"JUST PLAIN BILL"

JUST PLAIN BILL

His Story

THE TRUTH ABOUT
A MAN MILLIONS LOVE

PHILADELPHIA
DAVID McKAY COMPANY
WASHINGTON SQUARE

Printed in the United States of America

JUST PLAIN BILL
HIS STORY

JUST PLAIN BILL (SEATED) WITH DAVID, NANCY AND KERRY STANDING IN THE BACKGROUND

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Chapter I

When You and I Were Young

This happened a long time ago.

In those days, they still paid actors a dollar a day to ride on the elevated trains, in Chicago and New York, so people would not be afraid to risk themselves in the cars that hurtled along at such terrifying speed, high above the streets.

In those days, the Columbian Exposition was being talked about and wondered about, and people lived a strange, slow life.

In those days, there were people who said some day buggies would go through the streets with no horses pulling them; some day, maybe, men would fly like birds; but sensible people said that was madness, and refused to worry about it at all.

In those days, a war was ending, and the boys were coming home—from Cuba, from the Philippines, from fever-smitten Chicamaugua, from all the camps and cantonments.

And on the hottest day of all those days, Nellie Grayson waited for the man she loved —the lover she had never seen or spoken to.

She waited with so many thousand others that she was utterly lost and a little afraid. For in those days, girls like Nellie Grayson went out in public very little, girls with her family background and her education were not seen in great crowds waiting to see parades.

"You're being a fool," her sister told her. "I don't like it. If our dear mother were alive, I'm sure she would forbid you to go."

Then she went a little farther.

"I forbid you to go," she said. "You shan't leave this house. I've told you and told you, that man is a nobody, you have no right to waste your time thinking of him, writing to him." Desperately, loudly, she almost shouted "You shan't go."

And Nellie Grayson smiled quietly, and went, exactly as she had planned to go, with-

out even hearing her sister's angry voice calling after her, as she walked slowly down the tree-shaded street. She kept on smiling, softly, tenderly. There was a great longing in her eyes, and a very great courage.

And yet she had never seen the man she loved. She was afraid, in a deep corner of her heart. Would he be, really, what he had been to her in those brief and strangely simple letters? Would he smile, as he seemed to smile over the odd little things he wrote to her about? Would he be tall, and handsome, and kind, and very gentle? Would he, seeing Nellie Grayson, love her, as she knew now she must love him, always and forever?

It isn't easy to face the man you know is part of your life, and not know if you are anything more to him than the girl back home he wrote to, from the Cuban camps.

Because in those days it was the thing to do, for the girls back home to write letters to the soldiers far away, to cheer them, to give them some small touch of sweetness and laughter just before the battle.

Even Nellie's older sister wrote a letter to

a soldier. Then she read his answer. He couldn't spell, very well; he was, he told her proudly, a farmhand from Missouri, but now he was about to be a corporal, and when he came home he'd like to meet her, they'd go out and ride the roller-coaster, and meanwhile would she send a picture of herself? His picture was enclosed.

Nellie's older sister tore the letter in small pieces and threw the picture in the baseburner. She was very angry.

Nellie's older sister had a habit of being very angry at almost all people, almost all the time. She was very conscious of who she was, and what she was. She was educated, she was in society, she administered their dead mother's estate, which was rather large; "large enough," she always said, "so we can maintain our position."

She told Nellie she must not answer the letter from Private Bill Davidson, whoever he was.

"What does he do for a living?" she demanded.

"I don't know," Nellie told her.

gathered up the torn fragments of her letters, she put them away, very tenderly, in her high school memory book. And she wrote, that night, a very long letter to Private Bill Davidson.

And the months went by, and the war was over. Nobody knew then, nobody quite remembers now, just what the victory meant. But there had been a victory, the days of waiting and worrying were ended, the boys were coming home again.

Somebody wrote a song, along about then. A song called "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." People sang it, whistled it. Little boys riding their bicycles shouted the words as they passed the windows of the house where Nellie Grayson waited so patiently for the postman to bring a letter that would say "I'm coming back. I'm coming to see you."

It was unbelievable good fortune, that Private Bill Davidson's regiment should be included in those assigned to parade, before being mustered out of service, through the very city in which Nellie Grayson lived.

not want to cause any scenes, if she could help it.

Then, one day, she came back from a walk to find her older sister in her room. There was a pile of torn paper on the desk in front of her sister. That was what was left of her letters from Private Bill Davidson.

She never knew quite what she said, in those few hectic, furious moments. She remembered, afterward, that her sister, who had always told her what to do—and been obeyed, unquestioningly—seemed almost afraid of her, now. She must have been something like a small and very angry kitten, in her fury. But she said, and she meant it, "From this day on, don't ever touch anything that belongs to me; don't ever dare read my letters; I'll write to him as often as I want to, as much as I want to . . . and you can't stop me."

After the door slammed behind her sister, Nellie Grayson cried. She hated hurting people, she always hated herself for being angry at people. She was sorry for what she must have said. And yet, after a while, she dried her eyes, and then, very carefully, she

then of course you can't expect the photographer to do miracles, can you?"

She wrote that kind of a letter, and Private Bill Davidson, hunkered in the mud at the foot of San Juan hill, read it many times. Even with bullets singing overhead, even with his heart pounding a little as he waited, like all the others, for the order to go forward, Private Bill Davidson closed his eyes and saw a lovely girl, sweet, quiet, very young, and wondered . . . as so many other men in battle have wondered, before and since . . . "Will I ever see her? Am I going home from this?" And said, half out loud, "Please, God, if it's according to your plan, I'd like to live and go home. Please."

Then there was battle. Then there were long months of waiting. Then there were more letters.

At first, Nellie Grayson thought to keep her older sister from knowing about the letters to Private Bill Davidson. Not that she feared her sister. But she was gentle, she hated quarreling, she felt sorry for her sister, who was always so angry about something. She did

"Has he any money?"

"I don't know." Nellie's face said "I don't even care. I don't care who he is or what he is."

"What does he say about himself in his letter?"

"Nothing much."

"Then why are you so happy?"

"I don't know."

"Oh," said her sister, angrily, "there's no use talking to you. Sometimes, Nellie Grayson, I don't understand you at all."

"Sometimes," said Nellie, very quietly, "I don't quite understand myself." Then she went away to her room, to read Private Bill Davidson's letter again, and look at his picture, and wonder about him so much that before she knew it her answer to his letter was many pages long. She told him everything about herself, and there seemed to be so little to tell.

"I'm going to be twenty-one in just about a month. I have brown hair and I think my eyes are sort of brown, too. I'm sending you a picture of me. It isn't a very good picture but

She was so happy about that news that she tried to tell her older sister about it. She hoped, somehow, her sister's frosty anger might have waned by now. And yet she knew her sister better than that. A sister who had married, left her husband within a year because he was a business failure, never gone back to him, not even been sorry when he died ("He drank," said Mrs. Palmer, Nellie's older sister, calmly. "He was a ne'er-do-well. I don't care to talk about him at all.") . . . a sister like that would not easily forget her anger about anything. Nor had.

"You will not see that man," she said.

"But of course I will."

"I stand in our dear dead mother's place. I have a duty to perform. Angus Rockford wants to marry you. He's a solid business man; he'll be very wealthy some day."

"Angus Rockford!" Nellie Grayson shuddered her distaste. An old man, an ugly man, a man whose whole life was "How much profit will I make on the deal? What's the percentage?" "Angus Rockford," she said again, "is a horrible person."

Instantly, her sister was furious. And Nellie went hurriedly to her room and shut the door against another outburst. Perhaps her sister truly loved her, truly sought to guide her in the right direction. Perhaps . . . more probably . . . Mrs. Palmer was born to give orders, had so much arrogance in her heart that she could not comprehend any failure to do as she thought best.

But Nellie Grayson knew, by now, that she loved a man who had written her many letters, who had sent her a second photograph, taken the day he got his sergeant's chevrons; who might be anything in the world but what his letters made him seem to be.

So for many days two sisters lived in a quiet and spacious home and hardly spoke. Nellie Grayson knew Mrs. Palmer talked to their neighbors, said to them wearily, "I have a great cross to bear. My poor sister is so young, so foolish . . ." She didn't even care. She waited for her man to come home, and she was afraid in her heart that he might not find her pretty.

She had very thick hair, very long. She

tried a dozen different ways of winding the long braids around her small head. She thought her face was really too thin, her nose was such a small and unimpressive nose, her chin was really not nice at all. She worried. Yet on her dressing table was the small, smudged tintype of a man in badly-fitted uniform, a man no one in all the world would call handsome or distinguished . . . an ordinary man, named Bill Davidson.

Women have strange second sight, in finding beauty and grace in the men they love. Nellie Grayson knew Bill Davidson was fine and grand. Not from what he said about himself; he said almost nothing; he wrote at length about other better men, braver men; he said nothing at all about his plans for the future. He had never said "I love you"; he had never asked her "Wait for me"; he seemed strangely shy and very apologetic, if anything in his letters came even close to saying "You mean so much to me." And yet she knew. Somehow, women always know. And so she was happy, and yet she was afraid.

And then, one day, she put on the new white

dress she had made for just this day. She looked at herself in the mirror, a little sadly. She felt that her hands were trembling. There could be no more wondering, now. Today, she would see Private Bill Davidson, they would talk, she would know if her small timid dreams were ever to come true.

Mrs. Palmer knew nothing about that. She only knew her sister was about to go downtown, to stand along a curb in the midst of vulgar throngs, to watch a parade of soldiers march by, to meet a common soldier named Bill Davidson.

"You can't go," she said. "You shan't go."

It was the most startling surprise of her life, to find that Nellie barely heard her, and was not at all impressed.

She watched from the window. Her face was not pretty at all; she had never been pretty; she had always envied Nellie's charm; she was furious now. In that moment, a thing formed in her heart that would go on for many years . . . hatred, hatred of a man she had never seen; grim, deadly hatred of Bill David-

son, who had dared to take her sister away from her.

"But she'll realize the truth when she sees him," Mrs. Palmer said to console herself. "I've trained her too well. She can't be fool enough not to see how common and ordinary and worthless he is."

She might not have been quite so sure, if she had been there in the crowd to watch her sister.

There had never been a crowd like it before. As far as anyone could see, through the misty waves of heat that danced across the wood-block paving down the street, people waited for the parade to begin. They had been waiting, most of them, all morning. It was past noon, now, and they were hungry, hot, tired, irritable. But they kept on waiting.

The hottest day of the year. There was grim humor, now, in the song people kept humming or whistling or even singing, in snatches. "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." (Remember when the song was new? So many years ago, so long ago that people have almost forgotten, in these harsh new

days, that once there was a war with Spain, and the boys came home singing that song. This happened a long time ago.)

Nellie Grayson heard herself humming the tune, and was embarrassed, for a moment. Then she smiled at a large woman who stood next to her, because the woman was humming, too.

"I got a son coming home with the soldiers," the woman volunteered. "He'll be marching by pretty soon now. He's my only son."

Nellie Grayson wondered. Could this be . . .?

"What . . . what is your son's name?" she managed, finally, wondering, fearful, and yet hoping.

"Sam," the woman answered. "I call him Sammy. Sammy Fullerton. He's a real good boy."

"Oh," said Nellie. "I . . . I'm sure he must be." Then, proudly, "I'm waiting to meet . . . Private Bill Davidson."

"Where's he from?"

Nellie realized suddenly she had no idea where Bill Davidson was from. She had

never asked him. It hadn't seemed important.

"I . . . I don't know," she confessed. "That is . . ."

The large woman smiled knowingly.

"You been writing letters to him, eh?"

In a very small voice, Nellie answered "Yes."

"Well, I don't know. I do say, though, some girls is due to be awful disappointed when they see what they been writing to. A man can make himself sound a whole lot better, in a letter, than he is. I've had experience."

"Oh," said Nellie.

"Still, he might be all right. You can't ever tell."

This time, she didn't answer. This time, she simply stared down the street, wondering, hoping.

And somehow she seemed to be alone in that crowd. She seemed to be different from the people crowded hotly all around her. She seemed cool, even now, after all the hours of waiting in a pushing, shoving, angry throng. Somehow, she looked so young and lovely that

people stared at her, not meaning to, wondering how even such a pretty young girl in such a nice dress could smile and be happy, on a day like this.

And then they heard the bands. Far, faint, the brassy music leaped against the brassy sky. "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." Horns blaring, drums rolling, young men stepping out in line.

"Here comes the parade!"

The wild yell spread like wildfire, up along the street. The tired people forgot their weariness, crowded forward past the curb. The policemen with their funny helmets pushed awry fought, struggled, pleaded, somehow kept a straggling line, a narrow lane through which the boys could march.

And now the sun glinted on the first horns of the first band, far away. The music leaped and laughed, and people echoed it, and other girls were waiting, eager, hopeful . . . Nellie saw that, now. Strangely, in this moment at which she had been so sure nothing would matter but one face seen in these rows of faces, Nellie found she could think slowly, as if she

were looking down on all this; she could think of her sister, of all her sister had said. She was not trembling now. Somehow, she was sure.

The bands came on. And back behind the bands, the flags, that somehow found a breeze to spread them even in this vacuum of heat. And back behind the flags, heads up, heels clicking, arms all swinging sharply, evenly, the troops were marching. People started, far down the street, a ragged cheer that grew, that roared against the buildings. People shouted greetings. People tried to run out past the guard-lines. Mothers called out to their sons. (A mother wept, in silence. She had seen her son march away, shoulder to shoulder with his friend. Now his friend came home alone. Her son would never come home. Yet, somehow, she found the strength to hold her head up, to set her shoulders square, to stare at the flags with something rather wonderful in her tear-stained eyes.)

Nellie Grayson was not tall, or very strong The others got in front of her, they pushed her back. She could not fight as they were fight-

ing for a vantage point; in her gentle life, she had not learned how to push and shove and fight. Perhaps, she thought with sudden terror, Private Bill Davidson would march by and she would not even see him. Perhaps . . . her heart stopped . . . perhaps she would not know him, when she saw him. He would march by, he would be gone, he might not even try to find her after the parade was over.

"But he knows the address," she told herself. "He said he'd surely come to the house. He will come. Oh, he will!"

The bands were going by. The music blared. Her ears were deafened, her eyes were blinded by the glare of sun on shining brass. She saw a little space between two men, moved up, was shoved back, felt the hot tears rising. Then a strong hand took her arm, a strong hand shoved two men aside. The large woman who had talked of men who write letters shouldered through the crowd to make room for Nellie Grayson on the curb.

"You better watch hard for him," she said, smiling. "They're marching awful fast.

What's he like? Tall, short? Fat, thin? What kind of hair? *Red*, maybe. It's easier to tell a red-haired man in that crowd."

"I don't know what color hair he has," Nellie said. "I'm not even sure how tall he is. But . . . but I'll know him. I'll know him when I see him. I'm sure of that."

Then she remembered.

"Thank you. Thank you so much for helping me."

"I was young myself once," the large woman said.

She turned to stare eagerly into the marching rows of men. And Nellie looked, watched, was almost sure, was disappointed. Her hands were trembling again. Maybe he had not come, after all. Maybe he had thought "If I go there, I must meet her." Maybe, back home, wherever his home might be, some other girl, prettier, nicer, younger, waited for Bill Davidson. The thought was like ice in her heart. She tried to shake her head, she tried to tell herself "You know that isn't true. You're acting like a silly schoolgirl, imagining things. You ought to be grown up, by now.

You're twenty-one years old. Be sensible." But it isn't easy to be sensible, when you're too much in love with someone who may not be at all in love with you.

The men kept on marching by. She said to herself she had never known there could be that many young men in an army. It seemed she must have watched thousands, she felt her eyes burning from the strain of looking, looking hurriedly along long rows of men that stretched from curb to curb, that went by so fast there wasn't time to see each face in each row . . . and yet she must. One of those faces, one of those men, would be the only one in the world who mattered.

Suddenly, she fumbled into her small handbag and got out the second picture Bill Davidson had sent her. It was foggy, dim, a cheap picture badly made. It was hard to tell, now, with the hot sun glaring, with her eyes so very tired, just what Bill Davidson would look like.

The large woman beside her shouted.

"Sammy! Sammy! Son! Here's Mama! Here!"

Out in the midst of a hundred figures exactly alike, one figure suddenly, quickly raised a hand, let it drop again.

"He saw me. That's my boy. He saw me. Now I got to get home quick. I got to have supper ready when he comes home. He likes fried chicken with gravy and biscuits. I got to fix it just right. Goodbye!" The large woman said all the words together so fast Nellie barely understood her. A kindly big hand patted Nellie on the arm. Like a juggernaut, the large woman plowed her way back through the crowd. And the parade of marching men went on, and now Nellie felt so terribly alone that almost, for a minute, she was ready to give up, to go home.

Mrs. Palmer would be waiting. She would sniff scornfully. She might say something like "Well, I'm glad to see you finally came to your senses." She would talk, talk, talk.

"No," Nellie said out loud. "No!"

She said it so loudly that the man beside her, watching for his young son to march by with the soldiers, was startled, almost jumped away from her.

"I didn't say anything, miss," he protested.

She didn't even hear him. For now some strange thing was happening to her heart. It was beating faster; this rhythm was something new, different; she was eager, without knowing why; she was glad, all at once, and sure, without at all knowing what had changed.

For she saw faces, faces of many men. Not one single face, not one that might be recognized. And yet suddenly she saw the one face she had come to see.

She would never know quite how it happened. She would never be able to tell Bill Davidson how it was that, having never seen him before, she could look along a row of fifty men and at the far end see him and know him surely, forever. She always said that she must have shouted his name, very loudly. But nobody heard her. Bill Davidson heard nothing at all. He was watching, wondering, praying, too. He had been more afraid than he had ever been at San Juan hill. He had thought for days, for nights, "I'd better not even try to say hello to her. I'd better go on back to Hartville and try to forget." But he

had known he would never forget. He saw her now, he knew her now. Through that mob, through all that shouting and all the blaring of the bands, something was said between them. Not in words; no words could be heard. Not even, surely, with their eyes. Only that what wise people say cannot happen, never does happen, did happen at that moment. They were separated by everything in the world; yet they met, they were together.

Somebody wrote a poem about it. "Two shall be born the whole wide world apart, to meet and kiss." Some people still believe it: That there is a destiny that says to one boy, one girl, "You two belong together. You must meet." Some people say it is so arranged that if you are born ten thousand miles apart, still you shall surely meet and kiss, if that is the Great Plan. And other people say it is all accident. This man, this woman, meet and love and marry and live happily and see their children grow up and are content. Yet, these people say, if this man had met some other woman, if this woman had met some other

man, if these two out of all the millions in this world had never met, their happiness would have been the same.

I do not know who is right. I do not think anyone knows. I do know that Nellie Grayson and Private Bill Davidson had no right in the world to meet and smile and kiss and love. I know that still it happened, and for that freak of fortune—if it was—I am very glad.

But the lines marched by. And Nellie Grayson stood there, knowing she had seen the man she longed to see—and was not disappointed. He was not very tall, he was not impressive, he was in no way handsome. She had seen him once, from perhaps eighty feet away, dimly, briefly. But she could go home, now, wait for him to come to see her, and if her sister asked questions, she would know how to answer.

The bands still blared, the people watched more soldiers marching by, but Nellie Grayson found her way back through the crowd, somehow. She walked home very slowly. Now she realized how tired she was. Now she

saw, suddenly, that the afternoon was waning. Soon the dark would come down. There would be a moon tonight. The shadows would be deep, along the tree-lined street. There would be a cool breeze, maybe. She would put on her dotted Swiss dress, she would sit very quietly on the wide front porch. Maybe . . . maybe . . .

She couldn't plan beyond that. It would be wrong to say to a man "I love you." It would be wrong even to let the man know. But if he should say the words, if he should say "I wish you would marry me," what would she answer, then? She said to herself "I don't know." Then she said "But I do know. I know exactly. If I could say the words." Then, after a long time, she said to herself "I wonder why? I wonder what it is? I'm in love with a man I never talked to, I've only seen him once in my life. Is that right? Do other girls fall in love so easily? Maybe my sister is right. Maybe I am foolish." Then she shook her head. "No," she said very softly. "I'm not foolish. I'm right. Even if he never knows, even if he never speaks."

And she went into a quiet and apparently empty house. She thought of calling her sister, then she decided not to, and went on to her room. She sat down at the window, looking out. There were roses in the narrow garden under her window. They were very sweet.

* * * * * * *

"The name," said Bill, "is Davidson. From Hartville. Volunteered. Now I'm here to get un-volunteered. If you don't mind."

The army colonel grinned.

"I see you got a medal."

"Well . . ." Bill hesitated, blushed. "A fellow came around giving 'em away, and he had too many on hand, so I kind of wound up with the left-over."

"Ah. I see." The colonel signed a paper. "Honorable discharge. And good luck to you, Davidson."

"Thank you, colonel. Same to you. Oh . . . You won't need it, will you? I mean being as you're staying in the army and there ain't any war coming on." Bill stammered. "Gosh. Sounds kind of like I was down on

the army. I didn't mean that, though, colonel."

The colonel grinned again.

"Glad to get out, aren't you, Davidson?"

"Yes, sir."

"Got a job to go to, now Uncle Sam's not paying you? Or have you got to go looking for one?"

"I've got a trade. I figure long as a man's got a trade he can do and do pretty good; he'll never have to worry too much over how to earn his groceries."

"Sounds reasonable. Heading home to Hartville?"

"I reckon so, colonel. Well, after while, anyhow."

The colonel nodded.

"What's her name?" he asked, being a very wise old colonel who had seen a lot of men leave the army, that day.

"Nellie. I mean . . . Gosh. I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I mean I don't know . . . well, I know how I feel. But I don't know how she feels.

And you kind of have to ask the lady about it, before you know where you stand. Leastways, that's what I figure. I'm not much acquainted with the ladies. But . . ." he blushed . . . "she's awful pretty. Here, sir."

He extended a thumb-marked, treasured photograph. The colonel took it, being very careful with it. He studied the face, he nodded.

"Mighty nice girl. You can tell it in her eyes."

"Yes, sir, colonel. You bet, colonel."

The colonel stood up and extended his hand.

"Good luck, Davidson. You've been a good soldier. If I know anything, you'll be a good citizen. And a good husband."

"Gosh," said Bill. There didn't seem to be anything else to say. He shook hands, hard. Then he picked up his suitcase and headed for the nearest barber shop.

He waited a long time for his turn in the chair. He kept looking at his watch. Then

he'd look at the clock. Then he'd get up and walk back and forth, nervously. He found himself watching the head barber, at the first chair, snipping out a haircut for another ex-soldier like himself. He watched the procedure for several minutes. Then the customer was through.

"Next," said the head barber.

"No, thanks," said Bill. And to himself "If I couldn't cut a better head of hair than that, I'd take up ditch-digging."

Grimly, while the time sped by, he waited for the next barber. An older barber, slower, more methodical. But Bill nodded his head approvingly, while he watched this barber work.

"You got a nice touch there, mister," he said as his turn came to get into the man's chair.

The barber looked surprised.

"You talk like you knew the difference."

"Well . . ." embarrassedly. "I done a bit of barbering myself, these last few years. That is, 'til I got in the war."

Meeting a fellow craftsman, the old barber was on his mettle. "New York style or just ordinary?" he asked.

"However folks around here wears their haircuts, that's the way I'd like to have mine," said Bill.

"Figuring to settle down and live here?"

"Oh, no. I got to get back to Hartville."

"Never heard of that town."

"I reckon hardly anybody has. It ain't such a much of a town, by and large. Kind of a wide place in the road where the trains go by as quick as they can. But I like it. It's home."

The barber nodded understandingly.

"Plenty barbering jobs for good men here in the city, though," he offered. "Fact is, we might be able to use a top man in this shop. That is . . ."

"Thank you, mister. But I can't make any plans 'til I know more than I know now. You see . . ."

Even the barber seemed to know.

"Always depends on where the lady wants

to live, don't it, partner? Well, congratulations," the old man said.

Bill gulped.

"Does it show on me that much?"

"Who'd know better than a barber when a fellow's getting all slicked up because he's on his way to meet his girl?"

