LADYFINGERS

By JACKSON GREGORY

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FOR their baby was coming to them. And Enid was never afraid again. There came the time when they could understand that God had been good to them in giving them those six months of struggle side by side. For the time the baby came the look of worry had gone from Robert's eyes. In the little things he had made good. And fortune was breaking into a smile of glad promise. He had sold a lyric for $15; he had sold another and a third. All within the year. And he had made friends. Lockworth began to boast of him. He had a place with the Lockworth paper. He wrote a column each day; a bit of light verse once a week, and, in spare time, he helped with the advertising. When the baby came, a boy promptly named Robert, there was an imported nurse in the house under the watchful eye of Dr. Jefferson Lee Bullock and Robert, Sr., had money in his pocket.

If there is anything else in the world quite as proud and conceited and vaingloriously happy as a young father, I don't know what it is. The girl-mother accepted her happiness as a very natural thing: Robert was delirious with it. Enid was all right; that was the first thing of which he demanded to be assured as infinite number of times. And then the baby! At first he was overjoyed just to be informed that it was a normal baby in all respects. God alone knows what anticipatory fears the young father is subject to!

So for them life now entered a new phase. Robert's keen eyes made out that Enid was as beautiful as ever, more beautiful, in sober fact; that the roses came back to her cheeks and the laughter to her eyes; that in no dread fashion had she grown older in a day; that she began to look younger; that the nurse suspected she was only seventeen!

Arnold Bond called to see them. This, like the matter of the mortgage, was to remain sub rosa. He sat and looked at Enid and the baby and for a long, long while said nothing. He just marveled. He asked in a hesitant fashion to be allowed to hold it a moment. He wrung Robert's hand hard as he went away.

"You ought to be mighty happy," he said.

"I am," said Robert.

The important, high-salaried and extremely efficient nurse was a mere mortal. She burned her finger one day and said "Damn!" This in the presence of the baby, who turned speculative eyes upon her. The baby was two weeks old. Robert called the nurse into the next room. With dignified and impressive severity he cautioned her against allowing such a thing to occur again. One could not be too careful of the impressions made upon children at early ages.

Robert Ellis, Senior, was editor-in-chief of the Lockworth independent. Enid had to be careful nowadays not to speak in terms of praise of anything under the sun which she did not want immediately bought and sent home to her. She had now gone out of the house and down the footpath through the woods to meet her husband who was coming home early today.

He held out his arms to her as he came through the trees, his eyes boorish, his smile boyish, his hair rumpled as he swept off his hat in greeting. She waited for him, her smile tender and glad. When he put his arms about her a little thrill ran through her whole body, an answering thrill through his.

Dr. Jefferson Lee Bullock had brought Robert Ellis, Junior, into the world. The old fellow had adored Enid since the day he had brought her, too, into this life. Also he had come to have a great liking for the erstwhile Ladyfingers himself, for certain very definite reasons: the boy was likable and the old doctor's heart was a wide-open place of welcome for new loves; Robert's little lyrics appealed mightily to a sentimental old heart; and finally, here was another instance of old Rachel Stetheril's persecution. So, curling his mustaches fiercely, and chinking the metallic substances in his pocket, he went straight to the Big House and rocking on his high heels and small toes, he burst forth into denunciation of its mistress and her ways.

"It's a damned shame, madam!" he shouted at her. "What's that boy ever done to you that you should treat him as I wouldn't treat a cursed yellow dog? What has that sweet little girl done, that you should hound her as you've done?

"And that baby of theirs, a year old today, and you haven't so much as laid eyes on it. Judas Priest, madam! Why, Rachel Stetheril, I'm ashamed of you. I * * *"

Rachel Stetheril, speechless so far before his unexpected gust of words, gasped at him and pounded her old stick on the floor dangerously near his toes and screamed back at him:

"Hold your tongue, you old fool! You dare to stand up before me and talk like that! You dare!"

"I dare anything," cried the old colonel, withdrawing his toes but thrusting his fierce mustaches forward like stilettos. "It's a disgrace and I'm ashamed of you. The whole valley's ashamed of you. I * * * I * * *"

He broke off, breathing hard and mopping his face with his big handkerchief.

Rachel Stetheril stood staring at him curiously.

"You've the beard of a brigand, the eyes of a wolf," she said queerly, "and underneath you have the heart of a mooning old turtle-dove. You are a meddlesome, nose-poking old busybody and * * * Oh, come on, can't you? Come on."

She snatched at his sleeve, pounded the floor with her stick, and dragged him to the door. Outside young Beeson was holding the carriage team in restive check. Carter stepped to his mistress' elbow; the marveling colonel followed her; young Beeson gave the horses their head and they were off. But where? wondered the colonel. He did not dare hope.

