in the fourth, even as she was struggling up and not yet on her feet, she gave a frightened thrilling cry. She saw Ginger, and a moment later she was bending over the small hunched figure in a rumpled smock that lay inert in the thick dust, stocking-footed, her shoes close by her side.

“Ginger—my darling,” she cried, and caught the girl up in her strong arms.

Ginger’s head fell limply upon Miss Phil’s arm.

“Oh, my dear.” Miss Phil swayed a little.

“Lemme look, lady,” said the brakeman kindly. “I don’t think she’s hurt any. Likely she’s just fainted.”

A throbbing silence held them as they turned the flash-light over the wan little face, the limp little figure, the stockinged feet with blisters showing through the holes.

“Her—her feet hurt,” said Phil, and tears ran down her face.

Iry Ford picked up the soiled little shoes and dusted them tenderly.

“She’s all right, lady. She’s just unconscious. Don’t you fear for her. Lemme carry her.”

“I’ll carry her myself,” said Phil Van Doorn.

In the full light of the revealing sunshine they examined her again—a pathetic figure, indeed, wan, and white, and streaked with dust and tears, mute evidence of the terrible strain through which she had passed stamped grimly upon the small drawn face. But the slight body was unbruised, the soiled gown undamaged. And Ginger was not dead.

“I’m going to keep her, for ever and ever,” said Phil Van Doorn. “They don’t know how to take care of her.—You drive, Iry.—We’ll take her right straight to Doorndee.”

A more kindly afterthought would not permit of such cruelty. “Oh, very well,” she said aloud and petulantly, in answer to her own thoughts, “take us to the silly old parsonage then.”

Even at that early hour little groups were gathering upon the parsonage lawn, men wearily draining cups of steaming coffee, returned to hear the latest discouraging words, to report their latest failure. The sudden great cry that went up at sight of Phil Van Doorn staggering from the car with the limp little figure in her arms brought every one crowding from within the house to meet her.

But when they saw Ginger, Ginger, the feverishly alert and active, lying limp and motionless in Phil’s arms, a sudden hush fell upon their joy.

“She’s all right! She’s all right!” Phil called to them again and again to relieve their starting fears.

“All right—all right!” boomed the three men who followed her from the car.

Mr. Tolliver ran down the path and put out his arms to take his daughter to himself. And he was not ashamed of the tears that ran down his cheeks.

Phil did not release her hold on the slight figure, but drew her back in her arms, defiantly close, and frowned at him over the bright but drooping head.

“You—you don’t know how to take care of her, any of you,” she said in a low voice, rather sternly.

“I suppose not. We’ve never had a chance to try—because she spent her whole life taking care of everybody else. Maybe I’ll do better now.”

His eyes met hers frankly, smiling and wet, over Ginger’s limp little figure, and Phil relinquished her to him without a further word.

CHAPTER XX

GINGER GIVES ADVICE

HOURS later, when Ginger Ella opened her eyes, she was lying upon her own bed in the room at the head of the circular staircase. As she looked about her, into the tender, happy, anxious faces, she blinked a few times to banish the weak glad tears which flooded her eyes and forced a brave little grimace to her lips in semblance of a smile.

“Light hurts my eyes,” she explained bravely. “It was dark in there.”

She gazed appealingly at her father. “D-don’t scold me,” she said. “I know it was dumb of me.”

When she saw the twins, a mock severity settled over her face. “Oh, you bad things,” she exclaimed. “Coming all the way home from college and wasting all that money when it wasn’t even a vacation. Good excuse for you, Hiram, wasn’t it?”

Her eyes wandered on. “You got me, Phil, didn’t you? I couldn’t make out what was going on, but I knew it was you.—Who scratched you?”

When her eyes met those of Eddy Jackson, she smiled and blushed a little. “Just the same, Eddy Jackson, it was my Home, and you had no business to do it. Did—did he get away?”

“Speed?” interposed her father cheerfully. “Oh, no, indeed. He came back of his own accord to say good-by and tell you how it happened. He is waiting outside. He was afraid the sight of him might shock you.”