"Well," said Bill, "I reckon there's something in that, come to think of it. Anyhow . . . Ah, mister. If you could hurry just a bit."

The barber hurried. He put on too much perfume, even Bill knew that. He slicked Bill's hair down a little too smoothly. But when he offered to trim up Bill's eyebrows a little, Private Bill Davidson balked.

"I ain't studying to be a actor," he explained. "I'm just a ordinary fellow that's already found out if he spent a million dollars fixing up his face he'd still have nothing but a face. So thank you kindly, and what's the damage? Two dollars? Gosh!" He paid it from a thin small roll of bills. "You kind of get it while the getting's good, here in the big

city, don't you, mister? Gosh, back in Hartville, if I charged two dollars for a shave and haircut, no telling what'd happen to me."

The old barber grinned. In a moment, so did Bill.

"Nice meeting you. If you ever get to Hartville, be sure to drop in. Mine's the barber shop on Main street. Fact, it's the only barber shop in town and Main street's just about the only street. So long, friend."

"So long," said the old barber. "I hope the lady says yes."

"But I ain't . . . I ain't even sure I'm gonna ask her, yet," Bill stammered. "You know, we ain't never met. Just letters, that's all. And I seen her today watching us parade. So I don't know."

He didn't know, at all. He found out, suddenly, he didn't even know if he had the courage to go and find out.

He ambled aimlessly along the street, still lugging his big cardboard suitcase, staring a little at the sights around him. Bill Davidson was country born and country bred; the city was a weird phenomenon to him. He would

be glad to get back home to Hartville, that he knew already. To live here? To settle down to work in a shop like that one back there? To give up his deal with old Jeb Shanks, back home, to buy that little one-story place across from the Widow Perry's store, and make it into a barber shop? It terrified him.

A simple man makes simple plans, and wants to follow them to the end. Bill Davidson was a simple man. He knew it. He had little education, if books are all there is to education. He knew he said "ain't"; he had borrowed a grammar, on the way home on the transport, and studied it sincerely; still his conversation would not be perfect. If Nellie should stare, the first time his tongue slipped, his mind forgot, and he said "ain't"! If she should just look at him and then be kind, too kind, pitying him! If he should come to her door and be told by her sister "You aren't wanted here!"

Bill knew more than Nellie ever realized she had told about her sister, Mrs. Palmer. He had conjured from brief mentions of her, in Nellie's letter, the specter of some grim

dragon, jealously determined not to let Nellie be happy, ever in her life. He wanted no trouble, he would be firmly polite to Mrs. Palmer, but would she be polite to him?

He didn't know. His feet dragged. For so long, now, he had marched in heavy boots, had worn a uniform. The store suit, bought by mail order for the homecoming, fitted badly. The new shoes creaked. They hurt his toes. His collar was too high, too stiff; it sawed against his neck. His hands seemed enormous, thrust out from shiny white cuffs. There was a spot of something on his wide blue tie, he saw when he looked down. He scrubbed at the spot anxiously. It would not disappear. He sighed and squared his shoulders and marched on. Slowly, very slowly. This was worse than walking slowly up San Juan hill with the Spaniards banging away pointblank from back of the stockades. This was the longest walk Bill Davidson had ever taken in his life.

Dimly, he found himself staring at street numbers. Not much farther, now. Then he realized that he was on a wide and obviously

wealthy street. Big houses, and on the front lawns well-dressed people, who stared at him a little, strangers being so rare in this elegant sector. He walked a little faster. Hearing someone laugh as he passed, he wondered "Is that about me?" He knew it might be. Country boy, come to the big city. "But I got to see her," Bill whispered to himself. "I got to see her."

A new thought burned in his mind. "What'll I say? What'll I do?" He considered. Be very brisk about it, maybe. Walk right up to the front door bold as brass, ring the bell . . . if they've got a bell . . . oh, well, if they haven't, knock, but don't knock too loud. Then when you see her, just say "Hello. I'm Bill Davidson from Hartville. You're Nellie."

"I can't do it," Bill said. "Gosh! I'm scared."

But maybe she'd speak first. Maybe if she was out on the front porch, like other people he saw along this street, she'd see him coming, recognize him, come to meet him, say the first words. That would make it so much easier.

He could always talk. A barber has to know how to talk, even when he doesn't feel much like talking.

Let's see, now. Should you bow? Or just raise your hat? Should you offer to shake hands? Make a fellow feel mighty silly if he stuck his hand out and the lady didn't expect to shake hands so she'd not do it for a second and there you'd be with your hand out like a pump-handle. Gosh!

He stopped and set down the suitcase and mopped his forehead hard with a huge white handkerchief, still new, still stiff and shiny with starch. He tried to get it back in his breast pocket the way the salesman had fixed it, with just the points sticking out. Very smart, the salesman said.

He gave up, stuffed the handkerchief down in his pocket, grimly forced himself to march on. Ahead was a particularly big house, set farther back from the sidewalk than the others, with wide smooth lawns around it and a rose garden along one side of the house.

Somehow, he knew. Like Nellie Grayson staring out through a horde of people to see

just one man she knew would surely be there, Bill Davidson knew now he had come to the house where Nellie Grayson lived.

He stopped. He started to set the suitcase down. He had not realized until now that it would look pretty funny, a man walking up to a strange house carrying a suitcase. She'd know he probably didn't live in the city. She might think he'd taken it for granted he was going to be invited to stay and visit, so he'd brought his suitcase right along with him. Gosh!

He stared around. Nobody in sight, at least no one that he could see. He set the suitcase down against the picket fence, shoved it into a shadow, left it there. "I'll probably be back after you real sudden," he said to the suitcase.

He marched on, doggedly, like a soldier marching up San Juan hill. Only now there wasn't any noise to make a man feel better. There wasn't any noise at all, but the brief intermittent chirp of crickets, the sudden chatter of a tree toad somewhere in the yard.

The house was very big. White, with wide

windows and a big porch around two sides. People have to have money, to live in a house as big as that. And somehow, until now, it had never occurred to Bill Davidson that Nellie Grayson might be rich. He knew from her letters that she was educated, better educated by far than he could ever hope to be. He knew that much, but the thought of what that might stand for had never come to him before.

"I'll say hello, thank you for writing letters to me, goodbye, ma'am, and I'll go quick. That's what I'll do. That's the only right thing to do," Bill told himself, aloud.

And then he stopped. He could not have spoken another word, he could not have walked another step.

He faced Nellie, and he knew her, and the faint moonlight was silver on her hair, and she was the loveliest thing he had ever seen in all his life.

She had seen him coming. She had known him. She had come down from the porch, down the flagstone walk, down to the gate to

meet him. She had stood there, watching, listening.

Back in the house and watching darkly from a darkened window was her sister. She knew that. It didn't matter.

They stood silent. For this moment, there was nothing in the world that needed to be said.

She was almost as tall as Bill. She carried herself proudly, she had a slender throat, very white in the moonlight; her hair was a soft cloud around her small head; she had forgotten, but she had a white rose in her hand.

She saw a man most people would never notice. A simple man, ordinary, therefore unimportant to most people. A lean, strong face, a mouth that had never known how to be bitter, a square jaw. Big hands, strong and capable. When he spoke, a low, slow drawl in his voice.

Then finally she said "Hello." Only that.

Bill nodded. "Yes, ma'am," he choked. "Hello."

She chuckled, warmly, softly.

"I hoped you'd come," she said.

"I wanted to, ma'am. I . . . I . . ." Bill couldn't go on. He couldn't even move. He struggled. The collar seemed tighter than ever; he was brutally conscious that the store suit was cheap and tight, that in his pocketbook he had exactly forty-seven dollars, that between himself and this young vision yawned an immeasurable, immutable abyss.

"I . . . wanted to thank you, ma'am," he managed, huskily. The voice didn't sound to him like his own voice, but he knew it was. "I mean for writing me such nice letters. I read 'em all. I . . . I kept 'em all."

"I kept your letters, too," she murmured.

"Did you, ma'am?"

"Have you forgotten? My name's Nellie."

"Ah . . . yes, ma'am. Ah . . . my name's . . . Bill."

It must have been a strange tableau for Mrs. Palmer to watch, just then. She must have wondered more than ever about her sister's infatuation, seeing quite clearly, as she could from where she stood, that Bill David-

son was nondescript, unimportant. She was sure they would not talk very long.

And yet somehow they found out that they could talk, for hours, forever. Neither of them ever remembered who it was who said first, "Let's walk and look at the moon and talk." They simply walked west along the street, and it led slowly into a park, and they sat down on a bench, and they were so seized up by the wonder of the evening and of meeting at last that nothing they said had any relation at all to what was in their hearts.

They were not afraid, not any more. Bill had forgotten how poor he was, how shabby, how far out of place. Nellie had forgotten how she thought he might be going home to another girl; she had forgotten that her sister would be waiting, would wait no matter how long, so that she might say "Well? Did you send him away? Did you do as I told you?"

Nellie Grayson had been given orders. She could be polite to the returning soldier (it would be better, Mrs. Palmer thought with smug appreciation of her own cleverness, not

to insist that Nellie must not even see him) and even kind to him. She was, however, to make it plain to him that he must not think a few letters written out of patriotic duty meant anything now that he had returned to civilian life.

Simple enough to remember. All too easy to forget.

"Tell me about yourself," she urged Bill Davidson.

Abashed, he assured her "There's nothing to tell."

"But I want to know about you. All about you. Where you live. What you do. Who you are, really. I mean not just . . . just Private Bill Davidson. I mean . . . you."

Could he do it? Could he say to her "I'm a barber. I don't even own my own shop . . . yet. I've been working for old Milt Parrish. He died while I was in the army and his shop's been turned into a butcher shop. Now I've got a deal with Jeb Shanks to buy the store on Main street and put in a barber shop. I've got to get the equipment on credit, most of it.

I haven't got but forty-seven dollars in the world, besides my ticket home."? Could he tell her all that?

He did, not realizing it. When he said, "I'm a barber," he waited for her to get up, to leave him. Barbers are decent people, they work hard, they pay their bills. But they don't belong in society. He knew that. He was sure it would end everything.

She stared at him.

"Oh," she said.

Quick and bitter, Bill Davidson said, "It's not much of a job. But then, I'm not such a much of a man."

Her hand went across his mouth, stopping the words.

"I guess I've got to say it," she said. "Since you just won't tell me. I guess I've got to tell you."

He couldn't understand. And then, understanding, he couldn't believe. Yet her eyes were so sure.

He did not know then, he does not know now, he will never know, who said first "I love

you." The words, nothing more. Then a long stillness while they only looked at one another.

People walked past them. A fat policeman walked by, stopped, stared, chuckled, marched on about his business. Small children ran in the park, shouting, playing run-sheep-run. A glistening horse clopped down the street, towing a glistening buggy. Somewhere, very far off, there was music, people were dancing. It was quite late.

"I love you."

It had been in their letters, it had been in their hearts, now the words were spoken. Now they touched hands, and could not have heard the blaring of all the bands in all the world.

And then, after a while, they walked slowly back toward Nellie Grayson's home. They had not said much, after those words. They were too newly come into a strange land to be sure what to say next.

"Wait," Bill said finally, huskily. "I've got to tell you. I'm nobody. I ain't got . . . haven't got any money. I haven't got any education. I don't know nice people. I've

worked all my life, since my mother died. That's ten years ago. I'm just a barber. I can't ask you to marry me."

She smiled at him.

"I'm going to marry you," she said.

With how much breathless courage, with how much utter disregard for all that really matters (to such people as Mrs. Palmer), girls like Nellie Grayson say that, and mean it, to men like Bill Davidson.

And he could only say "No. No. You can't marry me. You belong . . . married to somebody rich, somebody that's your equal. I'm not. I'm just a barber. Bill, the barber. That's all. Maybe that's all I'll ever be. I'm not the kind that makes a lot of money. I guess I don't know how. I never wanted money, much, 'til now. I wish I could have come back rich, important, so I could ask you to marry me. But . . . I can't. I've got to go. I'd better go now, quick. You'd better forget all about me. You will. You will."

"I love you," Nellie said. "And you love me."

A man can try with all his might to do what

his mind tells him is right, but if his heart will not listen, a man is lost.

He could not leave her, now or ever. He knew that. He could not go on saying "It's got to be goodbye." He could only nod, and want more than he had ever wanted before in his life to cry a little, being so proud and yet somehow so sorry for the woman he loved.

"I'm not worth it," he protested. "You'd find that out, so soon. If you married me, you'd have to live in the back rooms behind a little barber shop in a little town."

"I don't care."

"But you've got to care."

"I want to be happy. I've never been happy, all my life. I would be happy, all my life, with you."

Girls are taught that they must not speak the words, they must wait for the man to propose. Nellie had been taught all that, so very carefully. Her sister had said so much. And yet it was all forgotten, now.

He took her home. He stood there at the door, for only a minute. "Tomorrow," he said, "tomorrow you'll feel differently about

it. Maybe . . . the moon . . . and . . . well . . . I don't know much about what's romantic, but maybe . . . tonight . . . Ah, tomorrow you'll know you want me to go away and not come back. You'll tell me that, tomorrow."

Praying that it might be so—praying that it might not be so—he left her. And she went in, to face a waiting, sneering sister. To tell her "It's no use saying anything to me. I'm twenty-one. I'm a woman, grown. And I'm going to marry him."

Her sister must have gone nearly mad, that night. She talked, for hours. She raved. She threatened. She pleaded. She wept. And in all this, she found no weapon to change the quiet sureness with which Nellie went on saying, "I'm going to marry him."

"Who is he? A barber! A barber! You've been brought up to be a lady. Now you say you're going to marry a barber."

"Yes."

"Somebody's servant. Anybody's servant, as long as they pay him. You might as well marry a waiter. Or a butler."

"I'd marry him in spite of anything. I don't care what he does for a living. It doesn't matter. He's honest, he's kind, he's a good man, I love him. That's all there is."

And when, at last, Mrs. Palmer shouted that she'd never permit it, that somehow she'd find a way to send Bill Davidson out of Nellie's life forever, Nellie said only, "Don't. Don't do that. I don't want to hate my own sister." Then she closed the door of her room.

There could be no sleep for Mrs. Palmer, after that. All her life, she had given orders and seen them obeyed. Her own mother had always feared her a little. Her pathetic husband had fled from her—that was the truth—he had been almost glad to die, because he feared her so much. Her sister had been docile, quiet, obedient, always . . . until now.

She prepared herself grimly. In the early morning, she set out to find Bill Davidson. She knew he was staying, for one night, at a cheap hotel in the railroad section. She went there, grim in black clothes and a black, hard scowl. She told a sleepy, yawning clerk he'd

better get Bill Davidson downstairs at once, or she'd go up after him.

She waited, not very long, to see a figure hurry down the stairs. Bill Davidson. Shaved, clean, but cheaply dressed, a man so utterly uninspiring to her eyes that she could not believe, now, that her sister could be quite sane, to see anything at all in this man.

"I'm Nellie's sister," she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Why, ma'am?"

"She's a silly, romantic girl. She's been writing letters to a soldier. She apparently thinks there's something romantic about a soldier."

"There ain't, ma'am. Not when he gets killed."

"Oh!"

She flamed at him. Trading on a romantic girl's romantic and unguided impulse, he had made love to her sister . . .

"Please, ma'am," Bill said mildly, "folks is hearing what you're saying. It ain't neces-

sary, all this, anyhow. Because I already know you're right. I mean about me having no right to ask your sister ever to marry me. I know that, ma'am. I'm already packed to go on home where I belong."

The triumph came almost too easily. She wanted to humble him, humiliate him, see him cringe, so she could more thoroughly despise him. Now he had taken her own weapons out of her hands.

"You want money!" she accused him.

"No, ma'am."

"Oh, yes, you do. You'll probably give her letters to some shyster lawyer and he'll come to me and demand money . . ."

"You better go, now, ma'am."

She had never known she could hate anyone quite as much as she hated Bill Davidson. Because he would not even get angry, at least would not show his anger. Because he was so scrupulously polite to her.

"I'll go when I'm ready. When this is settled."

"It's been settled for quite a spell, ma'am.

I . . . I love your sister. I can even tell it to you. I'll always love her."

She almost howled at him. "Be silent! Don't you say that again! How dare you tell me . . ."

Bill bowed a little. His grave expression had not changed; there was tragedy in his mild eyes.

"If you just go on back home, now, ma'am, she'll never have to know you even came here to see me. And I'm catching the train in a few minutes. I won't ever be back. Nellie don't know where I live. I mean she knows the name of the town, maybe, but not the state. I didn't tell her. She'll forget about me real quick. I know that. It's right she should forget. And . . . Goodbye, ma'am. I reckon I better not even ask you to be good to her. I know you are good to her, according to your lights. Goodbye."

He turned away and left her standing there. Surely she saw in the way he left her nothing of dignity or pride. Surely the clerk, charging double price from one more hick from the

country, one more dumb ex-soldier who wouldn't know the difference, saw no tragedy in the way Bill Davidson's square shoulders had dropped a little, now; in the way he kept his eyes turned away from anyone and everyone.

A suitcase and a banjo. That was all the baggage he had. He had told Nellie a little about the banjo, in his letters.

"I got a funny kind of habit. I like to play tunes on my old banjo. I don't play 'em good, but I play 'em so loud nobody hardly seems to know the difference. I get a lot of pleasure out of that old banjo," he said in one letter that she kept all her life (that her daughter Nancy read, and wept over, many years later).

He waited at the station. The train would come in, in just a few minutes. He would get on the train, he would go west. A day and a night, and then he would drive from Hiawatha, the main line town, down to sleepy, forgotten Hartville. He would talk things over with Jeb Shanks, arrange somehow to pay for the barber shop building out of the barber shop

profits. He would work, he would save his money, he would play the banjo, nights, when work was done. He would be as happy, at least, as a man can expect to be in this world.

It was simple enough. And he was a man. And men do not cry out, if their hearts break. There's a rule against it. Men have to act as if nothing had happened. Men can't cry.

He heard the train coming, heard the whistle. He started along the platform, stopped. If he went back now . . . No. He had given a promise. Not to Mrs. Palmer. He had already almost forgotten her existence. He had made a promise to himself. "I'm a barber," he reminded himself. "A barber. That's all I am. That's probably all I'll ever be. There's nothing else to do but what I'm doing. She'll forget. Maybe she was just being nice to me, anyhow, just because she felt so sorry for me. Anyhow, she'll forget. That's the way it ought to be. That's the right way for things to turn out."

The train was coming in. He saw other ex-soldiers, men he knew, going aboard. He

saw one soldier with his new wife. He had heard all about that girl, through many months in Cuba. Now he saw the soldier married to the fat little, homely little girl he had talked about as if she were the Queen of Beauty in person. He saw the soldier and his bride smiling, laughing. His heart ached. He picked up his suitcase, he clutched his banjo under his arm, and he started out to board the train.

And then the world changed.

He heard a voice he knew he must be imagining. It could not be real. He would not even turn around, because that would be silly, a grown man wide awake but dreaming and believing the dream so much . . .

He knew it was true. He knew it was no dream.

Nellie stood beside him. She carried a tiny suitcase. That was all she had brought with her, away from the home she had left forever.

"I woke this morning and found my sister gone. I knew she must have gone to see you. I telephoned your hotel. The clerk said you

JUST PLAIN BILL WITH HIS BELOVED BANJO

had left to catch a train. I came right away. I'm going with you."

All that breathlessly, the words run together, and meanwhile the bell clanged, the conductor was shouting desperately to two people who had forgotten there was a train anywhere in the world, "All aboard! All aboard!" He came running toward them, where they stood.

"If you're going, get on the train. If you're not, get off the steps! Hey, you! You! Hey-y-y-y!"

Somehow, they heard him. Somehow, they smiled.

"You shouldn't do this," Bill said, desperately.

"I've already done it," she said. "I didn't wait to see my sister. I left a letter for her, though. I told her we're being married, at the first town where there's a minister and we can get a license."

"Please, please," the conductor bellowed. "All aboard! You're holding up the train! All aboard!"

They didn't hear him.

"I'll promise, I'll promise," Bill said now, "that somehow I'll try to fix it so you never regret this, so you're never sorry . . ."

"I'll never be sorry," Nellie Grayson told him. "I love you. We were meant for each other, meant to be together."

The conductor waved his arms in silent rage.

"I love you, Nellie," Bill said. "I'm just a barber. I probably won't never be anything more than a barber, but I love you."

The conductor shouted. "All aboard! For the last time, all aboard! Hey-y! Lady! Hey, you! If you're going . . ."

"We're going," said Bill to the conductor, "we're going a long, long ways. Together."

"Yes. Together," Nellie Grayson said.

They got on the train.

Chapter II

Moonlight and Roses

It seemed to Bill this night must be the very finest night the Lord had ever given to the world.

It seemed to him, too, that he must be the happiest man in the world on this amazing night; he thought, once in a while, no man has a right to be as happy as he was and couldn't help being; he worried about it, just a little, because it didn't seem quite right.

For he could see other people, as he walked along the streets in Hartville, who were not so happy. That was Bill's joy, and his sorrow: He always seemed to know all there was to know about the sorrows and troubles of every man and woman and child. They came to him to tell him, they came for advice —which they seldom followed; for consolation —which they did not always deserve; for small loans—which they hardly ever repaid.

They called Bill "neighbor," and it seemed to him always that to be called "neighbor" by someone who means it is almost as fine a tribute as a man can hope to hear.

But he pitied so many people. He even pitied Elmer Eeps, a little. Which would have surprised Elmer greatly, and pained him even more. For, by his own tests, Elmer Eeps was at this moment the most successful man in Hartville.

He came swinging up Main street from Ned Sable's pool-room, humming to himself, and wishing he'd remembered to bring his mouth organ along with him from the barber shop, because now would be a time when a really handsome tune would do a man a lot of good.

Bill waited, watching Elmer, grinning as he thought about this man he called his helper in the barber shop. (No one ever understood how Bill could ever have picked Elmer Eeps, out of all the available men in Hartville, to be his helper in anything that asked for solid daily work. After a while, of course, every-

body sort of got used to seeing Elmer hanging around Bill's shop, and finally people began to realize Bill hadn't really hired Elmer because he would—or wouldn't—work, but because Elmer played the mouth organ while Bill played the banjo, through the long evenings, and Bill liked the music; and then, too, whatever else Elmer Eeps might be, he was the best listener a man ever knew, and Bill liked to talk . . . so there, the people said, you are, and at that a man has a right to figure out how he wants to run his business and who he wants to have around when he's working.)

Bill grinned, noticing how Elmer strutted. Because, of course, Bill had already heard all about Elmer's singular triumph over the brand-new traveling man just hitting Hartville for his first visit.

Everything came to Bill. People who didn't want or wouldn't spend the money for or simply didn't need a shave or a haircut or a massage would step into the barber shop, just the same, and when the door jingled, even if Bill was back in his house at the back, he'd

come quickly and say "Hello" and offer a chair. And then he told the latest news.

It was even strange about the kind of news people came to tell Bill. Not gossip. Bill was sort of funny about a good bit of gossip, people often said. He'd sort of freeze up and get far-off and distant and quit listening and wander over to the shelf behind the barber chair and start stropping his razor, if you got started telling him the latest scandal. Not that he'd say to stop talking; he wouldn't do that, being too polite by nature. But he'd sort of start humming to himself, and all at once you'd realize he wasn't hearing anything you were saying, and you'd get a kind of lost feeling like you'd just as well quit talking and go on home.

But news about Elmer was never scandal. News about that lusty gentleman was likely to be laughable, almost always.

As today. The new traveling man announced to the crowd in the pool room that he'd like to find one man, somewhere on his travels, who could even give him some decent competition at a friendly game of billiards.

"Ah . . . how friendly?" Elmer asked, quietly, still tipped back in the arm-chair against the wall.

The traveling man explained that his idea of a really friendly game would have to be one with a little money in it for the winner.

"Oh," said Elmer. And he pondered, ponderously, while Marcy Tuttle and Abner Pettifer and Monty Barton and some of the other boys watched and grinned, anticipating what must surely happen soon.

