

The Girl Who Had No God

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—Old Hilary Kingston, starting with Socialism, drifts into anarchy, and gathers round him in the hall above the village of Woffingham a band of accomplished desperadoes who rob the rich, fatten seditions and arm the rebellious. His motherless daughter, Elinor, is raised to fine living and wrong thinking, to no law and no Christ.

CHAPTER II—In an attack on the Agrarian bank messenger, old Hilary is killed, but is not suspected of complicity. Boroday brings the body home to the hall.

CHAPTER III—Ward, assistant rector of St. Jude's, makes a call of condolence on Elinor, who consents to have her father buried from St. Jude's in the odor of sanctity. The chief of police recognizes Boroday and is suspicious.

CHAPTER IV—After the funeral the band meet at the hall and agree to go on as before. Elinor acting in her father's stead. Huff asks Elinor to marry him and she consents, though she does not love him. Boroday is arrested and threatened.

CHAPTER V—Boroday in jail, Talbot plans a raid on the Country Club. The friendship between Ward and Elinor deepens to something deeper. She envies him his faith.

CHAPTER VI—Huff burns St. Jude's parish house. Elinor offers to help rebuild it and is angry with Huff.

Not that she had forgotten that few minutes in the garden, under the moon; but that had been an accident—hardly a call.

Talbot chuckled. But Huff was thinking hard. Elinor had been different lately, a little softer. Ward represented all that the men Elinor knew were not—law to their violence, order to their disorder. There was almost a snarl in his voice.

"He'd better stay down in his valley with his old women," he said, "and leave you alone. You don't need him."

"I'm not so sure of that," Elinor replied quietly, and left him staring. . . .

Huff burned the parish house the next night. He did it himself, without the assistance of the band. Into it he put not only the devilish ingenuity of long experience, but his new hatred of Ward.

Church property is always easy of access. It was the work of five minutes to crawl through a basement window and of half an hour to make his preparations.

He looked at his watch when he had finished. It was just midnight. In two hours, or before the fire began, he would be back in the city, establishing his alibi.

The fire-whistles in the village awakened Elinor at something after eleven o'clock. All of her room was filled with the red glare of the burning parish house. Old Henriette knocked at her door.

"The church is burning down in the valley," she called. "It's a grand sight."

Elinor was throwing on her clothing. She must see Ward. She would sell her pearls. She would build a new parish house. She said this over and over to herself as she struggled down the hill.

A new parish house, better than the old, with plenty of room for the children to play in! At least it was new, and the children safe in their beds; thank God for that! She was too disturbed to notice that she had thanked the God in whom she did not believe.

The fire had gained too much headway to be checked. All the efforts of the volunteer department and the small engine were directed toward saving the church. For a time it seemed as if Saint Jude's must go.

Elinor watched the destruction. It seemed as though a band had fastened itself around her chest. Then she saw Ward. He was on the ridge-pole of the church roof with a hatchet. The ridge-pole was burning slowly. She could see him chopping.

From that time she never took her eyes away from him. Other men were there. She did not see them. She saw only Ward battling on the ridge-pole, and high above on the steeple the sturdy cross of his faith.

Once the men on the street below turned the full force of the hose on him. She saw him reel, saw him recover himself by a miracle.

The fire glare died into the dawn. Saint Jude's was saved. Behind it in its park the charred skeleton of the parish house showed how thoroughly young Huff had done his work. Not until Ward had descended safely to the street did Elinor relax.

Ward found her sitting in one of the chairs along the pavement, her hair still in its long braid, her feet thrust into slippers, her eyes red from long staring.

The fire engine was being dragged away. The crowd had dispersed. Ward, blackened and depressed, was surveying the ruins with a heavy heart. He turned and saw the girl.

Just at first he was not sure of her. He was always seeing her, mentally. Then he went toward her, his hand out.

"You see," he said, "what an hour may bring forth!" And then, "You reckless child, here in slippers!"

"I saw you on the roof," said Elinor, barely able to articulate. "Once I thought you had fallen."

"They nearly got me. It's rather sad, isn't it?" He stood, bareheaded in the cool dawn, and surveyed the ruin.

People meet great crises simply. She tried to find some word of sympathy to say, but what was there, poor

child? She knew the true inwardness of that disastrous night. So, with pathetic eyes, she turned away.

"I'll go home now," she said. "I saw the glare—I—" Quite suddenly her lips trembled. "I should like to help you with the new building."

"Fine!" said Ward heartily. "We'll get to that before long."

"If you had fallen—" He was not listening. It came to her then how far apart they were. To her his falling would have been an end of all things; to him, it would have meant the beginning of a useful eternity.

