

TWO IN A TREE

By Amy Lyman Phillips

Drawing by E. Pollak Ottendorf

IT was a ripping morning; just the kind of morning a fellow who has lived nine months of the year with nothing but brick walls to look at appreciates, especially when he's going fishing along the same old stream where he dropped his first bent pinhook and where he knows every deep pool where big trout lie in lazy scorn of tempting bait.

But I had a grouch, and I'm afraid I didn't appreciate all the poetic beauty of the twinkling diamond dewdrops on the grass and that sort of thing. When a fellow has a grouch, he doesn't think about much else.

It was a girl, of course! I don't think anything else could have made me bad tempered on such a morning. Queer things, girls! This one lives next door. I hadn't seen her for three years. When I was graduated, she was a young slip of a thing with long black legs and flying pigtails. Then she went abroad with her folks and—lo and behold!—when I arrived on my vacation, I found a tall young person with her hair up, long, slinking trains, and all the hallmarks of a proper young lady who has been "finished" abroad. Well, she soon finished me: for after ten days I found myself thinking of her pretty much all the time. And the way she treated me—well, it was fierce! Talk about woman and her inconsistency! Eleanor had it, all right! One day she treated me like the Prodigal Son, and the next she was sweet and cold as an icecream soda. Just when I thought I was making some progress, I found I was apparently just where I began, and then I had to begin all over again.

Pretty soon down came old Pete. I had been waiting for him; for we were going fishing together. Pete, like myself, is one of the cliff dwelling tribe in town; but we come home together for three long delightful months in New Hampshire every summer, in time to get the best of the June fishing. Pete had become as dotty as I over a girl. It was Eleanor's chum, who lived across the street, and she was a pretty young thing with dimples and yellow hair, one of those little, cuddly sort of girls that you want to pick up and hug and smother with kisses.

I NOTICED that Pete wasn't whistling as usual and that he too looked disturbed. "What is it, old man?" I said. "Aren't you feeling quite fit this morning?"

"Confound it!" exploded Pete. "Can't you see I'm not?"

That settled it. When Pete gives vent to such an expression it means something serious.

He sat down rather gloomily on a log and began to look through his fly book. Then he selected a *Parmachene Belle* and tied it on the end of his line with a vicious twist. "Queer things, girls!" he said suddenly, apropos of nothing.

"Aha!" I thought. "Then that's how the land lies! Yes, queer, what?" I assented verbally.

"Confounded queer, I think!" he reiterated. "Say, Bill, did you ever notice that any other fellow than the one she's with always seems most attractive to a girl?"

I had. "And have you noticed that Sally had eyes for no one but you at the Warners' last night when we were at supper?"

I hadn't. "Well," pursued Pete viciously, "she took no notice of me. Every time I spoke to her she was preoccupied, and she never took her eyes off you and Nell from the time we began on bouillon until she had finished her ice. And walking home she hardly spoke to me. But the day before she was sweet as pie. Now I can't understand why she should have been so cool last night, can you?"

"Sure," I said. "All girls are that way." A great light had dawned on my fevered brain. Perhaps girls were like men, after all, and that the unattainable held more attraction for them. I said as much: but Pete only sniffed disdainfully as he threw his fly amid stream with a practised turn of his wrist and watched it drift down on the current.

Finally he said, "I know she prefers you; but she must know you have no interest in anyone but Nell."

Then I had to confess. "Brace up, old man!" I said. "Girls are all alike. I have been there, no later than yesterday, and I know; for—perhaps you didn't notice that at the golf club tea—Nell never kept her eyes off you the whole time."



We Saw Two Roguish Faces Peeping Down at Us.

"Oh, bosh!" he said. But the telltale red crept up his cheek from under the collar of his flannel shirt, and I knew that he too had noticed.

Finally Pete was struck with a brilliant idea. "I say," he began, "perhaps you're right after all. And what I say is that if that's what they want—why, let's give it to 'em." And he put his flybook carefully away in his hip pocket and prepared to start down stream.

IT certainly was a bully day. The grass was still wet, with little silver spider's webs scattered all over it. Great, fleecy, white clouds with silver edges floated lazily across a sky that was bluer than turquoise, and there was a cool breeze to temper the sun's heat. The air was fresh, after the heated city, and one felt like drinking great deep drafts of it, just as a thirsty dog buries its nose deep in a brook after a dusty run.

I didn't realize all this then, though. I was too busy thinking over what Pete had said. His meaning was a little bit obscure. "You mean—" I began.

"I mean that if Sally prefers you to me," he said slowly and with emphasis, "let her have you! And if, as you say, Nell has been making envious eyes at me—well, then, she can make 'em at closer range. Then, don't you see, when we've switched around that way and changed partners, so to speak, why the girls'll begin to make eyes at the other girl's man, and then we'll each have the girl we like best preferring us to the one she has."