"So finally Elmer kind of tipped his chair down, slow and easy, 'til it finally hit the floor, and then he kind of got himself up out of the chair like he wasn't sure if he was awake or still asleep," said Marvin Blivens, father of five-year-old Percy Blivens, telling the story to Bill. "And then he kind of edged up to the billiard table, timid like, and he picked up a cue like he didn't just exactly know what kind of a machine it might be, and he kind of grinned, and he finally said as much as how he wouldn't mind risking maybe a dime on one little game."

An old trick of Elmer's, as Bill well knew.

An old trick for many a sleepy-looking hanger-on in many a pool room in many a little town like Hartville. For the traveling man, contemptuous of this clumsy hick, insisted a dime was not enough. A dollar, he said grandly, would be his idea of a neat small wager on a single game.

In Elmer's pocket was one shabby dollar bill. He managed, however, to part with this treasure long enough to win it back. And then he won another dollar, and another one, and while the traveling man was fuming, wondering at last if possibly he had been taken in, Elmer went on winning money, and the news of his victory spread quickly over town.

(There isn't much real news to get excited about, in little towns like Hartville. And everybody does his duty by his neighbor, handing on whatever news there is. It took no more than twenty minutes for the story to reach Bill, complete.)

"And so he's happy, too," said Bill to himself, gazing at Elmer with more fondness than

he would ever let Elmer suspect he felt. "Well, I guess we've all got different ways of figuring what's right to make us happy, and what's right to make us sad. Well!"

He coughed, quietly, and Elmer, startled, stopped his humming and yipped loudly, "Bill!" As if he hadn't seen Bill for years; as if he had forgotten—as he hadn't—that three hours before Bill said "Get back in ten minutes and you'd better wash the front window this afternoon."

"I been awful busy, Bill," he stuttered, quickly.

"So I heard," said Bill.

"You know how it is, Bill."

"I know how it is."

"A fellah . . ." Elmer dug his round-toed yellow shoe deep in the dust. "A fellah . . . kind of gets himself mixed up in social duties."

"That's right, Elmer."

"Ah . . . uh . . . You got any ideas about supper, Bill?"

Bill grinned, and started walking along toward the barber shop, as he answered with

apparent irrelevance, "There's a cherry pie for supper. Still warm, too. With juice just oozing out."

"Gosh!" Elmer closed his eyes in silent ecstasy. "A kind of big pie, maybe, Bill? I mean it might be big enough?"

"For seconds?" Bill was chuckling. "I'd say there'd be enough for thirds, if a fellah got there in plenty of time."

"Gosh!"

Elmer considered the world. Eight dollars in his pocket, neatly won, with much applause from all the men who sat around and watched his victory. The circus due in town tomorrow. And cherry pie for supper. A man could hardly ask for more than that.

And then he blinked, and frowned, and almost ducked, as if in fear of something, anything, thrown at his head.

A woman barred his onward path. A woman who stood with hands on hips, with sharp chin jutting, with her spectacles almost ashine with righteous wrath.

"You! Elmer Eeps!" she remarked, in a

voice that could have been heard as far as the railroad tracks. "You!"

"Yes'm," Elmer managed mildly. "Me. Yes'm. Well, it's been right nice to see you. Uh . . . Goodbye."

She didn't move. Bill grinned again, and watched a tableau he had seen many times before. Elmer edged a little backward, and the Widow Perry edged a little closer. (Meet the Widow Perry. Two years a widow, for five years Hartville's most efficient dispenser of news, and also sole proprietor of Main street's smartest . . . in fact, only . . . millinery and notion shop. She fears nobody living; she has scant admiration in her heart for anyone at all; she is fond of Bill, and therefore she makes his life miserable with constant warnings against his habit of being friendly, neighborly, to anyone at all. For Elmer, she has a strangely different feeling. Just what that feeling is, no one can quite decide. But Elmer fears her more than he fears work, and that is truly very terrible terror.)

"You was to come over and carry out the boxes and nail up the new sign. Wasn't you?" she demands of Elmer.

He can't remember. At least, he doesn't want to let himself remember. He backs up a little farther, and she moves right at him.

"Bill Davidson," she says, "I can't for all the life of me imagine why you got a shiftless no-account like him around your shop. He's no good. He's the laziest man in town."

"I wouldn't say that about you," says Elmer, having nothing better in mind to say. "I always say real nice things about you."

"Bah!" she snaps at him.

"Y—yes'm," Elmer stammers. "Well . . . We got to go now. We'll be seeing you around, I shouldn't wonder, maybe."

"You stand right still where you're at," she orders.

Elmer thinks of cherry pie, all oozing-sweet with juice, still warm from the oven. Elmer thinks of food and peace and safety from this female terror. But he cannot move.

"You come and get that work done," she

goes on. "I'm paying for it when it's done, and not before."

"But I don't need the money, now," says Elmer, with suddenly remembered pride. "I got eight dollars. I don't need no more."

He went to her, three days before, to ask for extra work, because he'd spent the money he got that week from Bill, on a new and very noble suit of clothes bought by mail order for the special delectation of the circus crowds. He had quite forgotten that a man must have money for tickets, for pink lemonade, for all the sideshows. Hence a job of extra work to be done for the Widow Perry. Hence his present sheer contempt for any sort of work.

"I'm a rich man, now. Excuse me. I got to be going on about some awful important business," said Elmer, and took one step forward, and then stopped.

"You come to me and asked for work to do and I give you the work and now, now," said the widow, emphasizing each "now" with a shaken pointing finger, "now you'll come and do that work. Come on!"

He looked to Bill for help, and got no help at all. He looked back at the Widow Perry, and he bowed his head.

"Yes, ma'am," said Elmer, with heart-rending sadness. "Yes, ma'am. Ah . . . Bill . . . you suppose maybe about the cherry pie . . ."

"I'll see to it there's plenty left over for you when you finally get around to it," Bill promised.

With that much to comfort him in his hour of pain, Elmer trudged on toward the Widow Perry's shop, and work, real work, that he would surely have to do. And Bill was happier than ever.

Strange to wonder just how many things go all together to make happiness in a human heart! A quiet little town, a pale round moon still barely seen against the last light from the hidden sun. People walking in the cool of evening, people that Bill knew by first names, every one. Down the street a little, he could see the wide front window of his little shop. And now he watched Elmer following the Widow Perry as she stumped along

the street, and Bill smiled, thinking how good people are, how simple and how much afraid to let each other know what is really in their hearts; how often people rant and shout and make believe, to hide the quiet tenderness they feel; how truly real most people are, and how much to be liked and thought about and helped.

And so he stood there, having forgotten, for this moment, what he must still do before he could go back to his shop, back home . . . and back to Nellie, who would be expecting him very soon.

He could almost feel the warmth of human kindness in this little town. He would not, ever in his life, put any of that in words. He was not the kind, then or later, to say sentimental, sticky things about life, about people, about his great and constant love for humanity. He would only watch and smile a little, and be very glad to be alive.

"I'm too happy," Bill told himself. "A man can't ask his life to bring him too much happiness. There maybe ain't enough of it to go around, for all us humans on this earth.

To have so much, to have as much of it as I've got now . . ."

He felt almost guilty, almost ashamed.

Down the street, he saw Sam Holcomb hurrying out of his grocery store, and starting home. A hard man, a stingy man, a man who had in his heart only a terrible fear of not having enough money. And Elley Holcomb, Sam's young wife, hurrying home, too, from the telephone office; going home to get supper and to be abused for spending too much money and for not wearing simpler clothes . . . and to slip away, at last, to read and gloat over stories about true love.

He shook his head, and pitied them.

And he saw Jeb Shanks coming out of the bank building on the corner, down the street, and now he remembered with a sudden icy shock that there was something to be done.

He squared his shoulders. Maybe he hummed a little—the song he played so often for Nellie, beginning on their first evening at home in the little house behind the barber shop. The old song. "Nellie Gray."

He hummed the words.

"Oh, my darling Nellie Gray,
They have taken you away . . .
And I'll never see my darling
any more . . ."

He stopped suddenly, catching his breath. The words of the song! He had never thought of them, before as having any personal meaning. The sad story of a loved one, gone. But . . . Nellie's name was Nellie. And Nellie, waiting there at home, waiting for what would happen soon. He was afraid. In one black moment his great feeling of tremendous happiness was gone. He was horribly afraid. The words of the song had made him think for the first time of what might happen, of what had happened to another beloved Nellie.

He walked very fast, setting his feet down hard. He shook his head, and tried to forget the words of the song.

"Oh, my darling Nellie Gray,
They have taken you away . . ."

"Jeb!" He called out desperately, much too loudly. "Jeb Shanks! Wait! I got to

talk to you! Jeb!" He hurried forward, almost running, to catch up to the grim, tall, hulking figure of Hartville's richest man.

"I guess you know what I want to talk to you about without me having to tell it to you all over again," he said to Jeb Shanks.

The big man nodded, dourly.

Jeb Shanks had deep lines cut through his cheeks, and his chin was like the prow of a battleship. He had big, white hands, that were never at rest unless they lay on piles of crisp new bills piled on his desk in the bank. He loved money as some men love honor, as some men love things money cannot buy. He had owned the bank ever since shortly after Hartville's once-beloved banker, Arthur Ellis, was sent away to prison as a thief. He had testified against Arthur Ellis at that famous trial.

"I hate a thief," he said then, ponderously. "I'm sorry for Arthur Ellis. I looked up to him. I worked hard for him. But when I found out he was robbing the bank, I had to tell the truth."

And Arthur Ellis died in a prison cell, and

Jeb Shanks lived, fatly, proudly, in his own chosen kind of a cell. With possessions all around him, with power in his hands.

He could never be an easy man for Bill Davidson to talk to, to ask a favor from. Yet now Bill must ask a favor. And it had not occurred to him that the favor would be so much, for Bill, too, was an honest man, and the whole town knew it, and most of all Jeb Shanks knew it.

"Right after I was married and my wife and I came home to Hartville, I started paying off for the barber shop building," Bill reminded him now.

"Well?"

"I don't still owe you very much, Jeb. I've paid on the dot, every three months. I'm almost paid up for everything, including what you loaned me to get started."

Jeb Shanks was silent, studying him. Jeb Shanks knew when a man wanted to borrow money, before the man spoke. Or when a man was going to say, "I can't pay on time," without having to be told why.

"I need a hundred dollars cash, Jeb. Right

away. Tonight or first thing in the morning. It's for something important. I'll sign a thirty-day note. I'll be able to pay it, right on time."

Jeb Shanks still stood silent.

Bill looked at him.

"You heard what I said," he said mildly, not as a question, simply as a statement of fact.

Jeb Shanks nodded, and Bill waited.

It was darker, now. It was cooler. It would be cold, by midnight. Fall would come, soon, and very soon now the last of the roses would die, the trees would be bare and grim against the sky. Winter would come again to Hartville. And winter stood before Bill Davidson, now.

Jeb Shanks shook his head.

"But, Jeb . . ." Bill started.

Jeb Shanks's mouth opened like a trap. His lips were thin against his large white teeth. His expression was not changed at all.

"You're not doing much business at the shop."

"People have to go easy 'til after they get their crop money. You know that, Jeb. From now on, though . . ."

"You owe the bank two hundred and fifty dollars more, that's due and payable on the first of November."

"And I'll pay it, on the day. You know I will. I haven't missed a pay day yet. I don't miss paying what I owe."

Jeb Shanks looked down the street toward the barber shop, and back again at Bill Davidson.

"I know what you want the money for," he said.

Bill started, just a little. "How? Who told you?"

"I know." The thin lips closed. The large head rose, as if to tell the world, "I know everything that happens in this town. I own this town. Nothing at all can happen that I do not know all about."

The two men stood silent.

Finally, Jeb Shanks opened his mouth again.

"You're a fool, Bill Davidson."

He turned, and started down the street, not hurrying, not even interested in what Bill Davidson might be thinking.

And Bill thought nothing at all, for a moment or so. It had seemed so simple. It had seemed so right. It had never occurred to him, even for a moment, that Jeb Shanks would say anything but "Yes, of course." A man pays his bills on the day they are due, a man keeps his word, a man builds up a little business on faith and trust and hard work, a man will surely pay back every cent he borrows. How can even Jeb Shanks refuse a man like that?

But already, the tall banker was half a block away. He did not speak to people along the street. They did not speak to him, except in a shamefaced, hesitant way, if they were people who owed him money; or in a whispering, careful way, if they were of the charmed small circle of his intimates who might share a little in his profits, now and then.

Bill could not go after him. He knew that. He could not beg for anything from anybody

in the world. But least of all, from Jeb Shanks.

"I'm surprised," Bill said out loud. He shook his head. "I don't understand a man like that." He started to walk on, slowly, toward his barber shop. "I need that money. I need it awful bad." Not complaining, not whining, only puzzled, sorry, surprised. "I don't know how I'll get along without that money. I'd have paid it back. He knows that. He knows me. Why wouldn't he do that much? He couldn't lose." He walked a little faster. "I hate to tell Nellie what he said." He shook his head. "I better not tell her. I won't. I'll just say . . . No. No use lying to Nellie. She'd always know. I'll just not talk about it. Maybe . . ." His heart felt suddenly afraid again. "Maybe she won't think to ask me, anyhow. Maybe . . ."

Where had his happiness gone? The moon was higher, now. The darkness was velvet, cool and deep. He could hear people's voices, people laughing, calling to each other back and forth across the street. Where had all his happiness gone?

He could have gone to Jeb Shanks sooner. Much sooner. If he had, maybe the answer would have been different.

"I hate to think it," Bill Davidson said to himself. "I hate to think it about any man. But it's kind of true about Jeb Shanks. When you need money the worst, he seems to get a kind of pleasure out of saying 'no.' Like he almost likes to see you suffer for lack of what would be so easy to lend."

No. He shook his head. No use thinking things like that about a man, simply because he doesn't agree with you.

Bill had a favorite saying. "No man's right, no man's wrong," he'd say, sometimes. "I'm not so sure there's any such thing as a man that's altogether good—or a man that's altogether bad. We've all of us, the best of us, got things about us that aren't so good. And the worst of us . . . well, we've all got good in us somewhere. What I say is right may be right for me and still wrong for the other fellow. I never know. I don't think anybody ever knows."

So he could repeat all that to himself, now, and still not find his happiness again, and still not be able to forget the hard, almost exulting look in Jeb Shank's face when he refused a loan he must have known Bill would ask for.

"That man don't like me," Bill told himself. "I don't know why. I never did him any harm. He don't like me." In a moment, "He don't like us. That's what it is. He don't like us."

His chin went up, his shoulders squared. After all, when a man's young and strong and healthy and has a job, he can't just give up and quit because some little thing goes wrong. After all . . . Bill caught his breath. In just a minute, now, he must walk into the shop and through the shop, calling to Nellie, calling "I'm home." And he must smile. He must show no defeat in his face or in his eyes. He must be gay and glad and gentle.

"It ain't always easy," Bill said, half aloud.

But he began to hum. Not the same song. Not the sad song that had, all at once, such terrifying implications. Now he hummed

"Polly Wolly Doodle," louder and louder as he walked along, faster and faster, toward the door of the little shop.

"Fare thee well, fare thee well,
Fare thee well, my fairy fay . . .
For I'm bound to Louisiana
For to see my Suzyanny
Singin' Polly-Wolly-Doodle all
the day . . ."

His hand was on the door, and he stopped humming, he stood looking in, not knowing why.

He could see nothing that was not utterly familiar. The single barber chair, the mirrors, the rows of shaving mugs along one wall, the old base-burner at the back, the sign that said "Baths, Twenty-Five Cents. Saturdays, Thirty-Five Cents." All familiar, all warm with memories of many days. And yet something was wrong. He could feel it. His pulse had begun to race, his heart was pounding; he could almost hear it booming, in the sudden silence. Something was wrong. He knew it. His throat ached. He stared, see-

ing nothing. He could not make his hand open the door. Not for a moment. Then, slowly, he pulled the door open, he stood on the threshold as the bell jingled slightly. He waited. No one called to him. Nellie always listened for the bell at the door, Nellie always heard it; she always said she always knew, somehow, when it was Bill coming in the door. She would call to him, always. Not now. Not now. There was silence in the room, and the silence hurt him, and he was afraid to call to Nellie, afraid.

Back of him in the street, someone laughed very loudly. A high-pitched shout rang from boys, playing run-sheep-run somewhere down by the railroad tracks. An old wagon rattled, down the street, heading out of town.

Bill closed the door, carefully, silently. He moved a little. He could see himself in the wide mirrors back of the barber chair. He took off his battered old hat (the hat he wore that day when he came home from Cuba, when he marched up the avenue with all the other soldiers, home at last; the old campaign hat with the tarnished golden braid around the

crown). He laid his hat down in the chair, and listened again.

Got to do something, his mind was telling him, louder and louder. Got to walk back to the door and open it and walk through. Got to stop acting like this. Got to remember. Got to remember. Maybe now. Maybe now.

Then the door opened, and he knew.

Standing there, his bent figure outlined by a lamp behind him in the kitchen, was the doctor.

He closed the door quietly, while Bill stood staring at him. He came forward, smiling the way he had smiled so often before that it was a habit, now—and Bill could see the smile was a habit, and not quite real; and Bill tried to speak, and couldn't.

"I thought I heard the door close," the doctor said. "About time you were getting home, Bill."

"I had to see a fellah," Bill managed, surprised at himself for saying that instead of what he wanted to say.

"Well, it's just as well." The doctor went

to the telephone, cranked it three times, and waited. Then he said "Operator. Tell my wife I won't be home for maybe three or four hours. She'll understand. Thanks. Oh, and if you get any calls for me, send them over here. Thanks. Goodnight."

He hung up.

Bill shivered. He had never been so cold, not even when the harsh rain beat down on the soldiers hunkered in the muddy trench at San Juan hill. He had never been so afraid, not even that first time when he stood up straight and realized there was nothing in front of him but a man firing at him, very fast, with full intent to kill him as he walked in line up the long slope of San Juan. He had never found it so hard to speak, not even on the night when somehow he managed to tell Nellie "You must forget about me. I'm not good enough. You must forget all about me. Goodbye."

The doctor patted him casually on the shoulder.

"Nothing to worry about, Bill," he said, in quiet professional tones. "Nothing at all."

"Then it . . . it's . . . now?"

"Yes, Bill. Now." The doctor nodded. "You'd just as well go out for a walk, Bill. Nothing you can do here. You'd better go talk to somebody. I'll call you if it's necessary."

Bill shivered again.

"Can't I do anything, doc?"

"No, Bill. Except stay out of the way."

"Oh." Bill gulped, and squared his shoulders. "You wouldn't keep it from a fellah, would you, doc? I mean if . . . if . . ." He couldn't finish what he wanted to ask.

"There's nothing to worry about," the doctor said. "Nothing at all." He managed an ancient professional joke, once more. "I've been a doctor a long time. I've never lost a father yet."

With that he turned, and went back through the door, and opened it, and closed it, and all that time Bill never moved.

Now again there was terrible silence in the room. Now, slowly, Bill walked toward the barber chair and picked up his hat, and then dropped it, and then started toward the door,

and then stopped, and then tried to go on again, and then, suddenly, dropped down in a chair, sitting there, staring at the door.

The night when he opened that door and Nellie started to walk in, and Bill said "No. No. I read about it in a book somewhere. The way they do it in the old countries. The . . . young husband . . . he picks up the bride in his arms and . . . carries her over the threshold. It . . . it sort of means something special. I guess maybe it sounds kind of silly, but I always thought . . ."

Nellie laughed. It was a moonlight night, and her hair looked like silver, with the moonlight on her head. Then she put up her arms, and they went around his neck, and Bill Davidson carried his bride across the threshold into their new home.

And now . . .

And now . . .

* * * * * * *

Morning. No more moonlight. Nothing now but a grim darkness greying slowly into the first faint light. And it was cold, very cold, there in the barber shop. And still Bill

Davidson sat in the chair against the wall, not asleep, not awake.

Hours are too long, when a man waits as he had waited, all night long. Hours are years, and a man forgets how long it has been, and there is nothing in the world that he can do, nothing at all, and he thinks too much and remembers too many tragedies and does not know what to do, and he would feel foolish if he did what he wants to do: If he went and asked the doctor, again and yet again, "Is she all right? Is she all right?"

So Bill sat in the chair, waiting.

He had prayed, too many times. The words ran all together, now, if he tried to pray at all. He had said "Please, God, don't let anything happen to Nellie. I love her. I love her so much. We need each other. We were . . . we were so happy. Please, God."

Prayers like that. Not careful words or carefully finished thoughts. And the memory of Nellie, standing there so often in the doorway, smiling, gentle, sweet. And the memory of her voice, calling him.

It had seemed to him, a dozen times during

ELMER EEPS AND MRS. EEPS

the night, that he heard Nellie calling for him. A dozen times or a hundred times he had started up from the chair, started to answer Nellie calling him, and then known he had only dreamed it, only remembered it.

The door would have to open, soon. The doctor would have to come through the door. The doctor would have to tell him.

Bill thought about strange and unrelated things. About Mrs. Palmer, Nellie's sister, writing one letter, one letter only. "You will come back. You will live to regret what you have done. I do not want to ever hear a word about that man. I am glad our poor mother is not alive, to know what a terrible thing you have done. To marry a man like that . . ." He had not hated her, when Nellie at last yielded and told him what that letter said. Nellie had said then "She doesn't know. She couldn't know. But I know." He had not hated Mrs. Palmer, then; but he hated her, now, remembering how that letter had hurt Nellie.

He thought about the first day in the shop, with people coming just to see what sort of

people Mr. and Mrs. Bill Davidson might be. People who had never known Bill, or who remembered him as the young fellow who had only lived in town a few months, working in the old barber shop, before he went away to war. People who looked at Nellie and listened to her voice and saw her smile and then were her friends for always, because nobody could help being Nellie's friend.

He thought, and could not imagine why, about one morning in particular, when Nellie had come into the barber shop and said something about going for a walk, had asked him if he couldn't leave the shop for a while. "It's so beautiful, with all the snow. It's going to be our first Christmas together, in just a little while. I thought we might find a little tree that we could buy for our first Christmas Tree."

He remembered how he saved carefully so that Nellie would not know, until he had almost enough money to give the Widow Perry, for the coat Nellie had said she liked. And how she cried, on Christmas morning, when

she opened the big box and saw the warm coat lying there. And how it took weeks more to pay the Widow Perry the rest of what the coat cost. And how he hoped Nellie would never know he had sold the ring he got from his mother, long ago, for the last money it took to pay the bill.

He remembered so many things. How many years was it? It seemed like eternity, when he remembered each day, each moment, as he remembered them.

And he did not even hear the doctor, when that bent and weary man opened the door and closed it again and came forward in the shop. Bill was looking at Nellie's picture. It showed her young and smiling, so very young, so very gay. Bill could see the picture clearly, although it was still dark there in the barber shop. He could see Nellie, he could hear her laugh.

"Bill," the doctor said quietly.

Bill leaped up. The chair banged back against the wall. He almost leaped at the doctor.

"Doc! Doc! Tell me! Tell me!"

The doctor patted him on the shoulder again.

"In a little while," he said gently, "in just a little while, you can go back and talk to her."

"Doc . . ."

"And you can meet your daughter, too."

Bill gasped. He stood stock still. He could not have spoken, then, if his life depended on the words.

"Yes, Bill. A daughter. She's beautiful. She has eyes like your wife, at least that's how it seemed to me. She's sleeping, now. But in a little while . . ."

He stopped Bill.

"No. Not yet. Not quite yet. Wait a little while. Then you can talk to your wife, and you can meet your daughter . . . They're both doing fine, Bill. I told you, there was nothing at all to worry about. No, Bill. Not yet. But in a few minutes. Man, smile. Shake hands!"

Bill never knew that he almost broke the doctor's hand in the convulsive clutch of his

strong fingers. He never understood quite why he did what he did next. He hurried to the telephone. He cranked it, fiercely, time after time.

"Hello!" he said. "Hello! Hello Central— Oh, Elly, you're on the job already so early? Good. Elly. I got to tell somebody. I got a daughter. I got a daughter. Wait. Be sure you call Elmer Eeps, first, before anybody else. And then the Widow Perry. And then . . ."

He turned from the phone. He was smiling. He was standing straight, now, his shoulders square, his eyes bright with pride and happiness.