At the edge of a wood young Beeson stopped. He appeared to know the exact spot, though to the colonel's staring eyes there was nothing to mark it. Down climbed Rachel Stetheril, the dazed colonel following. Never a house in sight.

She led the way, back from the road, through a meadow, up a gentle, brushy slope. There was a tiny trail under foot.

"I made it," said the old woman colorlessly, her hand on his arm. "It is the path of weary old feet, colonel."

When they came to the crest of the knoll the path ended abruptly in a clump of bushes. Which was a stupid thing for a path to do, argued the colonel, since plainly trails should lead somewhere and this one led nowhere. But Rachel Stetheril's hand, trembling just a little, parted the bushes so that they could look forth. And what they saw was the porch of the little house in which lived Robert and Enid and the baby, a porch flooded with sunshine.

"Every day," whispered the old woman, "she comes outside. She brings the baby. She puts it down on a quilt and watches it. It can crawl, colonel. I am afraid she is going to let it walk before its little legs are strong enough. * * *"

"My God!" whispered the colonel. "You have come this close, you have made a path as far as this, and you have never gone to them?"

"Would they take me in? Would they drive me away? After all that I have done against them, would they take me in?"

The old colonel trumpeted mightily into his handkerchief.

She looked up at him with eyes suddenly hungry and wistful.

"They'd take the devil himself in," he grunted indistinctly, "if he came as you do. Those two, why good God, Rachel Stetheril, they've hearts of gold!"

He broke a sudden way through the bushes and he and she, ride by side, arm in arm, went through, making a fresh end to an old path so that at last it led somewhere. As they set foot on the porch, Robert and Enid came out of the cottage, Enid with the baby on her arm, Robert carrying the quilt. When they saw her they stopped and stared.

"Grandma!" cried Robert.

Enid was speechless. But it was to Enid's face that the hungry eyes went, it was Enid's soul they sought to read, it was to Enid that at last Rachel Stetheril spoke, crying out in a voice which had never been sharper, which had never fought so valiantly to hide an emotion:

"Oh, I know when I'm beaten! And I'm beaten now. For the first time in my wicked old life, I'm a villainous, selfish, grasping, despicable old woman and I know it as well as you do."

Enid's eyes were flooded with understanding, with sympathy, and with shining gladness.

"You mustn't say that," she began.

But an uplifted stick cut her short as the old woman ran on hurriedly:

"In my wisdom I was a fool, in your ignorance you were wise. You knew that when one sinned he must pay. Haven't I sinned all my life long? Haven't I paid all my long life? And never have I been more wicked than this last year and never have I suffered so." Her voice broke a little; the yearning grew in her eyes which at last had gone to the baby's face. "I have paid, paid, paid; over and over. In loneliness; in a loveless, barren life. Robert was right when he said that Polly paid; that Ambrose paid; that Haddon paid; he was right when he himself paid, and like a gentleman. So have I paid. And now, will you take me in with you? Or," and again her old voice hardened and she threw up her head with a sort of defiance infinitely sad, "will you slap my ugly old face and tell me to go?" In her nervousness she rapped as of old with her stick. "Answer me; which is it?"

For the moment they were beyond the power of words. But even so Enid knew what to do. She came forward quickly, her eyes wet but smiling, and into the old empty arms of Rachel Stetheril she put her baby. For an instant the old woman was terrified; she felt that her wrinkled, twitching face would make the baby cry. But when the baby, who was too young perhaps to read the harsh lines and not old enough to fail to read the heart, laughed, it was Rachel Stetheril herself who cried.

(THE END)

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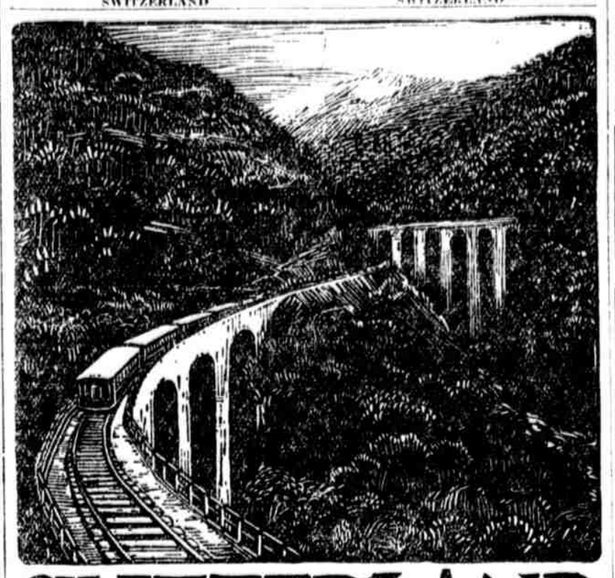

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