“Is he blind?”

“No, indeed.”

“I see somebody washed me—bring him in.”

They called his name. He came quickly and stood beside her bed, pleadingly, and took her hand.

“Oh, Speed,” she said, “I’m so ashamed. I used to wear such terrible old clothes to do my work because I thought nobody could see me but Father and Miss Jenkins—but you couldn’t see very well through those black glasses, could you?” Speed shook his head and did not answer, but pressed the hand lying limply in his. “And anybody that wants to walk ties can have the whole C. B. & Q. for all I care,” she said decidedly. “For my part, I

would rather be a gipsy and take to the woods. Did you see my blisters?— Well, I only hope it hurts you as much as it did me.”

“I hurt now,” he said clumsily. “I hurt all over. It was all my fault, Ginger. I’m so sorry.”

“So’m I. Wait till the others go out. I’ve thought up a lot of sensible things to say to you.”

So when they had talked just a very little and Speed had told her the foolish story of his boyish misadventure, Mr. Tolliver stood up.

“If he is going to catch that five o’clock train east, we’d better let Ginger administer her scolding.” He glanced rather deprecatingly at Eddy Jackson as he spoke.

Eddy looked at his watch. “You’ve got over an hour, Speed,” he said kindly. “And it’s little enough. I’ll get you to the station in time.” He grinned a little. “That’s a promise.”

He was the last of the group to pass through the door and he looked back as he did so and his eyes were anxious. Ginger did not see him. Her eyes were upon the moody dark ones of her truant Inmate. Eddy closed the door softly behind him.

Speed pulled a chair close to the bed and dropped into it, gently caressing her hand upon the white coverlet. “Ginger—that’s what I want to talk to you about. I intended to go back—but I don’t want to. I’ve learned a lot this summer. Why can’t I chuck school and go to work? I’m old enough. Father wasn’t so keen on college in itself—he just wanted to give me time to grow up a little before I go into business. Does it make any difference whether I graduate or not?”

Ginger pursed up her lips thoughtfully. She loved to give advice. Even in her state of extreme exhaustion she could not resist a little flounce of satisfaction that her personal opinion counted so much.

“I suppose I seem rather young to be giving advice,” she admitted kindly, “but I’ve had a lot of experience, running this Home and managing everybody, so I really know more than you would expect.”

“You’re just wonderful, Ginger. I don’t see how you ever do it. I think you’re wonderful.”

“Miss Jenkins helps a little,” she acknowledged. “And Father is simply wax. It was harder when the twins were at home falling in love and putting on airs— —”

“But graduation— —”

"No, Speed, graduation all by itself doesn't mean much. But your father thought you were too young and inexperienced to settle down yet— —"

"But that was three years ago!"

"Yes, but what you did last summer, chucking everything and clearing out like you did, doesn't seem to show much experience, does it? And the way you played through college last year and flunked three courses doesn't indicate that you had acquired wisdom very fast, do you think?"

Speed had nothing to say.

"Besides, it's no good starting things, and then dashing off to something else. We've got to see things through, once we get ourselves into them, or we never get any place at all."

"I'll go back if you say so. But I wanted to stay here, to be near you, Ginger. I think you're wonderful. If I go away and leave you here with— Eddy Jackson—and everybody— —"

Ginger Ella thought that over. "Well," she admitted, "I may say I like Eddy Jackson as well as anybody. He's not very romantic, but he's regular—he has sense, like Father and me. We always say Eddy Jackson is like us—you're not, Speed." She smiled at him affectionately. "You're romantic and exciting and unexpected. It's too bad you did not come when the twins were at home. They are like that. Always having thrills, and falling in love. Father and I are different."

"I don't like to leave you, Ginger."

"It's sensible, though. I have a lot of work to do this year, and you are so upsetting to have around, Speed. Not like Eddy Jackson and Father. You get my mind all off the things I ought to be doing. You don't realize how businesslike I am. You never really saw me before, did you?"

"No. Just one look the night—you stayed up—to— —"

"Yes. Well, usually I look much better than this. A box-car confinement is not so good for the complexion." They sat a moment, silent, holding hands sweetly like children.