"Her mother hoped she'd be a daughter," he told the doctor. "Her mother had a name all picked out, if she was a daughter. Nancy. That's going to be our daughter's name. Nancy. That's a pretty name. Her mother likes that name."

He turned back to the phone.

"You hear that, Elly? Nancy's going to be our daughter's name. Yes. Oh, Elly. Tell it around to everybody. Today, every-

body that comes to the shop gets anything free. That's to celebrate. I'm a father. I've got a daughter."

He hung up the receiver. He walked across the room.

"I've got a daughter," he said again. "There's three of us, now. Three of us."

Then, without thinking about why he did it or how it might look to anyone in the world, Bill Davidson went down on his knees.

"Thank you, God," he said. "Thank you."

Chapter III

Home Sweet Home

I think Christmas must have been very different, in those days, from Christmas in our present bright and active scientific times.

I don't say Christmas was better or happier. I don't pretend to tell you what the difference is, exactly. I don't say it's not more practical or—Heaven knows!—less bother, to string some colored light bulbs on a "moderne tree" made out of sticks and silver tinsel, bought at the corner store on the way home from the movies.

Much less bother than it was for Bill Davidson to walk three miles through the snow, out into the country, to chop down a small and brilliant tree, to drag it home again, to take it secretly into the barber shop, before he called Nellie in to see it.

Much less bother than it was for Nellie Davidson to dip popcorn in colored water and

then string the crusty segments on long cords, to decorate the tree; and cut a big star out of cardboard and paint it silver and put it high up on the tree; and then hang sticks of colored candy here and there.

Oh, much less bother than Bill Davidson took to hide his secret from Nellie, than she took to hide her secret from him.

And yet to emphasize the difference so greatly is not really fair. Of course Christmas means as much to little children now as it has ever meant; for little children still know how to love the sudden glare of light, the brilliant colors warm against the deep green of the tree, the fascinating packages scattered here and there . . .

As Nancy loved all that on her first Christmas, which was twenty years ago, when she was not quite one year old.

She had already begun to try to walk, to try to talk. She had said "Daddy Bill," so clearly that even Elmer Eeps could understand it, only just the other morning. She had learned already that the barber shop was the most fascinating place in the whole world. She

had found out for herself, oh, many weeks before this, that two people seemed to think she was the queen of the whole world; and she ruled them with an iron, pudgy, dimpled hand.

And so they worked long hours, that night, to have her first Christmas ready for Nancy in the morning. She would wake early; they knew that from much experience. She was always, from her earliest days, a baby who wanted to be up and going places, seeing things and people. Well, they would be ready. Maybe they wouldn't have much time left for sleep, but in the morning they would hear her first small cry, and soon after that they would carry her into the barber shop to see the glowing tree. And then . . .

They hadn't thought past that.

How Bill was going to get Nellie's present into the shop and properly placed under the tree, without her seeing it, he didn't know at all. How Nellie was going to get the package from the postoffice, without Bill suspecting where she had gone and what about, she didn't know, either. Each of them kept hoping

something would happen to attract the other one's attention so long and so thoroughly that there would be no trouble about the presents.

Then, finally, Elmer Eeps settled everything, in Elmer's own inimitable and terrible way.

He came banging through the door, suddenly, jangling it shut loud enough to wake the dead, puffing, stamping snow from his feet . . . the perfect picture of a snowman come to life but not yet melted.

"I been out in the snow," said Elmer, with unnecessary explanatory intentions. "It's cold, out there. Yes, sir, eee, bob, it's a cold, cold winter. Coldest Christmas Eve I remember in I don't remember when."

They stared at him. He had a huge bundle under one arm, and a square, thick package under the other.

"That's Nellie's present," said Bill to himself. "He's gone and collected it from Missus Eeps and brung it over without asking did I want him to. The first time in his life Elmer Eeps ever did any work he didn't have to be

driven to do . . . it has to be something I didn't want him to do!"

"That's the present for him," said Nellie Davidson, staring at the square, thick package. "Oh, I wish Elmer hadn't asked for our mail at the postoffice. He never did it before. But now . . ."

"I got the Christmas spirit," Elmer announced. "Yes, sir, I got to thinking to myself now looky here, Elmer Eeps, ain't this a time when a man ought to do what he can think of to scatter Christmas cheer? So I up and scattered it. Ah . . . that is . . . well . . . I'm here, and . . . well, . . . here . . ."

He thrust the packages at them. They stood still.

"But, gosh," said Elmer, plaintively. "But, gosh. These here belong to you and . . . You know something? I never yet got me a Christmas present that was wrapped up and had purty ribbons on it. No, sir, when I get a present it's either a pair of rubbers—too small—or a pair of mittens—too big—or a necktie—too red. And just kind of handed

at me like the giver wanted to get rid of it. Now, I always say, if I ever get fixed so as I can buy me a Christmas present of my own, I'm gonna have it all wrapped up . . ."

He ran out of words. Or at least he ran out of the desire to talk. The look on Bill's face, the strange expression on Nellie's face, awed and puzzled him.

"You two ain't mad at each other? On Christmas Eve?"

He knew the answer to that before he asked the question.

"No," he continued. "It couldn't be that. Why . . . Like I said to Mose Winthrop, any time Bill and Missus Davidson have a argument like most married folks has all the time every day, why, along about then, it's the end of the world. Yes, sir. That's what I said. Ha-ha!"

He waited. Bill didn't laugh. Neither did Nellie.

"Gosh," Elmer remarked to himself. "Gosh!" He set the packages down, very carefully. One of them seemed unusually heavy. He couldn't help wondering what

was in it; he couldn't help wishing he could stay around to see it opened up. But still and all, there's times when three's company, two's a crowd, or is it the other way around? He wasn't quite sure. He was only sure of one thing. Just now, he wasn't needed here.

"Well," he managed, "Merry Christmas."

Silence.

"Oh, yes . . . and a happy, prosperous New Year, too."

Silence.

"Hey, Bill! I just said Merry Christmas, Happy New Year. For you and Missus Davidson! Oh, and for little Nancy, too! Yes, sir. I wouldn't want to ever forget about Nancy. Tell her Uncle Elmer said Merry Christmas, huh, Bill? Huh, Missus Davidson?"

Now Nellie Davidson smiled.

"Thank you, Elmer. And . . . don't go, please."

"But . . . gosh. You and Bill . . . you kind of . . ."

"You can help us finish trimming the Christmas tree. And after that . . . well . . ."

Her eyes wandered toward a large box underneath the tree, and Elmer's eyes followed hers. A box! With red and green ribbon around it! With Christmas seals all over it. And it said . . . it said . . . He edged up closer. It couldn't be, but it was. There was "Elmer" printed on the box, big enough to see from five feet away. Gosh!

"Nellie." Bill talking, in almost a whisper. Sorrow in his eyes and in his voice. And yet a thrilled small-boy gladness, too. "Nellie. You said you wouldn't, but you went and done it. You went and sent for my Christmas present. I know. Gosh, Nellie. We both took a promise we wouldn't spend any money on presents for each other, not this year."

She smiled. She looked at the other package Elmer had brought, the big bundle with a tag from Mrs. Perry's store conspicuous on it.

"Yes," she murmured softly. "We both promised."

"But . . . gosh . . ." Bill stopped and stammered, then plunged on. "It . . . it's different . . . about you. I mean about me.

I mean . . . about me getting the . . . the . . . well . . . a present . . . for you. You needed it. But me . . ."

"We're awfully silly people, aren't we, darling?" Nellie Davidson asked the man she thought—would always think—was the wisest man in all the world. "So silly. Just like children."

"M-hmm. I guess. I suppose. I . . . Ah, Nellie . . ."

She took his hand. Not quite knowing what she meant to do, Bill followed her toward the door leading back from the barber shop into the small rooms they called their house.

"Nancy?" he asked finally.

"I can't wait," Nellie Davidson said. "I can't wait to see her eyes when she sees the Christmas tree. And the candles. And her presents. It's too long 'til morning. Can't we . . . wake her now, and bring her in . . . now?"

"It . . . ain't supposed to be so good for babies to be woke up in the middle of the night, though . . . is it?" Bill asked, hoping she would say "This once won't matter."

And she said "This once won't matter. Shall we?"

"Yes," Bill whispered. "Yes. Gosh . . . I hope she likes it, Nellie. Her first Christmas tree . . . I didn't ever have a Christmas tree. I always used to think about the little kids my age that had 'em every year, but I . . . I just didn't ever have a Christmas tree, or presents. We was . . . awful poor people, my mother and me. But . . . our little girl . . ."

Nellie's hand tightened on his. Then she turned to him. Her arms went up around his shoulders.

"Our little girl," she echoed.

Back beside the tree, Elmer stared, and gulped, and hurriedly turned back to look down in fascination at the huge box labeled "Elmer." Then he heard the door open. He saw Bill and Nellie Davidson go back into their baby daughter's room. He heard them call, suddenly, softly, "Merry Christmas, Nancy. Child. Wake up. Merry Christmas."

It occurred to Elmer that something should

be done. He studied hard. There wasn't much a man like Elmer Eeps could do; he knew it better than anybody else; "I lived with myself longer than anybody else, and I know I ain't such a much," Elmer would admit, on any provocation.

But . . . perhaps because it was a Christmas Eve . . . an idea came to Elmer, out of nowhere. And he grinned. And produced from his pocket his venerable mouth organ, and tooted on it quickly, softly, once. And then he threw his head back and he played. He played "Home Sweet Home."

Chapter IV

Darling Nellie Gray

She had to be very careful.

If she failed to smile in just a certain way, when Bill came back to the barber shop, he would notice it instantly; he would know something must be wrong. She knew Bill and Bill's eyes so well. And, knowing how he watched her, how his eyes followed her and studied her and worried over her, Nellie Davidson was suddenly terribly afraid.

She was sure it was nothing important. She was desperately confident that in a few days she would think back to this moment and laugh a little. Maybe, then, she could tell Bill all about it.

"I was silly," she would say, laughing a little.

Of course Bill would argue instantly that she had never been silly and could never be. It used to be a sort of game that they played

happily, like very young children arguing, not at all like two people who have been married for a number of years. For her to depreciate herself; for Bill to leap to her defense; for them to argue as earnestly as could be, for perhaps ten minutes at a time; but never longer. For then Bill would blink and grin, and there would be a low chuckle in his throat quite suddenly, always surprisingly. She liked the way Bill chuckled. He never laughed loudly, like some people. He simply grinned, and chuckled, and his eyes would dance.

"You have the youngest eyes I ever saw." She told Bill that so many times, and it would always embarrass him. Almost anything said in his praise would embarrass Bill.

"He's the most modest man I ever knew," she told the Widow Perry, once. "I really believe he believes he's the most ordinary person who ever lived."

"He is," said the Widow Perry, and then before Nellie could be indignant at her, quickly she added "Because he ain't never yet done anything in his life but what's so ordi-

nary and human nobody else hardly thinks of doing it."

That took some figuring out. But then Nellie understood that what the Widow Perry was really saying was that she had known about Bill since she read the first letter he wrote to her from Cuba, a number of years ago! That Bill believed in the ordinary human kindnesses and decencies and charities that few people have the time or the will to bother about. That he came close, in a strange, shy way, to being the man of whom no one could say anything cruel or disparaging; because whatever he did was done as if he believed with all his heart all those sayings children write in copybooks and forget as quickly as possible as they grow up.

"Honesty is the best policy." Bill believed that. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Bill believed that. "The only sad part of that," said Nellie confidingly to the Widow Perry, "is that people take advantage of him, always, all the time. When they're in trouble, they come to him, before

anyone else. They don't go to Jeb Shanks . . ."

"They know better," said the Widow Perry grimly. "That man Shanks, he's got a cake of ice for a heart. And needles for eyes."

Nellie smiled, only a little. She could never quite get over being afraid of Jeb Shanks. She knew so well how bitterly Bill had worked and schemed to pay Jeb Shanks for the barber shop; she learned, months after little Nancy was born, how Bill went to Jeb Shanks to borrow only a little money that he needed very badly, to pay the doctor, and how Jeb Shanks said by inference at least "You've got no right to have a child, poor as you are," and refused the loan.

"They come to my husband," she repeated, wondering. "And he'll always help anyone. It doesn't matter if they're friends or not. If anyone asks him for help, he helps. And then they forget. They don't pay back the money they borrow . . . of course, he doesn't lend them much, he can't, we haven't got much money . . ."

"You're getting along nice, though, ain't you?"

"We're getting along beautifully. And Nancy's growing so fast. She talks all the time, you know. And she's simply mad about her father. She tries to follow him, wherever he goes . . ." Then she stopped. She was trying so hard not to be the proud mother who talks about nothing but her firstborn child. She went back to a less important subject, easier to talk about. "But I can't quite understand people. They don't seem to be grateful, except right at first, right at the moment."

"The more I see of people," said the Widow Perry in pontifical accents, "the better I like my Plymouth Rock chickens. At least, they don't even pretend they got any sense or any gratefulness. But people . . . Hmmph!"

She rocked harder in her chair, to emphasize her general contempt. Then she smiled. "You couldn't change Bill if you tried, eh, Missus Davidson? He's just a born do-er for others-er."

"I guess," said Nellie Davidson, thinking of Bill and loving him very much, "I guess

that's what my husband is. A do-er for others-er. Yes, Mrs. Perry."

"Such as Elmer Eeps," the widow sniffed suddenly.

"Oh, Elmer . . ."

"Run off with the circus, didn't he? Went and got took down with love for the lady acrobat. So he put on his new mail order suit and yaller shoes and run away to be a circus roustabout. Hmmph! Got over that in a hurry. Back again, loafing in the barber shop. Hmmph! Elmer Eeps!"

Nellie chuckled. It was a funny story, the story of Elmer running away with the circus. Funny, and yet somehow plaintive, pathetic, to Nellie, who was always gentle with people who fell in love or even thought they had fallen in love.

She remembered Circus Day in Hartville, and the little pathetic parade that was very big and glamorous, to Hartville's people. And the steam calliope and the wagons coming in from all around and the big tent, and the weary people smiling their professional painted smiles, the clowns trying so very

hard to be funny; the crowds, crowds; even in the barber shop. ("Best day I had since the last Camp Meetin' Sunday," said Bill. "Forty-two haircuts, near as many shaves, and six massages and two singes. And nine baths, thirty-five cents each with the perfumed soap." He was so proud. He was so tired he could barely stand. He couldn't leave the barber shop to see the circus, he was too busy; but he insisted Nellie must go and enjoy herself, and take Nancy . .-. and Nancy loved it all. Her eyes grew big and round and she stared and smiled and reached out her little hands for the pretty colors that moved so fast. Then, after a long time, Nancy slept; but woke again and wanted to hear more music, wanted to see more tumbling clowns. But Nancy's father worked until midnight that night, and with that day's earnings he paid the last dollar he owed Jeb Shanks.)

Circus Day. And Elmer, disappeared entirely from the barber shop, even from the street. He was needed to help Bill; he had promised to be in the shop all day long. He

was not seen at all, not that day nor the next, nor for four days more.

Then Bill got the postcard. Everybody in town knew about it by the time Bill saw it, of course. Somebody read it in the postoffice, and told Elly Holcomb about it, and she told the Widow Perry, and in twenty minutes the whole town was talking.

"Am in jail," said Elmer's pathetic scrawl. "Please come and git me out and I'll never do so any more."

Not that he'd done anything really wrong. As far as Bill could see, Elmer had done only what any man might do, under the circumstances.

He had decided that he was in love. Not with the lady acrobat, as the Widow Perry inaccurately described her, but with the equestrienne star who was described on the billboards as Senorita Estrellita; whose actual name, as Elmer discovered later, was Minnie O'Toole.

Elmer had gazed on her in awe and instant adoration and had decided here was his chosen

one at last. Without considering matters any further, he had stowed away aboard the circus train when it left Hartville late at night. In the morning, in a far-off, foreign town, he presented himself to the circus owner and asked for a job.

"We ain't hiring hicks," said the circus man.

"But I got to have a job," said Elmer.

"Oh? Hungry, eh?"

"I got to have a job," said Elmer, "so I can ask the lady to marry me."

The circus man blinked, and grew more interested. And grew still more interested, when he heard the lady's name.

"I," he announced, "am her husband." Then he hit Elmer very hard. And Elmer, not being used to being hit in the nose, retaliated with force and efficiency.

Hence, Elmer Eeps in jail, for disturbing the peace. Hence, Bill arriving to bail him out and take him home.

"I never even knew she had a husband," Elmer moaned. "In fact, I never even talked to her. I just thought she was awful purty."

So ended the one romantic moment of Elmer

Eep's lightly checkered life. So began a period of persecution for Elmer, as the town's wits (and half-wits, said Elmer, grimly) reminded him of his troublous trip. Until Bill put a stop to it.

That was something else about Bill that Nellie Davidson could never quite fathom. That he knew how to make people stop talking was a constant wonder to her. They would come into the barber shop with scandalous gossip, they would begin to talk, and Bill would never seem to grow angry, would never reprove or argue with them. Only, somehow —not quite understanding it themselves— the gossipers stopped gossiping, in Bill Davidson's barber shop.

"I love him," Nellie Davidson said to herself suddenly, with a quick warm surging in her heart. "I knew it from the first minute I read his letter. Oh, but I know it so much better now. I love him. I want him to be happy. I don't want him to worry. I mustn't let him know."

She realized suddenly that the Widow Perry was staring at her, oddly, studiously.

Then the Widow Perry got up from the chair.

"You don't feel good, do you?" she demanded.

Nellie laughed at her.

"I've never felt so well in my life," she said, and almost made the words ring true. Almost . . . but not quite.

"You got a misery somewheres," the Widow Perry said, almost accusingly. "I know you don't want to let on. You hate to have Bill know if you're sick, because he worries so. I declare, that man idolizes the ground you walk on. And when you ain't feeling good, he's took like crazy. But you don't feel good now. You better tell me, so I can do something."

Nellie laughed again, much more convincingly.

"If I frowned," she said, "it was just because I was thinking so hard. I was thinking about what I ought to fix for supper."

The Widow Perry studied her, and shook her head.

"You keep too much hid," she said finally.

"But I'm not . . ."

"You ain't been well for days and weeks. I noticed it. That's why I been coming over here so often to set and talk. I figure when you get ready, you'll tell me. I figure it ain't good for you to be all soul alone so much of the time with Bill away. I reckon I better tell him so."

"Don't!"

"He's got the right to know."

"Don't tell my husband anything. You mustn't. Oh, please, Mrs. Perry, don't. He'd only worry. He has so much to worry him already. The . . . barber shop . . . business isn't good and . . . he needs money to pay for supplies. He's out collecting, or . . . trying to . . . from people who owe him money they borrowed. And he hates to ask people to pay money back."

"I know," the Widow Perry snorted. "Seems like that man of yours can't never get used to the idea that this here is a world full of people. Seems like he goes right on figuring there is a Santa Claus. Well, there ain't. Lend a dollar and lose a friend, that's what I always say. But Bill . . ."

"You won't tell him." Nellie Davidson was not pleading, she said it as an agreed fact. "You won't tell him I'm not well."

"Hadn't he ought to know?"

"I . . . I'll be all right," Nellie Davidson insisted.

"I hope so. Gracious sakes, I hope so. You with little Nancy to be took care of, and Bill as helpless a lummox as ever lived . . ."

The Widow Perry saw the flare in Nellie's eyes.

"I like Bill Davidson," she said quickly. "Him and me are friends and neighbors. Don't you ever let the way I talk get you to thinking I'd say anything against Bill Davidson. But he ain't so very much experienced in taking care of a house and waiting on a little girl that ain't none too healthy, anyhow. Supposing you got took real sick and had to go to bed and stay? And Bill trying to run the barber shop and still take care of you and Nancy and the house. . . . Why . . . it can't be. It ain't right. I say the thing to do when you don't feel good is see

the doctor right away. A stitch in time saves nine, that's what I say."

There wasn't any answer. She hadn't quite expected there would be an answer. She had grown to know Nellie very well indeed, in the short years since Bill Davidson came home from the war, and brought his young bride with him. Proud—she knew that about Nellie, from the very first. Brave—she learned that quickly, rather to her surprise; for in Hartville, you had little chance to learn that women as fragile and dainty and pretty as Nellie Davidson could work as hard as any strong farm woman, could be as brave as any man. Tender—and very much in love with Bill—the whole town and the whole countryside knew that, from the very first.

"That there's a couple that really is in love," said Jeff Bartley to his relatives at the reunion dinner. "That's the kind of married couples this here country needs. If there was more like them, this here would be a better country. And a happier. Yes, sir, eee."

And everyone agreed. And people envied

Bill, seeing how he started out owning nothing, terribly in debt to Jeb Shanks, and how somehow he made things go and paid old Jeb every cent and owned his business and his home, free and clear. They all said Nellie Davidson helped a lot; they knew it was true. Sam Holcomb, at the grocery store, gave up trying to cheat Nellie Davidson on the grocery bill, after the first few months; he was still cheating wives who had bought at his store for ten and fifteen years, but he could never fool the quiet little woman who seemed so frail—and was—but had such a strong mind.

It wouldn't be any use arguing, the Widow Perry made up her mind to that. And somehow she hated to hurt Nellie Davidson by hurting Bill, as she surely would if she said what she wanted to say. "Look here, Bill, you got a sick wife only she ain't letting on. You better get her to a doctor right away." The Widow Perry had almost said those words a half a dozen times, in recent days. And yet, seeing how Bill watched his beloved wife, she kept believing he would realize the truth,

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would not need to be told. Obviously, she had been wrong. But, facing Nellie Davidson's determination, she felt even she could do nothing at all.

"Well," she said. "Well. I reckon I might as well be moseying on about my business. I do wish you didn't make me feel so bad, Nellie."

She didn't call Bill's wife just "Nellie," very often. Make no mistake—no one ever had made the mistake—there was nothing soft or gentle about the Widow Perry, then or later. Or, if there was, if her heart was big and warm and very kind, few people ever guessed it. Except Bill. Perhaps that was why she found it impossible to fight with Bill even when she was angry at the world. He never argued or talked back; he just looked at her and grinned, and she felt like a foolish old woman talking too much, and she felt like he was saying "You're an awful fake, but you ain't fooling me."

She went on home, a little later, having first attended to the evening's gossip swapping at the postoffice. Elly Holcomb got another

dress from the mail order company, and again her husband wasn't to know about it; he wouldn't stand for Elly buying pretty things, if he knew it; hard and miserly and mean, Sam Holcomb. And Monty Barton got two more love letters from that girl in Kansas City, and blushed red clear around the back of his neck. And Marcy Tuttle got another dun from the bank; he'd better scratch around and get the cash to pay old Jeb Shanks, or he'd wind up put right out of his own father's house, all the people said. And there were other things to whisper about and to wonder about, but nothing important, nothing sensational.

"There ain't much happens in Hartville," said the Widow Perry. "And what there is ain't hardly worth bothering about. Not any more. Things used to be different, but they ain't any more."

She went on back to her store, and stood inside with the lights not yet turned on and stared across the street at Bill's barber shop. She saw Nellie Davidson, standing inside the wide window of the shop, holding little Nancy in her arms. Grown a big girl already, Nancy

Davidson; the prettiest little girl in town, and the nicest. Something strange about her; she seemed kind of different from other little girls, whose families were as good as hers, whose parents had more money . . . hard to figure out, the Hartville people said. And yet no one ever seemed to feel resentment against Nellie Davidson and her daughter, as Hartville people usually resented foreigners, outsiders, strangers come from other towns to settle down in their small, shut-in hamlet off the main roads.

Little towns are like that, sometimes. Everyone knows everyone. A stranger is not hated; he simply does not quite fit in; and he is made to feel his strangeness. Pity the small boy whose family has just moved to town as school is opening. He'll have to fight, whether he wants to or not. It's part of the immutable process of getting acquainted. If he wins, he'll be all right; if he loses, he will have to fight again; if he cries and runs away, his lifetime in that little town will be all misery and all new trouble, every day.

But little Nancy Davidson was different.

Seeing Nellie and Bill and Nancy going to church on Sunday, people caught themselves feeling something warm and pleasant in their hearts. It looked . . . well, it looked right, the way things should be, the way a man and his wife and his child should look.