"Oh," I said. Somehow, although the idea was logical enough, I didn't quite like the idea of such deception. Suppose, for instance, that Sally really did prefer me and that Nell liked Pete better than she did me? Somehow, it seemed like perjury, and I said so.

"Oh, piffle!" he ejaculated. "What do you call their present attitude but perjury, when it comes to that? We're simply playing their own game. And if they don't like it—well, then they'll have to cry quits. Is it agreed?"

"I—I suppose so," I assented lamely; for somehow, although Sally was a bright, pretty, lovable little thing, she wasn't Nell's intellectual equal and (I didn't say so to Pete) I feared that a steady diet of her society would bore me. Pete, on the contrary, said he didn't like a woman to know so much more than he did; he wanted a girl to look up to him and respect him for his superior knowledge. For my part, I like a woman who knows something, who reads and digests it and can meet a man on his own ground. I can't imagine anything more stupid than spending one's life with a girl who doesn't know

Bernard Shaw from a pushcart man and has no appreciation of anything higher than "My Friend the Chauffeur," or some such tale written for boarding-school girls to grow sentimental over.

However, there was no choice. So it was understood that, beginning at Ethel Barrow's tea that afternoon, Pete should appropriate Eleanor, while the irrepressible Sally should fall to me.

Having decided this, the world somehow took on a rosier hue, and we prepared to abandon ourselves to the congenial task of filling our creels.

We fished all the morning, landed some beauties, and arrived home at luncheon time, ready to eat nails. Pete stopped for tiffin with me and we discussed our fiendish plan, much to mother's amusement and doubt as to its final success. But the old joke about running after the car and that sort of thing seemed to clinch the idea in Pete's mind that it didn't make much difference which man the girls had—they would be sure to want the one they hadn't.

THAT afternoon Bill and I started for Ethel's, where a lot of our set were asked in to tea to meet her fiancé, Tom Fillmore, who had arrived the day before from his mines at Rawhide, bronzed as only a Nevada sun can bronze, big, athletic, and handsome, just the sort of man girls adore. Pete and I noticed Nell and Sally looking at him with undisguised admiration in their eyes, then toward us, as if to contrast our pallor—brought on by nine months' confinement in stuffy offices—with his glowing color. Thanks to our rigid training at the Racket Club, his physique wasn't any better than ours, that I could see. Funny, though, how the cowboy-miner type always seems to appeal to girls of the dainty, fragile sort.

That historic afternoon we changed our tactics, and instead of walking home with Nell, I slipped off with Sally and went with her to the arbor in the garden to watch the golden sun sink into a bank of red clouds over the distant purple hills. Pete, we saw, had followed with Nell, and mentally I figured that while we sat in the arbor talking airy nothings—"froth," I call it—Pete and Nell sat on the back porch in the gathering gloom, talking about—oh, all the things we used to talk about; of things about which, I found in a few well directed questions, Sally was innocent

as a new born babe. However, she was amazingly attractive, in her appealing way, and the respect she showed for a mind greater than her own was not unpleasant.

THAT night, I remember, we were all going up to the Parkers' country place to a barn dance. Their great stable was lighted with lanterns and trimmed with festoons of clematis and bunches of daisies. Punch was ladled with a tin dipper from milk pails, and we ate ices from tin cups. The music was furnished by old Eleazer Whittemore, who sat on a barrel and fiddled away as if his life depended upon it, calling the changes in the reels and moneymusk and other old fashioned dances with a voice that, despite his seventy years, was clear as a boy's.

I began to watch at once for Nell and the glances that, according to our plan, should be properly cast in my direction. But never! She acted as though no person had ever existed in her universe but Pete. And as for Pete—hang him! He never so much as looked in Sally's direction; but devoted himself to Nell with such fervor that everyone noticed it. Poor little Sally's lip quivered for a moment; for she too could not help seeing that Pete's devotion was real—as real as a counterfeit article can be. I admired him. He really did it well. And that made me reflect that since I was to play the game I might as well play it to the limit, with which reflection I devoted myself to Sally and strove to make her forget her hurt over her lost lover.

Of course we hadn't got to the lover stage. But for my part I had never seen a girl that appealed to me just as Nell did—and Pete had confided in me that Sally was the only girl in the world for him. I had seen Pete through the various stages of calf love; but a man of twenty-nine ought to be about old enough to know his own mind—or so it seems to me.

When I got home that night I reviewed the incidents of the day, and, really, I couldn't see where we had made much progress. We had taken the course that Pete's fertile brain had planned, and there was no going back; but it made me writhe, mentally, to think of Nell's intellect being thrown away upon a chap like Pete, who frankly preferred a five-cent magazine to Maeterlinck, and vowed that he'd rather listen to one piece of ragtime than to all the combined composers of classical stunts. And as for me—well, Sally was a dear; but she had her mental limitations, and I never could stand a girl who gushed, anyway. Yet I couldn't help liking her. She seemed to me just like a big angora kitten, just made to be loved and petted and fed on cream and that sort of