"I'm really going to settle down, Ginger. I'll never make such a fool of myself again. I'm going to be sensible now like you— —"

"And Eddy Jackson."

"No—like you. I'll go back then, if you say so. But I wish his farm was farther away. You won't forget me, Ginger?"

Tears came to her eyes. She may not have been romantic; in the main she was sensible, but she was warmly sympathetic and she liked Speed.

They were silent again.

A quavering voice came up to them, the voice of Captain Cody, plaintively expostulating.

“Now, don’t blame me, Brother Tolliver. But they say you’ve caught Ginger and brought her back — —”

“Caught Ginger!”

“And she’s hiding out here at home. We’ve got to have her. I didn’t give her away, Brother Tolliver, until she absconded with the money and left me holding the bag — —”

Speed sprang to his feet. “Don’t you care, Ginger. If you are in a scrape you can come with me.”

Ginger clung to him, listening intently.

They could not hear her father’s words, but his voice came up to them, annoyed, remonstrating, with another voice, loud and nasal, and again the quavering tones of Captain Cody. Then they heard steps ascending the circular staircase.

Speed bent above her protectingly, his arm about her shoulders.

“There she is, gents, that’s her,” quavered the old man. “She’s the one— she took the money all right.”

CHAPTER XXI

THE LAW IS RECONCILED

DURING all the exciting events of the preceding hours, Captain Cody had suffered painful anxieties on his own account. Not for one moment did he believe the story that Ginger had gone in pursuit of an errant Inmate. All very well for the average person, perhaps, but Captain Cody was in possession of information of which the rest of Red Thrush was totally unaware. The Inspectors had come to investigate the disposal of certain funds. Ginger Ella had received those funds into her possession, and simultaneously with the investigation she had disappeared. That she had absconded and had taken the money with her was self-evident.

The persistent questioning of the officers and their constant surveillance had sufficed to weaken his martial spirit. His threats about a lawyer had been mere idle stalling for time. Rather than place himself deliberately within the hands of a lawyer, Captain Cody, a hundred times over, would have preferred to languish within the county jail. When, therefore, he was convinced in his own mind that Ginger Ella had made good her escape and left him alone to face an outraged Postal Service, sure of dismissal and in danger of drastic discipline, he turned state's evidence without further parley.

But for all his rage and his fears for himself, for all his acute sense of his personal dignity, his rancor paled a little at sight of her, slim and pale and weak in her white gown, against the white pillows.

"Don't blame me, Ginger. I'd 'a' stood by you if I went to jail for it as long as I thought you was a-doin' good with the money and helping them as needed help. But when you lit out with the funds I wasn't going to play the sucker any longer, not if I could help it—me in jail and you livin' on the fat of the land on stolen funds — —"

Ginger clutched her head in her two weak hands. "Father," she gasped, "send for the doctor. I must be out of my head."

"I suspect that he is out of his head," said Mr. Tolliver in a tone of deep disgust. "Captain Cody, we do not know what in the world you are driving at. My daughter is ill and utterly exhausted. The doctor says she must be kept very quiet. How can she be quiet in this mad-house?"

The Inspector laughed. "I can't say as I blame you, Parson. It does sound nutty. It's that ding-busted Home for the Blind again. He says he gave her back the money—against all orders—"

Ginger broke into a relieved little laugh. "Oh, that!—I thought it was something serious. Pass me my slippers, Margie; I'll have to go up in the attic—"

"No, Miss," interposed the fat man quickly, speaking for the first time, "we can't let you out of our sight. They just caught you to-day, I understand. Well, you don't give us the slip again if we can help it."

"I should not choose the third story to escape from, I assure you. I have to go to my studio—"

"I'll go, Ginger. What do you want?" said Eddy quietly.

"I must go myself. I know where things are. Nobody can do it for me."

"Then," said the fat man virtuously, "I shall have to go with you."

Ginger thought of the wobbly ladder, of the narrow trap-door, and her tired eyes twinkled.