Just Plain Bill, Barber, and not a very successful barber, either. Nellie Davidson (people said she had money, before she married Bill, and her family never forgave her for the marriage; but she never talked about it). Nancy, so small, so dainty, so primly dressed in starched little dresses that were the despairing envy of every other mother in the town.

Three people, happy together. And yet suddenly a shadow was over them. The Widow Perry knew it. She could see it, feel it. She felt now that she ought to run out of her store and cross the street and run into the barber shop and say to Nellie Davidson "You've got to tell Bill or I'll tell him. I'm afraid for all three of you. I'm afraid." She knew she couldn't do it.

The Widow Perry had a rule, she always

said. The rule was "Tend to your own business, and your business will tend to you." It never occurred to her that she mixed into the affairs of everyone in town, more or less. Even if she had admitted that, even to herself, she could not mix into the lives of Nellie and Bill and little Nancy. "It wouldn't seem right," she told herself. "They're different. Far as they're concerned, there really ain't anybody else in all the wide world but just them three. When they're at home alone together they don't need anybody else, they don't really want anybody else." She waited a while. "They're happy, that's what it is," she whispered to herself, as if she had made a stunning discovery of something never known to happen before. "Yes. They're happy."

Then she saw Bill coming home. Hurrying. Almost running, as he came nearer to the barber shop. Carrying flowers, too. He must have stopped along the road, somewhere on the way back to town, to pick those flowers. He'd been walking. Probably walked all day long, from farm to farm, stop-

ping in at houses, talking to people. The Widow Perry knew Bill so well; she could imagine what had happened when he tried to bring himself to say "You owe me a little money, and I'm very much in need of money right now, so please let's have what you owe me."

"I bet he didn't even ask, right out, from anybody," the Widow Perry muttered. "I bet he's come home as empty-pocketed as he started out. Land, won't people like Bill Davidson ever learn?"

She saw him stop, just out of the square pool of light that shone through the wide front window of the barber shop. Straightening himself up, of course. Yes. She could see. He was dusting off his coat, wiping his dust covered shoes with his handkerchief. Spruc-ing up, before Nellie Davidson should see him. "Married all these years and he still acts like he was just going to call on his best girl," the Widow Perry muttered. "My, oh, my."

"You never knew a man like him when you were young," a small voice whispered to

her. "You'll never know a man like him. Not who'll think about you the way he thinks about little Nellie Davidson." "I know," she answered.

It made her feel strange, to realize she'd been talking such nonsense . . . and out loud, of all things. The Widow Perry said any time anybody began talking to themselves, that meant they were getting crazy, or else they had to talk to themselves because they were so no-account nobody else would talk to them. So she stopped talking at all. She just watched, and wondered what might happen to Nellie Davidson . . . and what would surely happen to Bill Davidson, and to little Nancy, if things turned out wrong.

And Bill got himself fixed up as well as he could, which wasn't by any means as well as he wanted to look, and finally moved in front of the window. And, of course, Nellie and Nancy saw him at once.

Nancy stretched her hands, instantly, reaching out to be taken in his arms. He couldn't hear her small voice, through the glass, but he knew what she was saying. "Daddy Bill!

Daddy Bill!" He got all choked up in his throat, remembering the first time Nancy ever said that. He didn't even realize he was running, now, as he entered the shop and found himself, all at once, with his arms around Nellie and Nancy, holding them close, too close.

"Daddy Bill!" said Nancy imperiously. She pushed him back, with tiny, warm hands. She knew her mind already, she did not propose to be squeezed too hard, even by this most wonderful of all persons in her world.

And Bill stepped back and laughed.

He couldn't think of anything to say, for a minute.

Finally, he managed "I'm home." It said everything. He couldn't have put more love and happiness in a thousand colored words than in just that much, "I'm home." And Nellie nodded. "We've been waiting for you," she said in the soft voice he could never hear without remembering that first almost unbelievable night when she had spoken to him, far away and long ago. She started to put Nancy down. Nancy liked to walk, she

had a bad habit of climbing up in the high barber chair and several times she had fallen hard, but she never cried more than just a little, about a fall like that, or about anything at all.

"No," said Bill. "Let me." He took Nancy in his arms, conscious as always that his hands were big and maybe too rough, afraid as always that he might somehow hurt the tiny creature he held. He wasn't very clever at holding a baby, and he knew it. He wasn't really very clever about anything that had to do with gentleness—so he believed. He would never have believed in the world that to Nellie he was the gentlest person who had ever lived.

But he held Nancy up and looked up at her, with the same wonder in his eyes that had been there from the first gray morning when the doctor said so quietly, so casually, "You've got a daughter, Bill." It was not possible that this could be his daughter. It was not possible to him, who saw in himself so little that was worth being proud of, that Nancy, of whom he was so terribly proud that

it hurt to think about it, could truly belong to him.

"But she does," he said suddenly. "She does."

"What, darling?" Nellie Davidson asked.

"I . . . I mean she . . . she's . . . ours."

"Yes."

People don't need to say much in words, when they are utterly in love and at peace and contented. Even then, feeling pain in her heart that made her sick with terror, Nellie Davidson could forget everything but the wonder of being so happy here in this room, watching her husband, watching her small daughter, seeing them together.

But her heart thundered. She caught her breath. She turned away quickly. She must not let him see her face, not for a moment, not until the pain had gone. And the pain did not go. It was worse, now. It was like a terrible fire burning higher all the time. She could not see. She dug her fingers deep in her palms, she bit hard into her lip; and somehow she forced herself to turn, smiling, as casual as she had ever been.

"I've got something special for supper," she managed to say. She was almost sure there was no sound in her voice that would betray her suffering. She watched Bill desperately. No, he hadn't seen, he hadn't suspected. He was raising Nancy again, toward the light. Nancy loved to be held up high. She gurgled, reaching her hands higher. Her hair was like gold.

"I'm afraid," Nellie Davidson kept thinking. "I'm afraid. If I leave them, if I have to leave them . . ." She almost cried out, "No! Don't, God! Don't take me away from them!"

How many other women have done what Nellie Davidson did then? She managed to make the little casual every-day things of her home seem to be the only important things in the world. She talked rapidly about the pie she had baked . . . "from my own recipe," she said, "and I'm keeping all the recipes so some day Nancy can use them . . . when she marries . . . when she marries . . ."

"Gosh," said Bill. "When Nancy . . . marries." He shook his head, almost frown-

ing. Then he smiled, very quickly. "That won't happen for a long, long time yet, will it? She'll be . . . just our baby . . . for years to come. Ah, Nellie, what would we ever do without her?"

What will I do without her? The question was hammering in Nellie's pain-wrenched mind. What will I do without them? Worse, much worse. The first and last thought of the wife, of the mother: What will they do without me? They need me. They're so . . . helpless. They depend on me for so much. If I go away now, if I leave them . . . "Please, God," she cried silently. "Please."

And again she talked, faster than before. If Bill had not been so entranced and so amazed by his small daughter, he would surely have sensed in the tone of her voice, in the almost hysterical speed of her words, that something was terribly wrong. But for those few moments he failed to hear or suspect, and for many years to come he would hate himself for that failure . . . never quite knowing that never in their years together had Nellie Davidson lied to him, until that moment.

She talked more about the pie. She talked about talking to the Widow Perry about Elmer. She talked about the steak and said she hoped it was as Bill liked it best. She had put Bill's flowers in the center of the table, by now. Wild flowers, pale and young. It was still early spring; these were the first flowers Bill had brought home to her.

"Was . . . the day a good day?" she asked finally.

Bill thought quickly, wondered if he could deceive her, knew instantly that he could not. "No," he said. "I'm sorry, Nellie. I didn't do very good. I just . . . I guess I just don't know how to ask people for money. I'm awful sorry. I tried." Suddenly, he braced himself. "I'll do better tomorrow, though. Jeff Bartley owes me nine dollars and something, and Max West owes me near to twenty, for two years now. I'll see them. I'll speak right up and say 'Looky here and listen, I got to have that money.'" He looked at Nellie, hopefully. "I'll get the money we need. Don't you never doubt it, Nellie."

Her hand touched him lightly on the fore-

head. Until that moment, Bill had not realized how very tired he was. But the cool touch of Nellie's fingers, soothing him, somehow made him realize how long the day had been. He closed his eyes, leaning back.

It was always a new wonder to Bill Davidson, when his wife kissed him as she did now. It was always a new wonder that she should have seen in him anything to love.

They were very silent, for a moment. And then Nancy began to beat on the plate before her, very loudly. "Hungry," she announced. And louder, "Hungry." And then smiled, knowing so surely that her brief command would bring quick action. And it did.

Bill started to get up. "No," said Nellie Davidson. "Don't, darling. You're so tired. Let me." She began to fix the food for her tiny daughter. Her hand touched Nancy's soft, small hand, and lay there for a moment. Suddenly, she shivered. Something cold was moving through her body, something slow and deadly sure.

She bit her lips again, and forced her head

up. She took one step toward the cupboard, and one more. Then, suddenly, she fell.

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"Her heart," the doctor said. "You understand, Bill? You hear me? Her heart. It never was strong. I knew that for a long time. She didn't want me to tell you. She hadn't come to my office for so long that I didn't know there'd been any change in her condition."

He waited. Bill did not move. He sat quite straight in his chair, looking toward the door. As if he expected someone to come through that door. As if he waited for someone. He seemed to be listening for someone's voice. There was no change in his expression. He had looked like this, waited like this, for hours. He had been like this since yesterday, the doctor knew.

"Bill. Old friend." The doctor was not a sentimental man. When you see birth and death every day of your life, when you must always be hurrying from happiness to tragedy and back again, you must learn to hide senti-

ment so deep in your being that at last you seem to have no feelings at all. But there were tears in the doctor's frosty blue eyes. After a moment, his hand dropped on Bill's shoulder. "Bill."

Bill's head moved, a little only. His eyes closed. Then he got up, slowly, like an old man. He had aged years, in these last days. The light had gone out of his eyes, the gay quickness out of his step.

"Thanks, doctor," he said quietly. "Thanks. You're a good man. You're a good neighbor. Thanks."

He started toward the door.

"Bill!" In spite of himself, the doctor was suddenly afraid. He hurried forward. "Bill! Wait! You're not going out anywhere?"

"I've got a thing to do," said Bill. "I've been putting it off, too long. I've got to get it over with, now. There ain't anything else left to do. I'll see you later, doctor."

"Wait!" the doctor said again. "Tell me . . ."

"I'm a lone man, now," said Bill. "I'm not much good. I don't know much. I'm just a

. . . a barber. That's all I ever was. But now, I . . ."

He said no more. He only thought it. He said one night to Nellie, "Leave me. Forget about me. I'm not good enough for you. I'm nothing, nothing but a barber. That's all I'll ever be. You're too far above me. You can't waste your life on me." He had said all that, when it broke his heart to speak the words. He had hoped Nellie would go away, when it would have killed him if she had. And now . . . after such short years . . . she was gone. She was gone. He could not believe it, yet. He found himself still watching the door, for Nellie to come back; he found himself still listening for her voice. And yet all the time he knew he would never see her, he would never hear her . . . never anymore. She was gone. She would never come back.

"Thanks, doctor," Bill said again.

"But I haven't . . ." The doctor stopped. He was going to say "But I haven't done anything to be thanked for. I couldn't do anything. No one could have saved her. No one in the world." He felt somehow that

he was to blame, and yet he knew he was not. Nellie Davidson had been dying for a year; that was the truth. For a year, she had kept her secret. He had warned her, he had said "You must rest, you ought to go to a sanitorium"; and she said "It would cost so much, it would worry my husband so terribly. Not now. Later, maybe. Later. I'm really all right. I'm really not sick."

Now Nellie Davidson was gone.

Needing her terribly, Bill had seen her go away, had stood helpless. She had spoken only once, after that moment when she fell so awfully. "Take care of Nancy," she said, over and over. Those words, and then "I love . . . you. I'm . . . sorry. I don't want to go away." And then silence.

Bill knelt beside her bed. Bill kept saying "I'll do the best I can. I promise, Nellie. I promise."

And now he was beginning to keep the promise as he understood it, as he had meant it.

"Bill," the doctor said again.

Bill turned to face him. The hard lines

were gone from around his mouth. He was older, but there was no hate left in his eyes, now; he was resigned. The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. The Lord is my Shepherd. Blessed be Thy Name. . . .

"Don't worry, doctor," he said very quietly. "Don't never worry about me. I got a job to do. I got to get started doing it. But don't you worry. I've been a happy man. I've had more happiness in these years than most folks have in their whole lives. God's been good to me. I've got no right to complain. I'm not complaining. I'll be all right."

It took a long time to say that much. He had talked so little, the last two days and nights, that his voice seemed rusty in his throat.

He thought for a second that he saw Nellie. Then he realized what it was. The colored photograph of Nellie, there above the door. A wandering "artist" made it, one day, soon after they were married. "It don't do her justice," Bill said, "but then I shouldn't ask that much. She's awful purty, ain't she, mis-

ter?" And the "artist," who had almost forgotten how to be sincere, said very sincerely, "Mister, she's the purtiest lady I ever saw in all my life." So now the picture was there above the door.

Soft eyes, very kind. A soft, small mouth. Soft hair drawn back along her temples. So much kindness, so much sweetness, so much grace. No shadow in her eyes, no shadow in the soft smile turning the corners of her lips. And now . . .

Bill turned the crank of the telephone on the wall. He waited quite a long time. Then he heard an answering voice.

"This is Bill Davidson," he said. "I want to talk to Mrs. Palmer, at the hotel. Yes, please, ma'am. Mrs. Palmer. She's maybe not expecting me to call. But I have to talk to her. She . . . she may not be so awful anxious to talk to me, but I got to talk to her. Tell her so, please, ma'am."

He waited, his face set. Having promised, Bill Davidson was beginning now to keep a promise that would break his heart again.

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It was a long time before the Hartville people, passing the barber shop on Main street late at night, heard Bill playing his banjo again, as he used to play it every night for Nellie Davidson.

They heard him playing "Darling Nellie Gray." They hurried on, because nobody could think of anything to say or do. You can't say anything to a man whose heart is dead, whose life is empty. You can't do anything for a man like that.

Chapter V

Long, Long Way from Home

It seemed right and reasonable, to Bill, that Elmer Eeps should go along with him, on that first trip. Elmer wanted to travel, Elmer looked at trains and said "Gosh! Why can't I git on one of them?" And Elmer had been saving his money. He could buy his own ticket. He wanted to. He wanted to make the trip, so he could come back home and tell the men around the pool hall "I been east. I been way back east. And I say, give me Hartville every time. But just the same, I'll tell you this about them eastern cities. . . ."

"New York? Huh, Bill? New York? Maybe New York?"

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised," said Bill. "You kind of have to go by way of New York to get to where I'm going."

"And—and Washington? Where they got the senators? I seen a senator, once. Fat

little fellow with an awful loud voice. Washington, Bill?"

"No, Elmer. I won't be getting to Washington. Not this trip. Maybe when I get elected senator, maybe then I'll go to Washington. But that'll be a couple years, yet, don't you think?"

"Hah!" Elmer snorted dutifully. "You got a good job, now. What you want to go fooling 'round with politics for?"

"I don't," said Bill. "I don't. I'm just going on back east to see my daughter. She . . . she's ten years old next week. You know that, Elmer? Ten years old! Gosh, to think . . ."

To think!

Years, now, since he had even seen his daughter. Years, now, since Nellie died, so suddenly, so terribly . . . so young.

And the years were long. That first year . . . he would never dare let himself remember the stark black loneliness of that first year, after Nellie died, after Mrs. Palmer took Nancy away with her.

"Her mother was a lady," Bill said, humbly,

slowly. "I know her mother never should of married a no-account like me."

The grim thin woman nodded, harshly.

"I know you got no use for me, and never had, since Nellie married me."

This time, she didn't even bother to nod. She just sat staring at him, with opaque empty eyes.

Bill shivered, slightly. So much concentrated hate was something new to him. To think that Nellie was this woman's sister! To think of what this woman must be thinking, now!

He couldn't say the words. He wanted to burst out suddenly and say "You think . . . Nellie died . . . because she didn't have proper care . . . and worked too hard . . . to help me . . . You think I'm to blame . . ."

He couldn't say that. If he did, she would most surely nod again, or maybe even answer. "Yes. Of course." For Mrs. Palmer thought, and she wanted Bill Davidson to know that she thought, that he had killed her sister. Just that. Just that brutally and positively.

If you had told her she was cruel, she would not even have listened to you. If you had said to her "You're unfair, horribly unfair. You have no right to set yourself up as the judge of other people's lives," she would probably have thought that you were quite insane.

Mrs. Palmer believed only in one person in all the world—in Mrs. Palmer. She had fought against Nellie's marriage, at first with scorn and contempt, and then with vitriolic rage. Well, she had lost her battle. This man standing before her, this shambling man with the marks of failure on his face and in his shabby clothes, had married Nellie, her own sister. Had so become—she shuddered inwardly—a relative of hers. She hated him. Quite calmly and impartially, she decided all her hate was justified. She did not care if he was sorry, now. Sorrow? She was, of course, sorry that Nellie was dead. Oh, yes, of course; one is sorry, when one's sister dies. But more than that, and she was not ashamed to say it, she was glad. "She's free of him, now," the grim woman would have said.

"She's free of this common barber she married. Oh, how she must have regretted her mistake, long ago! How she must have wished that she had heeded my advice!" She quite forgot, ignored, the letters from Nellie that said "I'm happy. I love him. He's wonderful. He's the one man in the world. You were so wrong." To Mrs. Palmer, truth could only be what she believed; what was said by anyone else as true, even by her own sister, must coincide with the beliefs of Mrs. Palmer, or it could only be a lie.

So she had quite decided. In fact, it was she who broached the subject, much too soon. That is, it would have been so much kinder if she had waited, even for another day. But she had no desire to be kind to Bill Davidson.

"You have no right to attempt to bring up Nellie's daughter," Mrs. Palmer said. "She needs a woman's care."

Bill could not answer, except to bow his head. To say "We both needed her, we both needed her and now she's gone" . . . He couldn't say it. He couldn't parade his utter heartbreak before Mrs. Palmer, then or ever.

"What are you?" the woman demanded then. "I've seen how you live, at last. I knew it would be like this. This . . . barber shop . . ." she made the words an insult . . . "this town . . ." the words were biting scorn . . . "your life work" . . . Bill flinched a little at the acid in those last words, but he still kept silent.

"She's her mother's daughter," Bill said finally. And that was all that he would ever be able to say, in utmost praise of Nancy Davidson. To be like her mother meant to be perfect in all things. To be her mother's daughter meant to be immeasurably far above him.

A humble man, an arrogant woman, face to face again. And for the last time. Mrs. Palmer had made that very clear.

"I don't propose to stay in this town another day," she said crisply. "I have done all that can be done. Now I am going back. Well, have you decided?"

Bill had quite decided. His duty was so plain.

"How can I raise my daughter?" he asked

humbly of the Widow Perry. "I don't know how. Her mother . . . Ah, her mother knew. But I don't know much of anything. All I know is barbering. A little tiny girl like Nancy . . . She'd get sick, maybe. I wouldn't know what to do if Nancy got sick. I . . . I'd just go kind of crazy. I'm an awful dumb man about children. I wouldn't be any help at all, if Nancy was took sick. And she keeps asking when her mother's coming home. She keeps asking me why don't her mother come and get her and hold her and talk to her. I can't tell her. I can't even talk to Nancy, now. I'm afraid to go near her. I'm afraid. I tell you, I'm just dumb. I just don't know."

Mrs. Palmer was thinking something very much like that, as Bill stood facing her in the hotel lobby in Hartville. And yet something very different. I doubt if ever, then or later, there was the slightest feeling of what we call love for Nancy, in the frozen box that Mrs. Palmer called her heart. I am quite sure she was thinking only of her triumph, then and for years afterward. For triumph, to her,

meant seeing the last of Bill Davidson, meant finally and utterly and forever shutting him out of contact with her family. She thought of Nancy not as the daughter of Bill and Nellie Davidson, but as the daughter of her sister, as therefore her niece, as therefore her exclusive property.

Only Bill Davidson stood in her way. And Bill Davidson was too weak, too unimportant, to disturb her plans at all.

"Well?" she said.

"You're right," Bill answered. "It wouldn't be fair to Nancy for me to try to raise her, all alone the way I am."

"I suppose you're thinking of marrying again?"

The words burned like a whip across Bill's face. He was angry, more angry than he had ever been, for one hot second. Then he held himself, forced himself to be quiet. He simply answered "No. Never."

Her smile was a sneer.

"You . . . you don't like me any at all, do you, Missus Palmer?" Bill had managed, finally.

"No," she said. "I never did. And now . . ."

And now?

Bill Davidson was born to be the kind of man who always does what he thinks is right, even when it breaks his heart. He had decided—with more prompting than he guessed, from the very clever Mrs. Palmer—that it would be wrong and unfair for him to keep Nancy with him, now that Nellie was . . . was gone. He had decided Nancy could never grow up to be a lady like her mother, if she lived there back of the barber shop, with only Bill to guide her, teach her, guard her. He had decided that he, just plain Bill, a barber, nothing more, could never be both father and mother to his motherless small daughter. He had decided that much, and yet the final words were more than he could say.

So Mrs. Palmer said the last words for him.

"I will take Nancy with me. She will have the best of care. She will live in a good home. She will grow up among people of her own kind. She will go to the right school."

She paused. Bill gulped a little.

"You think . . . she'll be happy? Eh, Missus Palmer?"

"The child isn't old enough yet to know what is really happening. By the time she is a year older and really begins to understand, she will have forgotten . . . all of this."

"All?" Bill whispered the word. "All?" No. He knew better than that. Now Mrs. Palmer was saying what could not be true. Nancy must surely remember her mother, always. Nancy must remember . . . him . . . her father.

"It's . . . awful hard to see her go," he whispered.

"I'm sure it is." The words meant ugly things she was too clever to say. For she had decided things fully, in her own mind, as was her habit always: This man has no money, he's worthless, he thinks because I have money I will give him money, now . . . because of Nellie's daughter. But I won't do it. I'll never give this man a cent. He can't fool me. He can't make me believe a man like him could really care what happens to Nancy.

Some people can make themselves believe

what they want to believe, so quickly and so thoroughly that they never for a second wonder if the other person has any rights at all. Mrs. Palmer was like that.

She began to talk. Slow, remorseless, positive, she pointed out what she could do for Nancy, and how little Bill could do. And she went further. Nellie had wanted to leave Hartville, she said suddenly, and as Bill started, white-faced, protesting desperately, she rushed on "Oh, she didn't tell you! She pitied you too much to tell you, I suppose! But she wrote it all to me, again and again! Nellie hated Hartville. She hated living the way she *had* to live, as your wife. She wanted to get away from all of this. She would have left you, soon . . . as soon as Nancy was old enough for the trip . . ."

She lied. She lied terribly and inexcusably. Never a word of what she said had come to her from Nellie. And she knew she lied, and yet she would have told you calmly "I'm an honest woman"; yet she told herself she had the right to lie, for the sake of motives she knew positively were good.

ON THE AIR—KERRY, NANCY, JUST PLAIN BILL ACTING OUT ONE OF THE SCENES THAT HAS ENDEARED THEM TO MILLIONS OF RADIO LISTENERS

"She hated you!" she cried out, suddenly. Her trump card. The most bitter blow that she could strike.

Bill's face was dead white. His hands were doubled into fists. He moved a little, only a little, toward Mrs. Palmer. She was suddenly afraid. A man like this, a common, vulgar creature like this, might do something . . . desperate! He might even dare to hurt her, Mrs. Palmer!

She leaped up. She cowered back. She thought in panic of screaming for help. She had never been afraid before in her life.

But Bill wasn't moving, any more. He simply stood with his hands loose at his sides, with his shoulders drooping, his eyes dead.

"I don't believe you, Mrs. Palmer," he said in a voice like a hoarse croak. "I don't know why you say such things. But I don't believe you. I know Nellie . . . Nellie . . . never wanted to leave me. She was happy. We were happy. Maybe I ain't been much of a husband, but I did the best I could, I did the best I ever knew how. Nellie didn't want to go away. She couldn't of ever said such

things in her letters, because it wasn't true. I don't believe you."

The last words were a whisper. And now Mrs. Palmer was no longer afraid, she was calmly sure of herself again. She almost smiled. She almost purred.

"I'm sorry I said it," she murmured. "It does no good, now. It's too late. Poor Nellie . . ." She managed an artful catch in her throat. She would never have admitted it, but Mrs. Palmer had always known she was a superlative actress. That, she admitted to herself, was a part of her particular greatness. She did even acting so well that it was real. She went on, very much pleased with the effect of her last thrust. "Nellie often wrote to me about Nancy. She dreaded to think of Nancy growing up like the other children in this town. She wanted Nancy to have the advantages she had. She said she knew of course that you would never be able to provide any advantages for Nancy. She had . . . more or less . . . appealed to me. And I knew so well that you would resent anything I might offer to do, that I was forced to tell Nellie I

could do nothing. But . . . of course . . . now . . ."

It's different, now, Bill Davidson whispered in his heart. It's all different. This isn't the same world as it was a week ago. Nellie isn't alive any more. Nellie has gone away and left us. No. Left me. Her sister says Nellie wanted her to take care of Nancy. I can't say I don't believe her. I can't even say I want to see it in Nellie's letters. She wouldn't show them to me. I have to take her word for it. Or else I have to tell her to go on away and not bother my daughter and me, ever again. And I can't do that. I can't. I've got to quit being selfish. I've got to think of Nancy. Nancy's going to be a lady like her mother. That's what her mother asked me to promise: To take care of Nancy. And I promised I would. I've got to do it. And it's best for Nancy, it's best if she goes away with her aunt, now, and has all the chances I couldn't give her here. And I'll work and save my money and maybe get ahead enough so after a while I can say I can take care of Nancy, myself, now. And then she'll be back with

me, and we'll be together, and what right have I got to let a year or so make so much difference?

"I'm leaving on the evening train." He heard Mrs. Palmer's flat, positive voice, as from a distance. "If I am to take Nancy with me, I must begin making arrangements at once. Naturally, I will pack her things. And also I will wire ahead to have a nurse engaged for Nancy, at my home. But I have no desire to argue with you. I have told you what Nellie said in her letters. I think even you must realize that Nancy has the right to the things you will never be able to give her."

"Maybe, some day," Bill began. But then he stopped. No use promising what you can't deliver! Better wait and see. This woman doesn't like you, never did. Well, that's her privilege. You can't even blame her. You know better than she knows, you knew it always . . . that Nellie should have married someone rich and fine, not someone like you. A barber. Nothing but a barber who can't even make much of a living, in a little town like Hartville. Nellie never belonged living

in the rooms back of the barber shop. You always knew it. You always said some day you'd get enough money to build a house, a nice house with a rose garden beside it. Nellie always smiled and said "Yes, some day." Some day! Now . . .

"All right," Mrs. Palmer heard him whispering. "All right. Yes. All right." He didn't say any more. He simply turned away and went to the window and stood looking out on Main street.

Nellie walked up the street with him, from the depot, the first day home. She wanted to know the names of all the people they saw; she wanted to know who owned each store; she wanted to know all about Hartville. "You like living here, don't you?" she asked, and Bill said "It's home." And not until now had he wondered if Nellie really meant what she seemed to mean when she asked that question, or if she had really been saying "I came to this town as your wife, because I am your wife, but oh, I hate it, I want to go back home."

He would never know, now. He could not

ask Mrs. Palmer for proof. He could not ask Nellie for denial.

Maybe she had been unhappy, all this time. Well, she was finished with all unhappiness, now. But Nellie's daughter . . .

"You'd better hurry!" Bill said suddenly, loudly, almost shouting it. "If you want to come back to the barber shop with me, now, come on. But hurry. I'm only a man. I can't stand too much. You'd better get it over with. You're right. Ah, you're right. But don't talk about it any more. Don't ask me to say all right any more. Not now. I can't. Come on!"

She grinned. There is no other word for the expression on her proud, sharp face. She grinned in smug and self-applauding triumph. Then she followed Bill back along Main street, prim, aloof, superlatively unconscious of all stares. She had waited a long time, but from this moment, she was sure, there would be no contamination in her family from a barber named Bill Davidson.

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Nancy cried when the train started and she

saw that her father was not going with her on this fascinating strange thing that made so many noises. Nancy cried, suddenly, wildly, and reached her hands out to him, the way she always did when she wanted Bill to hold her in his arms. But the train was moving very fast, now. Bill could not have followed. He must stand there, watching. He saw his daughter, for one last second. Then he saw the long train roaring away toward the east. He watched the train until it was out of sight. He might have gone on standing there, but Elmer touched his arm.

"We better go home, now, huh, Bill? Huh?"

Home!

"Yes, Elmer. Yes," Bill whispered. "We'd better . . . go . . . home . . . now." And went back to the emptiness where there had been such happiness, and said to Elmer "I don't feel like I'd better have any company tonight, Elmer. So you just run along. But we'll be open for business bright and early in the morning. First thing we'll do, we'll kind of polish all the razors. Then we'll see if we

get any customers. I got to make money, Elmer, from now on. I got to make more money than I ever made before. I got to do it."

A long pause.

"Good night, Elmer," Bill said. He turned away and started up the street toward the barber shop. Alone.

* * * * * * *

And that was years ago. How many? Bill caught his breath, one day, realizing he had not even seen his daughter for five years. Always, every so often, he had planned the trip. Then things would happen. He was very sick, for a long time, and the doctor and the hospital cost all the money he had saved, left him in debt besides. He hated himself for such weakness, but the only thing he could do was go to work again to earn more money, save more money. Then, of course, he kept sending money to Mrs. Palmer, every week. Not much; a few dollars, never more. He lived so cheaply that people whispered and worried about him. ("He don't eat enough to keep body and soul together," the Widow Perry complained. "He goes without every-

thing just to save a little more. And then he sends all he saves off to that ugly woman, Mrs. Palmer. It ain't right.") Bill never knew that people talked about his grim and constant saving. When Elmer stepped in front of the lumber truck and got run over and had to go to the hospital, Bill was almost ready for the trip back east, but of course there was nothing for him to do but pay to have Elmer brought back to health, and so he did it, and that left him with no savings and bills to pay, besides, but he started all over again and meanwhile he wrote with humble apologies to Mrs. Palmer: "I had to miss a week so I'm making up part of what I didn't send that week this week and I'll try to make up the rest next week. Please give my love to little Nancy. She must be getting a big girl, now."

No letters from Nancy, of course. Little girls who have only started in school can't write letters, very well.

No pictures of Nancy, either. Some aunts might have sent snapshots, at least. Not so Mrs. Palmer. She had answered only three of Bill's letters, in five years. And then she

wrote only a curt line or two, and she confided in her friends, "The man is insufferable. You would think he would have the common sense to realize . . ."

Bill went on saving. He had an unbelievable stroke of fortune, for a while. A road-building crew came to town, and they were all city men who liked to get shaved in the barber shop every day. Bill sent more money, then, to Mrs. Palmer, and yet felt he could save a little more. He had a feeling, sometimes, that he ought not to save any at all; that he ought to send all the money to Mrs. Palmer to pay for Nancy's keep.

"But I got to see her," he said. "I got to. Five years now. She probably won't even know me. I got to see my daughter. It won't be but just for a couple of weeks. Then I'll come back and get to work and save up and keep right on saving and sending . . ." That was his life. The years went by, and he had almost forgotten that he had ever lived away from the barber shop at all. He opened the shop at seven in the morning; the lights were

still on, he still waited for customers, until nine every night; only on Sunday did he draw down the curtain across the big front window. He helped people when he could, with a little money—and went hungry, sometimes, to make up for what he had given away. He found it so hard to have any money left to live on, after he had sent the week's money order to Mrs. Palmer, and put away the week's share of the savings he must have, if he was ever to go east to see his daughter.

It seems almost incredible, that Bill Davidson should have had to work so hard and for so long, before he dared to leave the barber shop and start east to see Nancy. To people in Hartville, it was incredible that he was able to keep going, living as he did, going without the things everyone has to have. He wore the same overcoat every winter; his shoes were pitiful, shined so carefully . . . but with holes through the soles. It was just that bad. A good week at the barber shop might produce enough to pay for the money order and to set up something more in his savings, but then

there would be almost nothing left for the bare necessities of even such a pinched and pitiful life as his.

But he found no cause to complain. He knew of nothing in the world that mattered as much as doing his job, keeping his promise to Nellie. He tried to explain it to Elmer, many times, and to the Widow Perry, so often that after a while he had to ask her "Let's try and not talk about it any more."

"If I let Mrs. Palmer take care of Nancy and spend her money, that would be all wrong," Bill would say, slowly, having said it so often.

"But she's rich," the Widow Perry protested.

"I know," Bill said. "But that's not it. Nancy's my daughter. It's my job to take care of Nancy. I couldn't keep Nancy here with me. It wouldn't be the right place for Nancy to be. But one thing I know, if I can't have Nancy with me at least I can pay Nancy's way. That's only fair."

"But you're getting old, you're wearing yourself out."

"I'm all right," Bill would answer, ending all discussion. For he believed it. He knew it. He was lonely; yes. No one ever knew how lonely Bill Davidson was, through all those years, living alone, being alone always at night, spending long hours walking through the darkness, after he had closed the shop, because he could not quite stand to be there in the silent rooms, because he had to drug himself with utter weariness before he could sleep.

He got so he played the banjo, almost every night. Sometimes, rarely at first but then more often, Elmer would come and sit with Bill and they would play duets, Bill at the banjo, Elmer tooting his ancient mouth organ. It wasn't very good music. And then, sometimes, Bill would stop in the middle of a tune, and Elmer, staring, would realize that Bill had forgotten he was even in the room. Bill was remembering Nellie, Bill was seeing a face that had been gone from this world for years.

Elmer knew a secret he had never told even to the Widow Perry, to whom he told almost everything.

Elmer knew that Bill talked to Nellie, sometimes. Talked to his dead wife, as if she could hear him, as if she were there listening. Talked often about their daughter. (All the pride Bill Davidson had was summed up in the thing he said sometimes, "I'm keeping my promise the best I know how, Nellie. I ain't much account, but I'm doing the best I can.")

The day Bill got the letter saying that Nancy had just started school, he asked Elmer not to come over, in the evening. He wanted to be alone. And probably he talked to Nellie that night, as if she were there and could hear and understand. Being so proud to know that their daughter had started in school, being so glad that his work had helped a little in that, at least.

For Bill believed he was helping. Mrs. Palmer never acknowledged the money orders he sent. But she did not return them. So, of course, she must be using the money for things for Nancy. And to Bill, testing all things by the only rules he knew: The rule that in Hartville a whole family lived, very often, on as much as he sent each week for Nancy's

care . . . Bill truly thought he was paying all of Nancy's expenses, buying her little dresses, sending her to school, relieving her aunt of financial burden. ("I couldn't have your sister spending her money. You see that, don't you, Nellie?" Elmer heard Bill asking, one night, talking to emptiness there in the shadowed shop. "She's mighty kind to take care of our little girl. I'm sorry I ever had hard feelings against your sister. But they're all gone now. She's a fine woman, to do what she's doing. But about the money . . . I hate to talk to you about money, Nellie, but you know how I feel . . . don't you?" And Elmer thought that Bill must really believe a voice had answered him. For only a little while later, Bill came to find Elmer, and he was smiling like a man who has heard good news, and he wanted Elmer to play something happy on the mouth organ, and so Elmer did, as well as he could.)

And the years had gone by. Bill worked, always worked. Bill grew older, quieter. People forgot that there had ever been a Nellie Davidson. Newcomers never heard the story

of Nellie and Bill and little Nancy. Many who should have remembered were almost startled when they saw Bill going down to the postoffice, before Christmas, carrying presents he had picked as well as he could for a little girl he had not seen in years.

People took Bill Davidson for granted. Nobody ever knew who first said "Don't ever call him Mister Davidson. Just plain Bill, that's him." Everybody said it, though, as time went by. "Just Plain Bill." It would probably have surprised most of the people who used the words to know that they were almost an accolade. In fact, almost no one in Hartville knew what an accolade was, or even cared. They only knew that Bill Davidson was always there, and he did a lot of kind things without wanting anybody to know about it, and if things were so bad that you were desperate you could always borrow a little money from Bill.

That was the strangest thing about it. Most people, if they stopped to think, would have realized that every dollar earned was terribly important to Bill. Yet people bor-

rowed money from him, every so often, and he did not know how to refuse their pleas. Some of them paid back what they borrowed, but many did not. But nobody ever heard Bill ask for the return of a loan. Nobody ever heard him say what so many of us have so often . . . "If the people who owe me money would all pay it back, today, I'd be almost a rich man."

He went along, going without things he should have had, working too hard, eating too little, saving all the time. He never failed to send money to Mrs. Palmer. He wrote long letters, infrequently, because he could not express himself very well in written words —but more, because he felt in his heart how Mrs. Palmer would sneer at his crabbed writing, the words he was not sure how to spell. And, anyhow, he said, "I can't tell Mrs. Palmer what to do, she knows better than I do."

The Widow Perry wondered, and said so. Elmer Eeps wondered, too. They talked about it so often and so long at a time that people began to whisper about a possible romance between the widow and Elmer. Noth-

ing would have made the widow angrier, nothing would have frightened Elmer more, than to know that as the years went by people began to take it for granted that some day the widow and Elmer would be married. Bill and his troubles had drawn them together; that was all they thought about. And yet there was nothing they could do to help Bill or to make his life any easier.

It was the Widow Perry who suggested to Elmer that he ought to start saving money, too. "How'm I going to save money when I ain't got any?" was an instant answer from a puzzled Elmer, and when he realized that the widow expected him to work and earn money, he was much upset. Work, to Elmer, was an anathema. And yet before he knew quite how it had happened, he was working at odd jobs here and there, and handing over his money to the Widow Perry, to be saved for him against the day when Bill might go east . . . and he, Elmer, would go along. "Because I'll worry about Bill Davidson every second he's out of this town," the widow said. "You got to be along to take care of him.

You ain't much good and he'll probably be better off without you than with. But at least you'll be there to write back and tell me if anything happens."

She could not have told Elmer what she thought might happen. She knew that Bill meant only to go back east and visit for a few days. He had to have money for the hotel—he had planned all that—"because of course, naturally, I couldn't expect to move in at Missus Palmer's house," he explained. He would spend a few days, being with his daughter as much as possible. He would want to have new clothes so his daughter wouldn't be ashamed of him, and money enough to buy presents for Nancy, and money enough to take her to the circus, if there was a circus in town, or wherever she might like to go. It sounded like a fortune, to Bill, the amount of money he would have to spend; and yet this one trip had to be perfect, he must have enough for anything, and he must have a little extra, too, to make up for the weeks when he would be out of the barber shop and so unable to earn money for the regular weekly remit-

tance. . . . He had counted on everything.

And ten years went by, before Bill's one dream had the chance to come true. Ten years since Nellie had died, ten years since Mrs. Palmer had taken Nancy away with her and Bill had stood looking after a train that carried a tiny girl who kept crying "Daddy Bill!" Ten years, and one day he looked at himself in the mirror and could not quite believe what he saw, for he saw gray hair at his temples, he saw his face changed, grown older than he was in years. He was surprised, but not at all unhappy. What had happened to him meant nothing at all. If in ten years he had done twenty years of work, if in ten years he had known no laughter and no daily bread but work, it had been worth it. Now, at last, he could go to see his daughter.

And he went, and Elmer Eeps went with him.

Bill was surprised and dismayed to see how many people came down to the depot to see him take the train. He was very sorry about it, because he suspected (and correctly) that someone must have told all these friends

and neighbors where he was going, what he was going to do.

"Your new suit looks awful nice. It's almost like in the movie magazines," Vangy Holcomb whispered.

"Gosh!" said Bill. And could not help being glad to know that at least he looked well enough so his daughter would not be ashamed of him.

"Your daughter's going to be mighty glad to see her paw, and she'll be right proud of him, too," said Saul Bartley. It was probably the first time in his life Saul Bartley had ever paid anyone a compliment.

"Gosh!" said Bill again, and shook hands heavily. There wasn't anything else to do. And yet he hoped, he hoped with terror in his heart, that Saul Bartley might be right.

"You be sure and take good care of him," the Widow Perry said commandingly to Elmer. "If anything goes wrong, you send me a telegram right away quick. You understand me, now?"

"But telegraphs cost money," Elmer protested.

"Here, then. You take this. If you have to send a telegram, pay for it out of this. But don't you dast spend this money on any of your own foolishments," the widow said. She slipped a ten dollar bill into Elmer's startled hand. (It was the first time in her life that the Widow Perry had ever given away money without getting a signature on a note before she let go of her hard-earned cash.)

The train came in and people crowded up to shake hands with Bill and wish him luck and say "You might send a feller a postal card from New York. Gosh, that must be a town!" They all kept saying "Good luck," and although no one of them knew what was ahead for Bill, somehow many of them felt sorry for him. There were fathers in that group. It had never happened to any of them, not to see one's own child at all in ten years, not even to know if one's own child would remember its father. That was going to happen to Bill. And there were strong men in that crowd who would have been deathly afraid to face what Bill must face so soon.

But Bill did not think about that. He had

a simple and straightforward mind. He thought only one thing. "Now at last I'm going to see Nancy." Nothing more. He had prayed, he had talked to Nellie as if she were there and could hear and understand; he had told her "I'll be with Nancy in just a little while now. With our daughter, Nellie. It's been a long time but then I never was much good on getting things done. But I did the best I could. And now I'm going, finally. And you'll be there with us, won't you?" He waited, then he whispered, "Yes, Nellie. I know. Yes."

And now the train sped eastward, and Elmer was in his glory, strutting up and down the cars to be sure that everyone had a chance to see his brand-new yellow shoes with the nobby toes. And Bill smiled more than he had smiled in years. He laughed at Elmer's jokes, he began to be the Bill Davidson people remembered from a long time ago when young Bill came home from the war. He vaguely remembered the towns through which they passed, and so to Elmer he was a fount of all possible knowledge. He answered Elmer's

questions, hour after hour, far into the night. He rescued Elmer when that delighted traveler went wandering away from the train, at a brief stop, and was nearly left behind.

City people stared at Bill and Elmer. Some of them sneered, some of them only smiled. One old lady asked point-blank where they were going, and very simply—and very proudly—Bill told her about Nancy. He was surprised to realize that he had told the whole story, all of it. He was even more surprised by the strange look on the old lady's face. He couldn't see anything particularly unusual about his story. He couldn't imagine why the old lady looked like she was crying. He thought perhaps he had said something he shouldn't have said, and he went away, and the old lady looked after him and prayed for him. (She was going on east to visit her fourth son. She was a very old lady, and her husband had been dead for eight years, now, and she lived a little part of each year with each of her children in turn, and she was not as happy as her children thought she should be; they could never understand why she

was not happy, and she would never tell them. A home of one's own costs money, and when one has no money one gives thanks for thoughtful children, and asks for no more.)

And this was the town. This was where Bill and Nellie had stood one night while Bill forced himself to plead, "Go back. Don't go with me. You'll always regret, if you do. I'm not good enough. Go back."

It had been a red-brick station and a long platform of heavy planks. Bill had always remembered, accurately. But now he saw a huge, long building, and wide platforms of cement. There was a train shed overhead; there were more people than Bill could remember ever seeing before.

"The station's . . . kind of changed from how I remembered it," Bill told Elmer. "It didn't use to be quite so large and full of people."

Elmer blinked. "It sure is a surprise to me how many people got how many places to go to they're in a hurry to git to," he opined. And followed Bill through the crowds on the station platform, and along a street where

Bill could not remember ever having been before. And yet he knew he had walked along this same street, one night, hurrying to the train that was to take him home to Hartville . . . and out of Nellie's life forever. Everything had changed. He had been able to remember each small detail of that day, through all these years; and now he saw that what he remembered so well must have been gone for years.

And it was like that about the street, the street where great elm trees had met overhead, the street with so many quiet houses set back among trees, the street where Nellie lived.

The trees were gone. Oh, there were still trees, of a sort—tame little scrawny trees caged around with wire and scattered sparsely here and there. And other little trees in flower pots, in front of tall apartment buildings that already looked old and a little shabby—but none of them had been here when Bill walked down this street, only—it seemed to him—a few years before.

A town changes too much, too soon. You remember a town as looking just so. You go back to the town, and everything you remember is gone. You begin to wish that you had not come back, because the memory of what was means so much more than the realization of what is.

It was like that with Bill. There was no reason why he should be unhappy because the city had grown large and bustling and gaudy, in the years since he marched up a street along with other soldiers coming back from Cuba. He had not come back to see a city; he had come only to see his little daughter, after ten long years. And yet he had believed—or hoped—that for a little while he could live again through the brief time he spent in this city, before Nellie said "I love you. I want to marry you, now." And now he knew that part of his dream could not come true.

But he would see his daughter, in just a little while. A few more houses, one more block, and then he knew he would come close to a white picket fence, and he would see be-

hind the fence a rambling, quiet house with green shutters and a wide front porch, and a rose garden at one side. He would be able, then, to close his eyes, and open them again, and see Nellie as she came to meet him at the gate, that first night, so long ago . . . so very long ago.

He had forgotten Elmer. And Elmer, who was not very clever, was clever enough to realize now that nothing he said would even be heard, by a Bill who was almost a stranger to him. Elmer dropped back a little, walking gingerly. The new shoes were tight, his feet were suffering, he had begun to wonder if the joys of being a world traveler can quite compensate a man for a blister on his heel. And, anyhow, he was lonely, now. He was worrying about Bill, too. He was wondering just what the Widow Perry had thought might happen to Bill, that would be so terrible, when she said "Send me a telegram right away if anything goes wrong." He couldn't imagine anything that could happen. To him, Bill was the wisest and the strongest man in the world. To him, Bill was . . . Bill.

He was startled when Bill, a little ahead of him, stopped still and said "It's there. It ain't gone. It's still there."

Elmer, looking past Bill, saw a big house back of a fence. That was all. But Bill, looking past that fence, was many years younger, for a moment; was young Bill Davidson, just come home from the war; was a lover waiting eagerly to see for the first time the girl he loves with all his heart—whose face he has never seen. Bill knew, now, that Nellie was here with him. Bill dreamed with his eyes wide open.

He had waited so long for this moment, he had worked so hard to make this possible. Now he wanted to go slowly. Now he wanted each moment to mean as much as it could.

He was no poet. He was just plain Bill, barber, from Main street, back in Hartville. If you had asked him to tell you what he was feeling, what he was thinking, he could not have told you. He only knew that if everything else in the world had changed, the memory of the happiness that began at this gate was as clear in his heart as if it were

happening at this moment. That was all he thought. That, and the thought that made his heart beat fast: Nancy is there in the house. I'll go up to the door and ring the bell and somebody will come to the door and I'll say "I'm Bill Davidson. My daughter, Nancy, lives here. I want to see my daughter."

For she was there. He had made sure of that. He had written to Mrs. Palmer, weeks ago, saying on what day he would arrive, saying "I'm anxious to see Nancy. I don't want to put you to any bother, though. I'll be staying at a hotel. I can't be there but a few days, anyhow. But I want to be with Nancy as much as I can while I'm there."

He had not said the rest of it, not even to Elmer, not even to the Widow Perry. He had not said "I hope that maybe Mrs. Palmer will say it's all right for Nancy to come home with me, now. If only for the summer. I've been saving for that, too. I didn't say anything about it, but I've got enough money saved so Nancy can make the trip back home

to Hartville with me and I'll have plenty so she can have a good time all summer long before she has to go back to school in the fall."

He had hoped, for so long, for so bitterly long, that something would happen, that he—who had never learned how to make money—would suddenly find some way to make a great deal of money. Because, if he were rich, he could say to Mrs. Palmer "I'm as able to give my daughter the things she deserves to have as you are, now. So I want my daughter to be with me all the time, from now on." That had been a dream he had found out very soon could never come true. He was not born to be rich, or even successful; he knew it; he was resigned to it. But at least he knew from now on he could earn enough money so that Nancy could spend her summers with him, and never want for anything. A substitute for a dream is not so bad, if you are like Bill Davidson; if you learn not to ask for much in life, and never to expect to have all your wishes come true.