"Fair enough," she agreed. "Ten Camels you'll wish you hadn't, as Brag would say."

Helen wrapped her heavy dressing-gown about her, steadying her tenderly as she essayed to rise, and Marjory held the soft slippers for her feet. She stood up, swaying a little.

"I'm all right—wait a minute—till the room stands still. No, let me go, Father,—let's get everything settled once and for all—and then—we'll—rest."

Ginger leading the way, supported by the twins on either side and followed closely by the fat official, they tramped down the hall to the wobbly ladder balanced against the wall.

The fat officer gazed at it apprehensively.

"She can't climb that," he ejaculated. "She's too weak."

"Oh, yes, I can," said Ginger sturdily. "Can you?"

She climbed slowly, pulling herself, a great weight, painfully from round to round and smiling faint reassurance over her shoulder to her father. On opposite sides of the ladder Eddy Jackson and Speed steadied her ascent. She unlocked the trap-door, pushed it up then pulled herself through. Little beads of perspiration stood out upon her forehead. Her knees trembled.

"Well," said the fat man gamely, "I can't do more than get stuck. Steady now, boys, hold 'er tight."

And he went up after her, tugging himself, panting aloud, through the narrow door. The others, waiting in silence, suddenly heard his shout of triumph. Eddy ran up the ladder.

“Here you are now—I’ve got it. The old boy was right—she had it. Catch these bags now, and pass them to the Inspector. Careful—look out there.”

Two mail sacks were passed down from hand to hand, and a box of opened empty envelopes. After them came Ginger Ella, came but a little way and reached out her hand to her father. She shook her head.

“I can’t,” she whispered.

He took her in his arms and carried her back to her bed, gently wiped the cold sweat from the white face. After a moment she opened her eyes with a faint smile, and motioned for the bags to be placed beside her.

“Better now—room runs around so—not as jerky as the box car, anyhow.”

She slipped a white hand inside the bag nearest her and drew out a letter. It was addressed for mailing, sealed and stamped. She broke it open and displayed the contents, a plain white card with a dime fastened by means of a bit of adhesive tape to one corner and written upon it, in Ginger’s familiar round script: “The Home being now on a firm paying basis, your contribution is returned with thanks.” She met their surprise and their discomfiture with a triumphant smile.

“I never spent a dime of it—fifteen hundred of those I wrote, with my own hand. There they are. And it cost me a pretty penny, too, for cards and stamps—going without everything you can think of to pay for them. But you see, with the forty-eight dollars a month from the Curtiss Home, and everybody in town just showering us with good things to eat, and the Missionary money, too,—why, we have been saving money on the poor dears right along. I never used one cent of this—although it really is a Home for the Blind, and we had a perfect right to the money.”

Her triumph faded into a tired smile, and they waited in silence until she opened her eyes again.

“He would never get around to sending them back,” she explained gently. “Besides, it wasn’t fair for him to have so much extra work when it all came from my mistake. Besides, I asked for the money, and it was only right that I should thank them for it myself. Besides — —”

“That’s besides enough, Miss,” said the inspector kindly. “You go to sleep now. We’ve got the money, and you’ve done a good job.”

They picked up the bag quietly and passed noiselessly from the room. Speed did not leave with the others, but stood silently waiting beside her bed.

“No hurry, Speed,” Eddy called back to him in a tone of grim friendliness, “I can deliver you to the Burlington in three minutes.”

She opened her eyes. “I’m not sick—just tired.”

“It’s all my fault—I’m so sorry.”

“He shouldn’t have chucked you out. It was my Home.”

“He’s an awfully decent sort—I wish he lived farther away.—Oh, he’s all right.—I’m going now. You won’t forget me, Ginger?”

She lifted her hand to him. “I will never forget you. When we are all grown up, and settled down, and terribly good and wise, let’s all be good friends, and get together and have a jolly laugh over all this.”

“I’m going to have a good many hours when I shall not feel like laughing. I like you a whole lot, Ginger.”

“I like you, too, Speed. I wish—yes, really I wish it, for the first time in my life—I wish I were romantic like the twins and you. But I just don’t know how not to be sensible.”