And he opened the gate. Then for the first

time in many minutes he remembered Elmer.

"I . . . I'm sorry, Elmer," Bill said, "but you . . . you know how it is, don't you? I mean . . . you know . . . how it is?"

"Sure," said Elmer. "I know how it is. Sure, Bill."

"You won't feel bad about waiting a while? I don't see any place to set down, but there's nice shade along here and . . . Gosh, Elmer, I hate to walk away and leave you. But . . . you know . . ."

"I know how it is," said Elmer, grinning. "You go on in and see Nancy, Bill. I got a place all picked out there under that there tree. I'm going to set myself down and I'm going to take off these here shoes and give my toes some fresh air treatment for a spell. I'll be all okay. Yes, sir, ee. You go on in." Awkwardly, surprised at himself for doing it, he patted Bill on the shoulder. "After while I'd kind of like to shake hands with Nancy," he said. "After while."

"You bet. You bet, Elmer. She'll be glad to know you, too. Maybe she even remembers you."

KERRY ON THE PORCH OF THE LITTLE HOUSE HE BOUGHT FOR NANCY WHEN THEY MARRIED

"She was awful young the last time she seen me."

"Yes. But maybe she remembers." Maybe she remembers! Bill wondered how it would feel if he said "Hello, Nancy," and she just stood staring at him and then finally said "I don't know who you are." That would hurt. No reason why it should, you can't expect a little baby to remember, when she's a grown-up girl, almost; and yet you wish she would. You're her father, you can't quite stand thinking she might not know it; after all, that's all you've got, and you've held onto that one thing for so long, so hard . . .

He was at the door. He realized all at once that he was cold as ice, all over. A hot day, but he was shivering with cold. Nerves, of course. He was amused at himself. But then, after all, when a man waits for so long for just one certain hour, he gets pretty excited about it when the hour finally comes. He can't blame himself for that.

Bill squared his shoulders. Nervously, he tugged his stiff shirt cuffs down a little farther. He stared at them. Yes, still clean. He

wanted to be clean, he wanted to look dressed up and kind of prosperous, when he first faced Mrs. Palmer. It wouldn't matter so much to Nancy; she wouldn't stop to notice things like that; but Mrs. Palmer would. Well, he didn't need to be afraid of Mrs. Palmer. Not now. Not any more. He had money in his pocket, he had enough money to pay his own way all the way, and even Mrs. Palmer ought to have forgotten to hate him, after all these years. She might be pleasant, now. She might be glad to see him.

("You wrote all those letters and she never wrote to you but three times. She never answered anything you asked about Nancy. She didn't even answer when you wrote to say you were coming to see Nancy." Bill heard something whispering all that to him, and he couldn't help listening.)

He rang the doorbell, fiercely, long and loud. He waited. Then he rang the bell again. And yet again, before he heard movement inside the door. Now he squared his shoulders. It might be Nancy herself, com-

ing to the door. It might be Nancy. If it was, what would he say? How could he start out? Just say "Hello, I'm your father"? No. He'd have to do it differently than that. But how? He didn't know. He caught his breath. He ought to be old enough, by now, not to act like a scared kid. But that's what he was, he knew, he couldn't help knowing.

The door opened. It revealed neither Nancy nor Mrs. Palmer. It revealed a tall, dark, saturnine man in impeccable clothes, who stared at Bill, up and down, and did not smile or say "Come in."

"I . . . I'm Bill Davidson," Bill managed at last.

"I know."

"I came to see my daughter. Nancy. She's my daughter, and Mrs. Palmer knows I'm coming. I wrote to Mrs. Palmer to expect me."

The dark man took his time about answering. He was still studying Bill, as if he studied some amusing if potentially dangerous new animal.

"I said I came to see my daughter. You tell Mrs. Palmer it's Bill Davidson. I guess you work for her. . . ."

"I am Mrs. Palmer's attorney," the man said then. "Mrs. Palmer is not here. She asked me to talk to you."

"What?"

"Mrs. Palmer left for Europe three days ago. She will be in Europe for the next year, if not longer."

"But my daughter . . . Nancy . . ." Bill was almost shouting. He had come so far, he had expected anything in the world but this. "My daughter . . . never mind about Mrs. Palmer. . . . I'm here to see Nancy. . . ."

"Mrs. Palmer," the dark man said slowly, "took . . . her niece . . . to Europe with her."

Bill gasped and stepped back. The man was lying. He must be lying. It couldn't be true. Even Mrs. Palmer wouldn't do a thing like this. Even Mrs. Palmer couldn't . . .

"You're a liar," Bill heard himself say then. "You're lying. Get out of my way! My daughter's here! I'm going to see her."

The dark man did not move.

"Listen, Mr. Davidson," he said, "Mrs. Palmer has apparently handled matters rather badly. That is due to her natural dislike for hurting you. So I volunteered to say what she did not feel she could say, even to you. Mrs. Palmer has begun to realize that your daughter is in danger . . ."

"Danger?" Bill shouted the word. "Danger?"

"Yes," the dark man said. "From you."

And then, while Bill stood staring, silent, utterly without the power to speak at all, the dark man told him the truth.

Nancy Davidson had been brought up, told from the first that her father and mother were both dead. Nancy Davidson, he said, was being sheltered from her father, for her own sake. Nancy was called Nancy Palmer, had always been called that, would always be called that . . . unless Bill wished to cause ugly trouble, wished to hurt his daughter. . . . "She knows her father was a barber," the man said quietly. "She's very ashamed about that. She doesn't want her friends to know it. They won't

know, and she can go on being happy where she belongs, in her own circle, away from . . . what you seem to wish to drag her back to . . . unless you are selfish enough or mercenary enough to wish to cause trouble. If you do that . . ."

* * * * * * *

A week later, Bill Davidson and Elmer Eeps came home to Hartville. They came home on a late train, and there was no one to see them get off the train but the Widow Perry. Elmer had sent the telegram. It told her only "Something did happen. I don't know what. Bill scares me. He ain't Bill. I don't know what happened. You better do something."

She was there to help, but there was nothing she could do. There was nothing anybody could do, just then.

But the next morning, Bill was at work, early, in the barber shop. And the morning after that. And for all the years that followed. But he no longer told people about his daughter. He no longer spoke of her at all. He only went on sending money, every

week, to Mrs. Palmer, to be spent to help bring up and educate a girl who thought her father was dead.

"I guess it's for the best," he said to Nellie, that first night, back in the dark and empty rooms where he had been so happy, many years before. "I guess it's for the best."

Chapter VI

The Best Things in Life

"I don't know anybody that's got a better right to know the truth and all about the truth than you," said Bill to the Widow Perry, one morning in the barber shop. "I know you've wondered, long and long. I've half-way come right out and told you everything, I guess a hundred times. I never got so's I could quite speak out the words. But now . . . well . . . now . . . we're getting kind of far along in years, us two, ain't we?"

"No," the Widow Perry answered, bridling. "Speak for yourself, Bill Davidson. As for me, I ain't half as old as some folks think I am."

"I hope you ain't," said Bill, incautiously, and then before the storm could break, "I mean to say, I know you ain't. I just got the wrong word in the wrong place, that's all.

You mustn't mind me. You know how I am and always was."

"I do," the Widow Perry said, with acid in the way she said it. "I know exactly how you are and always been. You're a natural-born fool. You know that, Bill Davidson? You hear that? You're a idiot and sometimes I could shake you for it but I always knew it wouldn't do a mite of good. You're so set in your ways a earthquake couldn't move you from 'em. Which is too, too bad. You got rights you don't never do anything about, you got claims but you don't ever do no claiming, you been abused and mistreated 'til your own neighbors can't hardly stand to see it going on and on . . . and you don't do a thing about it. Never. You just go along . . ."

"I'm lucky," said Bill. "I'm lucky I can keep on just going along. That's pretty good, if a fellah can keep on going along. I seen so many that didn't or couldn't. I've been a mighty lucky man."

A lucky man! The Widow Perry caught her breath and started to speak and then

thought better of it and simply looked around the barber shop. The same old mirror that had been there for more than twenty years; a new barber chair, Bill called it, but it was new fourteen years ago; the same room Bill and his bride entered, thirty-seven years ago this spring.

A lucky man! The Widow Perry knew more about his private financial affairs than Bill had ever suspected. She knew this much: The last time she heard that Bill had borrowed money at the bank, because earnings in the barber shop weren't enough so he could keep up the weekly remittances to Nancy Davidson's aunt back east, the Widow Perry went to the banker and bought Bill's note. Because she knew Jeb Shanks would force payment on the day the note came due; because the Widow Perry knew Bill would need extra time to pay. And so he thought he won unusual indulgence from old Jeb Shanks, who gave unusual indulgence to no one. The Widow Perry saw to it Bill never knew the truth: That he paid the money back to her. And other things beside that, in the long years

since Bill came home, so silent and so old, from that one trip back east.

A lot of people said the Widow Perry was the meanest woman in Hartville, with the sharpest tongue. Only a few people, a very few, knew about the kindly, secret things she did.

Bill knew, of course. Bill seemed to know all there was to know about just about everybody in town. And he didn't go around asking questions or listening for betrayals, either. He had a peculiar habit: He wouldn't let people sit around the barber shop and tell him the latest scandal. Yet he always knew the things that mattered, about the people who mattered; it was another peculiar habit of Bill's that he never told what he knew.

But he knew all about the Widow Perry. He knew how she really felt about Elmer Eeps. He had known for years. He had seen Elmer quiver and run to cover, whenever the Widow Perry hove in sight; he had heard Elmer announce that no woman in all the world had ever picked on him as constantly and as cruelly as the Widow Perry; he had

grinned and said nothing, figuring it was not his affair if the Widow Perry cherished secret romantic designs on Elmer, the last man in Hartville anyone else would have believed she cared about at all.

He knew all about her, and for that reason he had never told her the things he knew she wanted the most to know. Because, in all kindness, she would have gone on talking, talking, about his secrets. Not to anyone else. Only to him. But she would have argued and pleaded and accused, and Bill wanted none of that. It was hard enough, just keeping on, without having to explain why he had chosen the particular straight road he was following. It was terrible enough, being utterly alone and doomed to loneliness until the end, without having to explain—even to the Widow Perry, wise and kind—why he had to be alone.

"Your daughter . . ." How many times the Widow Perry had begun a sentence with those words. And not only the Widow Perry. Other people, too. All the friends Bill had

in Hartville—which meant almost everyone who lived in Hartville. All of them had wanted to ask "Is your daughter still alive? If she is, why doesn't she come home where she belongs? Why don't you ever even get a letter from your daughter, Nancy? Whatever happened? What kind of a daughter is she, when she don't even write to her own father?"

The whole town knew that Bill had sent a money order every week for so many years now that there had been four different postmasters in office, in that time—and in Hartville, postmasters stay in office much longer, usually, than their political parties stay in power at Washington. The postmaster's job in Hartville doesn't pay enough to make it sought after, except by quiet elderly men or women who want to live very safely, very slowly, to the end. But each successive postmaster or postmistress confided to the Hartville people that Bill Davidson still kept on sending the money-order back east to that Mrs. Palmer, every Monday morning; that

the amount had never changed, except to increase a little, ten years ago, and then again three years ago.

Bill Davidson sent more money away every week than it cost the average Hartville family to live for a week. He lived, himself, on less than it cost any other single man or widower in Hartville to live in any sort of comfort. That saving habit gave rise, often, to rumors that Bill Davidson must be secretly a miser, getting slowly richer. But no such rumor lasted long. It was too obvious that Bill was poor and desperately poor, always—even when he loaned money to complaining people better off than he was, truly, even in their poverty.

The Widow Perry knew how little Bill spent for food. She knew that the suit he wore was purchased by mail order, five full years ago, and that his hat was six years old. She knew that Bill did his own cooking, and his own washing, and that really he did not welcome the often repeated offers from good-hearted Hartville matrons, to come in and "straighten up around the place," because "A

baching man don't ever know how to keep things in order."

The barber shop was neat as a pin. The rooms back of the barber shop were spotless. Bill's clothes were always clean and pressed. His pride in cleanliness was a Hartville legend.

People said he was a good cook, too. Marcy Tuttle used to wait around, while Bill got supper, knowing that finally Bill would say "Well, might as well set down and work on these here vittles while they're hot." It would not occur to Marcy that inviting himself to supper meant less to eat for Bill, who had long ago taught himself not to want to eat very much, because if he ate very heavily very often there wouldn't be enough money to send to Mrs. Palmer.

And Percy Blivens liked to hang around and drink hot coffee while Bill played the banjo, and talk about his art and his profession. Having become, at long last, constable of Hartville, Percy Blivens had arrived young at the summit of his young ambitions. He wore the shiniest star that ever was, he wore

a cowboy holster and a heavy gun. He had never fired the gun; he wasn't quite sure what would happen if he did; but if a man's to be a constable, he must look the part, and Percy did.

And Elmer Eeps would come by, every night. Even if he hadn't eaten supper with Bill, as he did most of the time, he'd be there after supper . . . safely after supper, safely after the time when he might be called on to help wash and wipe the dishes. He would produce his mouth organ and gaze at it and announce oracularly, "I don't know what it is, but there's something about a tune." He would toot, and Bill would strum the banjo, slowly, quietly, and for long hours not a word would be said, but they would be quite happy, sitting there.

A life like that! A lucky man, Bill called himself!

Well, perhaps he was. Perhaps it is true fortune not to want things that are impossible to have. Perhaps it is fortune to know that every man and woman and child looks on you

as a friend if needed, as a neighbor always.

And yet there was emptiness always in Bill's heart.

Back east, he had a daughter, Nancy. She would be twenty, almost, now. He had not seen her since she was less than two years old. He had never read a letter from her, never seen a photograph, never even heard how she was doing in school. He did not know what color her hair would be, by now; he was not even sure what color her eyes would be. He did not know if she was tall or short, slim or stout. He had a picture in his heart, of course: A picture of a slim, tall girl with wavy hair, with deep, quiet eyes. A picture, truly, of her mother. A mental copy of the picture that still hung just above the door—the picture of Nellie, dead these many years. But he was not sure. He would never know, at least that was what he had told himself long ago. He would never see Nancy, never hear her voice.

But he was proud of Nancy. He was proud to have a daughter who must be, must be—ah, of that he could be sure!—as lovely and as

unbelievably sweet as her mother had been, so long ago. He was proud to know that even as the failure he had been, he had kept his promise to Nancy's mother in this one thing: He had done all that was in his power to do, to give Nancy her chance to be a lady, to be happy, to be proud.

He had sent to Mrs. Palmer, in those years, a good many thousands of dollars. He had never kept a record of how much; Bill was not the kind to figure the totals of his devotion. But the money he had sent—though he never thought of it that way—would have been enough to buy a home for Bill, to buy a farm, to free him from the daily, ever-present need for working, working, always trying to earn another dollar.

That didn't matter. And through long years he had forced himself to believe that not knowing Nancy, not seeing her, not even having her know her father still lived, didn't matter, either.

That was what he finally managed to tell the Widow Perry: That it was best for Nancy

not to know her father, not to know who he was and what he was, only to know herself as Nancy Palmer, orphan.

The Widow Perry said she understood. She nodded, sagely, careful not to let Bill Davidson see how much hate there was in her surging heart. Hatred of Mrs. Palmer, who could do this to a man like Bill Davidson; yes, and hatred of a daughter so callous and so cruel that she had never even sought to find out the truth about her father. Yes, she hated Nancy. She remembered Nancy as a small and heart-breakingly lovely baby girl; she was sure that Nancy had grown up to be beautiful; she was sure, too, that Nancy had grown up to be as harsh and selfish as her aunt.

She could not say so to Bill. She was wise; she realized that to think of Nancy as in any way different from her mother would break Bill's heart. For he had made himself believe, almost, that Nellie lived again, in Nancy. And because he had never stopped loving Nellie, he needed Nancy now. That was certain, the Widow Perry told herself. The girl ought to come back to her father; he

needed her; she ought to be with him; she ought to want to be with him. But she had never written a letter to him, never written a letter to anyone in Hartville . . .

"Of course, though, she wouldn't remember anybody here, she was so young when she went away," the Widow Perry murmured out loud. She saw Bill's startled look. "I was just thinking to myself," she stammered hastily. "It is too bad Nancy never got a chance to know her own father. I can't help saying it, Bill. It's a shame. It shouldn't be."

"It's better that way," Bill answered mildly.

"I don't see why."

He tried to tell her. He loved Hartville with all his simple heart. But then, he was a farmer boy, a little town man. But Nellie came of a great family, a rich family; she had grown up in society, she had given up all that to marry Bill and come back here to Hartville. . . . She had died, here in this very building, all alone.

"Alone?"

"I mean . . . without her friends. With only me."

"And that was all she wanted."

Bill nodded, then. He had spent twenty years, and more, hoping what the Widow Perry said now was true. But he had spent twenty years and more remembering what Mrs. Palmer told him, once: That Nellie hated Hartville, secretly, and would not tell him so because she was too kind and gentle to hurt him, ever; that Nellie had wanted to escape from this home, this life, and go back to the life she had been born to live, but that she never said anything about it because she loved him too much.

Love makes us keep secrets, always. Love makes us afraid to hurt those we love, even when the truth might be kinder, in the long run. Love makes it possible, sometimes, for other people—who are not kind—to twist the truth and make us almost believe the lie, because we know so well that those who love us would never hurt us if the truth were cruel.

Bill believed, had believed in spite of himself since the last time he spoke to Mrs. Pal-

mer, that Nellie had regretted their marriage, that she had been sorry she came to Hartville. That more than anything else, had made him willing—no, not willing! It had only forced him to accept the argument that Nancy would be better off away from Hartville, away from life as her father must live it, away from him.

"I want Nancy to be a lady," Bill explained.

"She's Nellie's daughter, so she is a lady," the Widow Perry snapped. "Being in society don't make a girl any more a lady. Being in some swell school or traveling in Europe, that ain't what makes a girl a lady. It's what's in her heart, what she is. And that . . ."

She stopped. No use going on.

She could say exactly what she thought to anyone else in the world. Even to Elmer, whom she pitied for his stupidities and loved for his shambling charm. But not to Bill. There was a wall she could not cross. She knew it, recognized what the barrier was.

Other people, many people, had tried to talk to Bill as she was talking now. They had not been quite as wise. They had plunged in, any way at all, had said things, had stopped suddenly, abashed and ashamed. They had never mentioned Nancy again. And the Widow Perry knew that it would be a long time before she would speak Nancy's name, after this day. Because it did no good, it only made Bill's unhappiness more evident.

A lucky man! Bill had always believed he had been more fortunate, all through life, than he deserved to be. And yet his wife died, so young. And his daughter was taken away from him, and now undoubtedly she either believed what she had been told years ago: That her father was dead; or else she simply did not care whether he was dead or alive. That would be worse, much worse, if the latter were true. Somehow, the Widow Perry believed it must be true.

"She's not like her mother," she told herself. "She's a mean, small girl. She's not worthy of being Bill Davidson's daughter."

If she had said that out loud, Bill would have hated her for the rest of his life. He would have asked her to leave the shop. He would never have spoken to her again.

But he called himself a lucky man. And so the Widow Perry nodded, finally. "I guess you're right," she said. "I guess you are. I don't know any other father that would love his daughter that much. But I guess that's you, Bill. And it ain't for me to try and change you. I won't say another word."

Then it was a long time before Nancy's name was mentioned again between them. Until one day when the Widow Perry walked into the shop and saw Bill trying to wrap a small package in dainty colored paper.

"Land sakes alive!" she said. "Let me get at that. Heavens sakes, Bill Davidson, you got no more business wrapping up a present than a hog's got of skating on ice!" And, wrapping the package neatly, primly, knew, of course, that it was something to be sent to Nancy Palmer—who was born Nancy Davidson in this very place.

"It's . . . Nancy's birthday next week," Bill said.

"You send her a present every birthday, don't you?"

"Well . . . Yes," Bill admitted.

"And Christmas, too!"

"Well . . . Yes."

"Then she does know! She must know!"

"Know what?" Bill asked, puzzled.

"Know about you. Know who you are!"

Bill shook his head, and he smiled, rather proudly.

"No," he said. "She doesn't know. I send the present to Mrs. Palmer, not to Nancy. I ask Mrs. Palmer just to put it in with Nancy's other presents, that's all. I imagine she gets awful nice things from her friends."

"You send presents but you don't say who sends 'em! Well, I must say . . . Why? What's the good?"

"Nancy might . . . like one of 'em, some time."

"Oh!"

Again she knew there was nothing she could

say. Again she pitied Bill, and hated Mrs. Palmer . . . yes, and hated Nancy Davidson.

A girl must know, if weird little presents picked out by a man are included among her birthday gifts. She must know no woman bought such a gift. "But I'll bet Missus Palmer don't ever even give 'em to her," the Widow Perry thought. "I bet she just throws 'em in the wastebasket and don't even open 'em." And she hated Mrs. Palmer, more than ever. How a woman could be so cruel, so arrogant, she would never know. Hartville people said the Widow Perry was stuck up and too sure of herself, and pretty mean, on occasion; but they could never have comprehended a woman as icily cruel as Mrs. Palmer had been for all these years.

"I couldn't tell Bill he's just wasting time and money, sending presents to Nancy. I couldn't ever do that. It's just about all the happiness he gets. I can't spoil it for him." The Widow Perry was a kind old woman, even if hardly anyone had ever suspected it. Pitying Bill and hating those who had made

his life such a grotesque and pitiable tragedy, she could say nothing about this gift.

She helped Bill mail the package. She knew that, once again, Bill waited, for days after Nancy's birthday, hoping there might be a letter from Mrs. Palmer to tell him about Nancy. He could deceive himself, year after year, like that; always, he kept hoping that some day might bring a letter. He had starved for years, for the least crumb of news about his daughter, and he had never been fed. If there had been, in all those years, even one brief letter, Bill's whole life would have been brighter, happier. It would have taken so little time and trouble for Mrs. Palmer to write one letter, only one; it would have been too much trouble to her.

So much hate, and so much love!

Mrs. Palmer hated Bill Davidson from the moment when she calmly opened a letter addressed to Nellie, many years ago, and read it, and was about to throw it in the fire when Nellie entered and said "You mustn't ever touch my letters from him."

Bill loved Nellie from the moment he read

the first scrawled little note written to a soldier in the war. As she loved him from the very beginning.

Bill idolized little Nancy from the moment of her birth. He would never cease to worship her, although she might be anything in the world, by now. There was no knowing, really, that Nancy even lived. She might be married, she might be living in Europe, she might be a younger and therefore harsher replica of her grim old aunt, by now. Bill didn't know.

Mrs. Palmer hated Bill, and kept his name out of her mind, and what she did with the money orders he sent was part of the woman. She had money, a great deal of money. She would have known, if she had stopped to think, that Bill must have starved himself to send so much money every week. It did not matter at all. She cashed the money orders and put the money in her bank account. She probably sincerely believed that Bill's constant contributions were but a drop in the bucket, in the flood of her generosity to Nancy. And it was not true. The fact was, the fact

had always been, that Bill paid Nancy s expenses, almost always through the years. Of course, there were trips to Europe, but that was because Mrs. Palmer wanted to go to Europe; and Nancy was in a very expensive school for girls, but that was because it lent social prestige to Mrs. Palmer, to have "my dear little girl" enrolled as fellow pupil with the daughters of the richest, therefore finest people in society. And that was the extent of Mrs. Palmer's consideration of Bill Davidson: That once a week, she had to open a cheap envelope on which his crabbed hand had painfully scrawled her name and address. That once a week, she had to go to the extreme trouble of throwing the letter away carefully—because Nancy might, some time, grow curious. (Mrs. Palmer had never seen any reason why she should not read anyone's letter, if it might possibly contain a secret that would interest her; it was typical of her that she quite expected Nancy would do the same thing, given the opportunity.)