He took the pale face between his hands and kissed her. She returned the caress frankly, smiling into his eyes. But he did not smile. He kissed her again, with sudden intentness, turned quickly and went out of the room without a word.

“Good-by, my Dearest of all the Inmates,” she called after him. “The best of luck to you.”

But he did not look back.

CHAPTER XXII

GINGER'S BLESSING

WHEN the Inmates, with the exception of Benny, who awaited his final disposition at the fluttering hands of Miss Jenkins, had returned to their Home at Curtiss; when the twins were safely back at their humdrum college life once more; when Ginger Ella, although still confined to her room at the head of the stairs, was able from that vantage point to direct the affairs of her household, Phil Van Doorn presented herself to Mr. Tolliver with an air of deep determination.

"I want part of Ginger Ella," she began directly. "Will you let her come and stay at Doorndee with me part of the time? And let me pretend she is half mine?"

"Oh, I couldn't do that. Daughters were not designed for dividing up, like pies. It really isn't done."

"I could do a whole lot for Ginger—I'd love to. I haven't any relatives and I could leave her a heap of money."

"Ginger does not aspire to fortune by inheritance. She wants to earn her own money—oodles of it, as she often says. She has quite counted on it ever since I can remember. It would upset all her plans to be an heiress."

"But I want her so much. I really need her. She helps to keep me human. Why don't you both come, then, and live with me? Miss Jenkins is going to leave you—you will need some one. I will make you very comfortable. You can have your own part of the house, you can use my car for your calls, and it will not cost you a cent. Just think of all the money you could save up for missions, and prohibition, and such nonsense."

"I am afraid I couldn't do it. I should not feel right about it. But if you really want her so very much—we might make room for you here. Why don't you come and live with us?"

Phil stared moodily away into space for a while. A slow light glittered into her eyes. "Do you really mean it?"

"Yes, of course I mean it. We're used to a crowd. We're going to be quite lonely without our Inmates. I fancy we would quite enjoy having you!"

"How flattering." Phil laughed a little and bit her red lips reflectively. "Well, I'm on. I think I'll come."

“But of course,” he continued gravely, “as Ginger Ella often reminds me, there is Emily Post to be considered. After all, you could not properly be called an Inmate, not being blind, nor crippled, nor otherwise incapacitated. I am afraid, to satisfy the conventions, you will either have to marry me, or come as a housekeeper. For the sake of the conventions, you understand.”

Phil laughed again. “Well, I won’t come as housekeeper,” she declared. “I loathe housekeeping. That’s out.”

Mr. Tolliver cleared his throat in a manner curiously suggestive of Benny. “Well—do you think—you’ll come?”

“Yes, I think I will.”

He looked at her rather anxiously. “I wonder if we should take the matter up with Ginger? She considers herself the head of the house.”

“I think it is a grand idea.”

They went up the circular staircase together, slowly, hand in hand, and stood beside her bed. She looked up at them with wide and wondering eyes.

“Ginger, my dear, Miss Phil thinks she would like to come and live with us. It is so dull at Doorndee.”

“It must be,” commented Ginger dryly.

“And of course we are going to be lonely all by ourselves with no Inmates.”

Ginger’s sigh was chiefly for the Dearest of all the Inmates.

“I told her, that to propitiate the propieties, she must either marry me or come as housekeeper.”

Ginger laughed.

“Pardon my lapse into the vernacular,” Ginger interrupted abruptly, “but are you two kidding me?”

“No, indeed,” Phil broke in cheerfully. “We just came to ask your blessing, or what have you?”

Ginger lowered her lids, pursed her lips reflectively. Presently she smiled. “Well, on the whole, it is a blessing—and the more I think of it, the better I like it. I’ve got just heaps to do this winter, and it takes a lot of my time watching Father. You can do it from this on, and I’ll get things done.”

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 text is from the 1929 Grosset & Dunlap 1st edition and the cover is from the 1929 Bobbs Merrill 1st edition.

[The end of *Ginger and Speed*, by Ethel Hueston.]