She was wrong. She was wrong about Nancy. She wanted Nancy to be an exact

carbon copy of herself, because she had decided smugly, long ago, that no more perfect creature had ever been born on this earth than Mrs. Palmer herself. She wanted Nancy to value things according to her fixed standards; she wanted Nancy to ignore the existence in the world of anyone who was not "of our class"; she was an anachronism in a modern world, but that would never occur to her. And she could never have understood how utterly wrong she was about the girl who called herself—not knowing her true name—Nancy Palmer.

For the Widow Perry was wrong, too. She thought of Nancy as cruel and casual, she was sure Nancy must know about Bill. Nancy didn't know. She had asked questions, always. She had never been honestly answered.

"Your mother died because your father was so cruel to her." She remembered the first time her aunt had told her that. She had cried out bitterly, "It's not true. I don't believe it. My father couldn't be . . ." Her aunt's harsh voice stopped her. "Your father was a worthless man. A beast. A drunkard.

A common scoundrel." Lying, she gloried in the lie; she had done what some people are able to do, which is to say that she told the lie so often that finally she believed it was the truth.

"Your father is dead. You should be glad." She said that many times. "Your father is dead. You ought to be thankful for what I have done for you, all these years. You ought to thank me, always."

Nancy thanked her aunt. Nancy tried for so many years to find something about her aunt that she could love. It was not possible. She felt badly about it, she blamed herself, she tried to think always that she must be wrong and unfair; but she could never love Mrs. Palmer. Sometimes, she was not even sure she respected her aunt. When she heard that harsh-voiced woman snarl at some well-meaning servant, when she saw her completely ignoring all the little kindnesses of common courtesy, Nancy wondered. Nancy never said it out loud, but since she was quite a little girl she had really prayed, very often, not to be like her aunt when she grew up.

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She was not like her aunt. She was like her mother.

Bill, never having seen his grown-up daughter, had still painted the correct and perfect picture of her in his mind.

She was so like her mother that older women often told her aunt "It's incredible, it frightens me a little. I think, sometimes, it's your sister Nellie come back."

That did not please Mrs. Palmer. She did not want Nancy to be like the sister she had always thought of as weak and rather stupid. She wanted Nancy to be like her. And through all the years she fought and schemed to force Nancy to follow in her footsteps; and it was part of her general makeup that she never realized how completely she had failed.

Nancy was kind. Nancy was gentle. Nancy was honest. Nancy liked people, all kinds of people. Nancy did not know how to live, and she would be a very great disappointment to Mrs. Palmer—that much Mrs. Palmer said, very often. If Nancy did not learn that to only certain people is given the

KERRY AND NANCY IN THEIR LITTLE HOUSE, THEIR HONEY-MOON HOME

right to rule, if she did not learn to talk and walk and think and live like her aunt, she would have proved to be ungrateful. "Sharper than the serpent's tooth," Mrs. Palmer quoted, and Nancy wanted to cry.

She wanted to love somebody. She had no one of her own to love. For she could not love her aunt.

Perhaps that was enough to explain why Nancy finally surrendered to her aunt's constant and long-continued arguments.

"I want you to marry Ronald Blanton," her aunt kept saying, on and on. "He's of our own kind. He's a gentleman. He's rich. He isn't like the man I married. I made a mistake in my marriage, because I married for love. . . ." She beamed smugly. Nancy shook her head. She could not imagine her aunt ever having done anything for love. Her aunt marched on. "I want you to marry Ronald Blanton. I'm not going to let you make the same mistake that I made."

Nancy didn't love Ronald Blanton. She didn't love anyone in the world. She had friends, but even the friends she was allowed

to have seemed empty, chattering, stupidly self-satisfied to Nancy. She never knew why it was that she saw through sham and artifice so clearly. She did not know about her father.

But at last a strange thing happened. Nancy Palmer went home to Hartville. Not because her aunt wanted her to. Only because it had become obvious now that Ronald Blanton felt that all things must be settled, before he married Nancy. "I want no future trouble from that father of hers," he said—for Mrs. Palmer had felt that she must tell him about Bill. "He sounds like a man who would try to blackmail me for money. Well, that must be settled."

It was not planned that Nancy should go back to Hartville. Ronald Blanton, lawyer, Nancy's fiance, and Mrs. Palmer were going. They had it settled between them. Bill Davidson would be put in his place, once and for all time. He would be informed that, thanks to Mrs. Palmer, his daughter—Mrs. Palmer hated even to admit that Nancy was Bill's daughter!—thanks to Mrs. Palmer, Nancy was about to marry well. So he must

sign papers agreeing never to make any claims, he must legally guarantee that he would never come back from the grave to which Mrs. Palmer had consigned him long ago.

But Nancy went along. They could not tell her why she must not go, not without revealing the secret. For Nancy was clever; they both knew it; her cleverness worried Mrs. Palmer—it worried Ronald Blanton, too, much more than he meant to let Mrs. Palmer know. Nancy said "My mother died in Hartville, my father lived there, I want to see what it's like. I'm going with you."

Then she had to be told why the trip was being made. So they had to lie again. They explained at great length that it was a matter of property. Her worthless father had somehow managed to accumulate a little property. All these years, they had let a shiftless old man, a friend of her father's, occupy the property. But now that Nancy was being married, naturally her property must be transferred to her.

Mrs. Palmer had lied so often, through so many years, to Bill Davidson, to the world,

to herself, that she had grown to believe that any lie at all would be believed . . . if she told it. So she told a lie as stupid and clumsy as this, and expected Nancy not to doubt her at all.

And they went to Hartville.

Three elegant people, riding in a stuffy dusty day coach swinging over Two-Mile Bridge and into a small, sprawling, heat-baked town called Hartville.

Mrs. Palmer remembered the last time she had come to this town. As far as she could see, the town had not changed at all, had not grown, had only grown uglier in her eyes.

She whispered to Ronald Blanton "Keep Nancy with you. Don't tell anyone who she is. No one will know her, of course. She's been away from here for nineteen years. So we don't need to worry. But I don't want anything to spoil all that I've worked and prayed for. Keep Nancy from finding out about that man."

Ronald Blanton nodded. Sure of himself, and very clever—so much more clever than Mrs. Palmer had ever suspected!—Ronald

took charge of Nancy, and they walked together up a dusty street, while Mrs. Palmer prepared the story she would tell Bill Davidson to end his claims for all time.

"It's strange," Nancy said suddenly.

"What?" Ronald asked.

"This town. This street. I couldn't remember. I was such a little baby when I left here that of course I couldn't remember it at all. But I do. I remember this street. And those trees. And those buildings."

Ronald smiled, a little patronizingly. "You've always been a sentimentalist, you know," he said.

"I know. But . . ."

Ronald started to talk about their plans. And was surprised to find that Nancy was not listening. Surprised, and then a little angry. He spoke sharply. "Nancy! I was saying . . ."

"Please," Nancy said softly. "Please don't talk."

"Well!" He was very indignant, much upset. He looked past Nancy at Mrs. Palmer, to see that lady frowning, shaking her

head, signaling. Meaning, of course, "Be careful. She's still a silly girl. We must protect her against herself!" So he took Nancy's arm with proprietary firmness. "We'll walk to the hotel, now," he announced.

"I'd rather just walk around and look."

"At this? At all this?" His elegant hand spoke eloquently of the shabby sordidness of Hartville. And again he was amazed to realize that Nancy was not even interested in what he did or said. She was studying things, unimportant things, stupid things. A low one-story building, a windmill and water trough in the middle of the intersecting streets, a woman who hurried out of a store, wearing a voluminous apron and a sunbonnet down over her face . . . things that meant nothing to Ronald Blanton. He could not possibly understand what they meant to Nancy. And neither could she.

She was puzzled. Her heart was beating fast. Her eyes were larger. She could not imagine what was happening. There was no possible reason for her to remember, and yet she did remember this. All of it.

She stopped suddenly. She stared. Then before Ronald Blanton or Mrs. Palmer knew what Nancy meant to do, she had started across the street toward a small, white-painted, half-way tumbled down building.

"Nancy!" Ronald Blanton shouted.

"Nancy!" her aunt cried out imperiously. Then she gasped. "Oh! Look! Look!" Her shaking hand pointed toward the building toward which Nancy hurried, now. And Ronald Blanton read on an ancient sign above the plate glass window, "Bill Davidson, Barber." He gasped. He cried out. "Great Scott! How did she know? She couldn't know?"

"Stop her! She mustn't! Stop her!" Mrs. Palmer's carefully cultivated voice was a harridan's squawk. She ran after Nancy, ugly, black against the sun. "Nancy! Nancy Palmer . . ."

Nancy opened the door. The bell over the door jingled, just a little. And an old man who sat in a chair near the back jumped up and started forward and then stood stock still, wavering.

It was not true. It could not be true. He must be dreaming, more fully than ever before. He might be insane. It could not happen.

But the dream walked toward him.

Over her head—she had not seen it yet—was the picture of Nancy's mother. And Bill Davidson saw that Nellie was alive, that Nellie was walking toward him.

"I'm home," Nancy Palmer said, very quietly. "I'm home." She walked a little farther. "I'm home."

Then for the first time in eighteen years Bill Davidson held his daughter in his arms. And the waiting was over, and the emptiness. His daughter had come home.

JUST PLAIN BILL SAYS:

I'm always a little bit afraid of the man that always says he knows what he's talking about. A lot of better and smarter men than I'll ever be have come up against it, sometime, where they didn't know what to say or do next. And I figure the man that says "I think I'm right but if I'm wrong, show me," is the only real wise man there is.

Then again, there's the man that's always saying he's got no bad habits whatsoever. That's a mighty fine thing. But if he says it too often, I kind of start wondering what he's hiding.

And then again, there's the man that don't believe anything he can't see with his own eyes. I asked a fellow like that, once, if he believed in the wind, and he said of course, seeing as how the wind was blowing like to take the town away right at the minute. So, I said can you see it, and he said no, and then we kind of drifted apart.

I remember a fellah that came to Hartville once that was going to put the town on the map. He was awful young and awful convinced about himself, and he'd read just about all there was to read in the books. But after a while he come in one day looking kind of surprised and he said he just found out all by himself that there's a few things the men that write the books forgot to put in.

A man told me if he was me he wouldn't be doing what I was doing the way I was doing it and I said "Mister, if you was me, I'd be standing there telling you the same thing and you'd do just like I'm going to do in a minute, you'd go ahead and do it your own way, anyhow." And when we finally got it all figured out, what I was probably trying to say is advice is the easiest thing there is to give away and the hardest thing there is to take, and after all, getting your nose bumped is the surest way to make you remember to watch your step next time you pass that way.

I never knew a man in my life that was all bad, and I'm not so sure I ever knew a man that was all good. I mean to say we all have

our moments when we can't help it, being human beings; we kind of say to ourselves I've got to do this, for this reason or that, and we do it, and maybe the honest truth is we shouldn't of done it, but we did. And the best most of us can ever do is do the best we can and not be any too sure the other fellow isn't doing exactly the same, even if it means him and us are on opposite sides.

I remember a little boy talking to another little boy that said the first little boy's dad wasn't such a much. And the first little boy said "My dad can do anything." And he believed it. I wonder how a man that's got a son or a daughter feels the first time he does something he knows the son or the daughter wouldn't ever believe he could be mean enough to do. It must be an awful tough thing, to have your own child look at you, the first time he sees you've done something wrong . . . and the look in his eyes says "Gee, I never thought it of you." I hope that don't ever happen to me.

I got here a little too late to get to know Abraham Lincoln, and I never met any other

president. In fact, the famousest man I ever met was the governor before last, and I shook hands with him when he wasn't looking and he called me "Joe," which ain't my name. But I figured he meant well, at that. And anyhow, what I'm trying to get off my mind—which maybe ain't a very long jump, at that—is how I kind of always figure that there's a lot of famous men that never got to be famous any farther than the ends of their own neighborhood, that are as worthwhile knowing as any man in the world, even if he's a president or a king. They live and they die and probably nobody but their friends ever know the difference; but if a man's got one real friend to feel that the world ain't as good a place now that he's gone, then that man's been a success. That's how I figure it. And I'd rather have one man say when I'm gone "He was my friend" than a million people say "I read about him. He must have been quite some pumpkin. . . ."

There used to be a man in Hartville that always said the town wasn't big enough for a fellow like him. He said if he ever got just

one lucky chance he'd go right up to the top. He said people in a little town like this couldn't never appreciate a naturally big man like him. He said if he was down in Washington he could tell those fellows how to fix everything, wouldn't take him hardly no time at all. He said if he was over in Europe, he'd walk right up to the League of Nations and he'd say "now looky here, boys, this is all you have to do to fix everything all up for good." He said if he was John D. Rockefeller he'd mighty soon spend his millions where they'd do the most good . . . It always seemed kind of peculiar to me that a man with all those talents was so busy with the big problems of the whole wide world he just never realized his wife was taking in washing to support him. (The last I knew, he was sitting on the poorhouse steps, telling the superintendent how to settle up the gold standard.)

Do unto others as you would be done by is a mighty fine idea. The trouble is, a lot of people don't wait for the other fellow to do meanness first, before they do it back to him. Which kind of gets the good idea mixed up.

There's something about being just a plain old barber I don't imagine hardly anybody ever thinks much about. Fact is, I don't see why anybody ought to bother. But what I mean is this, kind of: I never saw the face that didn't look better for a shave, or the head that didn't look better after a haircut. And a funny thing is, I've seen many a grouchy map of grumpiness turn to a smiling prairie, for just a shave and a few minutes of rest and a couple of minutes talk about something else beside a fellow's troubles. So maybe even an old barber can do a little good in this here world, if only because there must be many's the wife that couldn't tell her husband's face from the doormat except that one had "Welcome" printed on it . . . 'til after the barber caught him and made him into a human being again, if only for a little while.

I like Christmas. I like New Year's. I like Fourth of July. I like any day when folks say to themselves "Well, sir, this is one day when nobody else is working, anyhow, so why don't we quit work for just this one day, too, and find out if our family still knows us and

we can still speak to our friends without biting 'em." But it's kind of too bad that so many people have to have a calendar to tell 'em when to smile.

Ain't it a peculiar thing how much more a fellow knows about everything when he's just turned twenty than when he's just turned fifty? Sometimes I wonder if our children don't lose patience with us, sometimes, we're so hard for them to bring up. But then I wouldn't be surprised if we wasn't kind of just about the same, when we was young. It ain't the fellow that climbed the hill that says "That hill don't look very high to me"; it's the fellow that's still fresh because he only just started climbing.

I know two women I wish could trade with each other 'til they got a little bit more even on things. One of 'em's pretty, and yet she's got a voice like you was listening to a saw cutting through iron. The other one's got a face they don't dare put clocks in front of, but she's got a low, sweet, lady's voice that can make you forget to look at her, you just want to listen. Now ain't it too bad that one of

'em ain't got what both has got only half of, each, now? But then I suppose what it means is the Good Lord does the best He can to give each one of us some one thing folks will like about us, if we'd only give it a chance. But ain't it too bad how some folks hide the Good Lord's Gift?

I heard a fellow say it ain't what you say it's how you say it that counts. And I couldn't help remembering the fellow that come through town selling guaranteed English razors two for a quarter, just about a year ago. I never heard such elegant words come out of one man's mouth so fast. But you should of seen those razors!

To some people, the most expensive thing in the world is a three cent stamp on a letter to their mother. It seems a little peculiar, don't it?

There used to be a man in our county named Honest John. It wasn't me that said it; it was somebody else. But the reason they called him Honest John was one time he was left all alone in somebody's house and there was a red hot stove right there in plain sight and

he didn't steal it. Which just goes to show, you not only can't tell a book by its cover, you can't tell a book by its good name.

I'd like to have every dog I meet on the street kind of wag his tail when I say hello to him. I'd like to have every little child I meet kind of sidle up and say "Hello, mister," like he knew him and me could probably get to be friends if we had the time. I'd like to have every man I ever meet want to shake hands when we say goodbye. I'd like to . . . Well! I'd like to be the kind of a man my mother lived and died hoping and praying I'd turn out to be. But ain't it a blessing our mothers don't always know how far we come from going where they wanted us to go?

I don't know what started me talking about mothers. I know this: Any time I hear somebody talking too long and too loud about what a wonderful being a man's mother is, I kind of wonder. Seems to me since we've all got mothers and they're all wonderful and kind it's kind of better if we all talk less about them when they're gone and do more for them while they're still with us.

A Gallery of Hartville Folks
as "Just Plain Bill" Sees Them

Elmer Eeps: I've heard people say Elmer Eeps ain't got real good sense, and some of the time I'm kind of tempted to agree with 'em, and then all at once I stop and start figuring and then I ain't so sure. Like this: He ain't never done a full day's work, in all the twenty years I knowed him. But he always had three good big square meals every day and plenty of times he managed to get himself around four or five meals on an extra lucky day. He always has a good bed to sleep on, and if he ain't the dressiest fellah in Hartville still he's got clothes that's good enough to satisfy him. He says a lot of things that don't sound awful bright, but then he don't care; if people laugh, he don't much care whether they laugh with him or at him; he kind of figures any kind of a laugh so it ain't downright mean is a pretty good thing to have

happen to you. He gets along, and that's all he ever wanted to do, anyhow, and he's always done it, and he always will. I ain't so sure but what a lot of us that worry and work and scheme for things wind up with less out of life than Elmer gets without ever lifting a hand. And I don't mean he's lazy, because it ain't lazy; he's just careful; if work comes around the corner, he goes around the other corner; that's the only time he ever hurries. And I don't mean he's a fellow that hangs onto other people and counts on them to take care of him; if he figures the world owes him a living, I'll say one thing, he's a mighty smooth collector. And he certainly can toot that mouth organ. And I never heard him say an unkind word of man or beast, I never seen him do anything to hurt anybody, I don't know anybody—but the Widow Perry that used to be, that's Missus Elmer Eeps now—I don't know anybody that ever truly said Elmer Eeps wasn't a right good kind of a man to have around. (And I've got my suspicions of the Widow Perry—meaning Missus Eeps. I heard her say a lot of right hard things to El-

mer, but then I seen her looking at him, too, when he was sick or something, and I always figure you don't have to say pretty words in a pretty voice if you really mean you think the world of somebody with the things you do for them.) I like Elmer Eeps. I always did.

MRS. ELMER EEPS: There's a woman can talk faster than any other woman we ever had to listen to in Hartville. There ain't nothing she don't know about anybody, and there ain't hardly anybody she don't tell. And now I got that part about the Widow Perry that use to was off of my mind, I'll say the rest. There's the best neighbor anybody in Hartville ever had. It ain't that she comes around with sympathy; she's got no more sympathy in her words than I got gold in the bank. She always does the best she can to make everybody think she's as mean as can be, and she's got a heart about the size of this here county. She can make a better dish of bacon and greens than anybody I know, she can run that little store of hers so it keeps right on paying the bills—and she pays 'em, right on the dot; she's got a funny kind of a idea it's a waste of time

for us to have a newspaper in town, when she's around and can still talk. . . . Well, you got to take the salt with the pepper, and vicy versy. It'd be a mighty dull old town, without Missus Eeps around to keep everything in a stew. And there'd be a lot of people besides Elmer that'd be mighty lost and lonesome, if Missus Eeps wasn't with us.

KERRY DONOVAN: What am I going to say about Kerry Donovan more than that I was the proudest man in Hartville the day my daughter married him? He's young, Kerry is. He gets excited and mad and worried and who don't, young or older? He's honest; that's one thing. He's fair and square and kind and thoughtful; that's a lot more things. He's a right nice-looking young fellow, too, and his case is one where he's as good a man as he looks to be. I'm proud I can call Kerry Donovan "son."

DAVID ELLIS: He ain't like Kerry, not a bit, and yet he is, a lot. I can't figure out exactly what I mean, myself. Except David's as different from Kerry Donovan in the way he talks and thinks and acts as President

Roosevelt is from me. And all the same David's got the same goodness and the same honesty. Maybe he ain't as strong and sure as Kerry is; maybe he is. I'm no man to judge. Except what I said about Kerry goes for David, too. I been a mighty lucky man, to have two young fellows as fine as Kerry and David be my friends. I'm right glad David's getting married, too.

PERCY BLIVENS: Give you a quick idea of the kind of fellow Percy Blivens is, he's the boy that used to fill out all the coupons in the magazines and send in for how to learn to be a detective in three easy lessons. I never saw a man so star-crazy in all my born days. And now he's running the store, and he's married to Vangy Holcomb that was. Heaven knows they had a hard time getting married, what with Vangy's paw as set against it as he was; but I kind of got the idea even old Sam Holcomb's found out he did mighty good in the son-in-law market, by now.

MARCY TUTTLE: Fellow use to say "There goes a fellow that ain't the man he thinks he is . . . and ain't he glad." Took

me a long time to get it figured out just what the fellow meant. I guess he probably had the same idea I got, though. Marcy's a well-meaning man. He just likes to be a important fellow, and he kind of started out in the Important Race with none too much gasoline in his tank. But he's doing the best he can, and one thing certain, once you get Marcy on your side he's with you—as long as you can keep him on your side. But if a man's what he is and don't pretend to be nothing else but what he is, how can you say he ain't a pretty good man, at that?

JEB SHANKS: He's gone, now. Of them that's gone, it don't do nobody no good to speak evil or to cherish enemy feelings. I'm just kind of sorry for a man that gets so crazy about money he forgets about the needle's eye.

ABNER PETTIFER: There's a fellow if he ever started reciting the Gettysburg Address to you, you'd still be listening to him sixty years from now, probably. But back of that there stutter, there's a right good human man.

DANNY TAYLOR: Danny's found his father, now. He ain't with me, any more. I

keep hoping he'll come back to see me, though, some day. That's a boy's got nerve, and that ain't all. He's got a mighty lucky thing to have. He thinks life's fun and anything that happens is worth being in on just so something is happening. He don't ever slow down. I hope it's a long, long time before he starts to get slowed down in spite of himself. Gosh! If we only knew how lucky we are to be young, when we still are young enough to enjoy it!

THE EDITOR: I've seen him a-setting there in his office of nights, and the way he looks you'd think he was writing a brand new Declaration of Independence. And then I've read what I seen him writing, and it'd be two lines saying the Ladies' Aid is going to meet next Tuesday if it don't rain. Well, I guess maybe when I got a pair of scissors in my hands and a head of hair to work on I get to taking myself pretty serious, too. I guess maybe it's a pretty good thing that a man's job can seem that important to him, even once in a while.

EVA WILLIS: She never had a chance to be

happy, and all at once something kind of got straightened out and now she's got the chance to be really happy, after all. And she's still so young. I hope and pray she's still young enough so she can still forget the bad part; I hope the sorrows of her life are over for good, and from now on she can smile. She needs to smile, a lot, that little girl.

MONTY BARTON: If it was as easy for Monty to fix up his life as it is for him to make a flivver run when it's all wore out and headed for the junk pile, he'd be the happiest man in Hartville. As it is, he don't do bad. And he's surely a handy man with his hands when hands is handy in an argument!

SAUL BARTLEY: Saul's got a good wife, he's got three tall sons, he's got a good farm. In the bad years, Saul and his folks kind of have it hard; in the good years, they pay their bills before they start buying things they want; and all the years I've known him, Saul Bartley's been a man that didn't do much talking about his rights, just kept on working for his folks. He votes every election, and he

kind of seems to take the time to figure out who he's voting for, and why, before he makes the X's on the ballot. I'd say if you wanted to pick out a fellow to stand for "American citizen," Saul's it. And I'm just old-fashioned enough so it kind of seems to me like it's a pretty nice thing to say about a man, to call him a good citizen. Even if there seems to be a lot of people, in these times, that maybe might say "What of it?" Well, there's always been that kind of people, since this country started; they ain't nothing new; whenever there's a government, there's got to be some people that's agin it. But they're going to have an awful hard time selling Saul the idea that it ain't a sight finer country to be in than some he could mention right off the front page.

SAM HARDY: Sam's a big man. I mean he's got a lot of beef and a lot of voice and a lot of large ideas to go with 'em. I like Sam better than I like his ideas; and I wouldn't be surprised if Sam said the same about me. Maybe that's why we're such good friends.

We ain't either one of us ever tried to convert the other fellow to thinking the way we think . . . not yet. I'm kind of scared that the day one of us starts that, we'll both run out of being friends.