"If you wait a little, I'll run around and get my car and take you up."

She sat down again, obediently. She was glad to be with him a little longer. Until recently, the work of the band had always seemed a vague abstraction. Now one of its results lay before her. And there were other things fresh in her mind—old Hilary, dead of his revolt against law, and lying in state before an altar erected to a God he had not recognized. And Ward, watching her windows and thinking her the embodiment of what a woman should be.

Over her bitterness rose a hot wave of anger against Walter Huff. She had forbidden this thing and he had done it.

CHAPTER VII.

Ward brought her a cup of coffee, and stood by with satisfaction while she drank it. In his eyes there was a mixture of depression and joy. The parish house was gone, and this girl before him was to marry another man. But they would build another parish house, and who knew—

He drove her up the hill in his small car. At the top of a rise he stopped



The Car Climbed Slowly.

the car and looked back. The night's devastation showed clearly, a black wound in the smiling heart of the valley.

Elinor watched him. "It means a great deal to you, doesn't it?"

"It's rather a facer— Of course we will build again, but there are things that could not be replaced. That isn't what troubles me. The fact is, I am afraid I'm responsible."

"I was there last night, alone. I have a bad habit, you know I have a mental problem to worry out, of walking up and down a room and lighting one cigarette after another. I am reckless with matches."

Then perhaps, after all, Walter had not done it!

The car climbed slowly. Ward kept his eyes straight ahead. Elinor cast little shy glances at his profile.

"You said you had something to worry out?"

He drew a long breath. "I have had an offer to go to New York to a big church. It's rather a wonderful opportunity."

Elinor made no sign except to clutch her hands as they lay ungloved in her lap.

"Then you will be leaving—us?"

"No," he said. "I shall not be leaving you."

"You like it here?"

"Very much." He turned and looked down at her. It was unwise. He realized that at once. So frail she looked, so softly, tenderly feminine! And because he knew that, after the night, he had not yet got control over himself, the merest hand-clasp as she got out of the machine was all he dared. But at the top of the steps Elinor turned.

"You will never know just how sorry I am," she said, and went through her garden to the house.

From that Friday morning until the evening of the following day Elinor was quite alone.

Hour after hour she spent pacing the terrace, looking down into the valley. On Friday night, unable to sleep, she threw a negligee over her shoulders and went down to her garden. The

viage slept quietly, but there was a light in Ward's small window near the church. She remained on the terrace until the light was extinguished.

At dinner that Saturday Boroday's empty place cast a gloom over the meal. Walter Huff came a little late. Under the ease of his greeting there was a touch of uneasiness as he met Elinor's eyes. When the servants left the room, Talbot leaned forward to Walter.

"Now tell us about it," he said. Huff was frankly triumphant, but he still avoided Elinor's eyes.

"It's working out exactly as I knew it would," he explained. "Having once had a parish house they cannot do without it. The vestry carried only about a third enough insurance. And there's another point in our favor—the rector's away. He's got rheumatism. They are going to take up an additional purse to send him to Baden-Baden."

"When?"

"Tomorrow morning. And tomorrow being Sunday, the assistant rector, Elinor's friend, will have it in charge until Monday morning."

"I shall warn him," said Elinor suddenly.

There was silence for a moment. Talbot smiled. Lethbridge looked astounded. Huff, bending forward with his arms out before him on the table, confronted Elinor squarely.

"That's it, is it?" he said. "I asked you not to do—that you have done. The children used it all the time. They played basketball there. Besides, my wish should mean something to you."

Huff shrugged his shoulders. "If I had burned a tenement full of people—"

"A man was nearly killed. He was on the ridge-pole of the church and they turned the full strength of the water on him. I saw it. I—almost fainted."

"You saw it?"

"I was there," said Elinor quietly. Huff rose angrily.

"You were there! And who was it who almost fell off the roof? Your parson, I suppose."

Talbot silenced the boy. It was Lethbridge who took up the argument. He understood her position and sympathized, he said. The fire was a mistake. But now that it was done—

He spoke of Boroday's critical condition, of their safety that depended on his, and finding her attitude to be unyielding, took refuge in her father's memory.

"If anything comes out, it will all come out," he reminded her. "It seems to me, Elinor, that you owe it to your father not to interfere. This new plan, four or five years ago, the parish house was first built, talked it over here. And it is through we mean to hurt this Ward. It will be three to one—make no resistance."

"Yes," she said. "Three That is the way we fight. Oh, of you, I know that—but it isn't sometimes."

The men were astounded, and uncomfortable.

The conference got nowhere. Elinor acknowledged their duty to the Russian, offered all her jewels, in fact, for his defense. But she stubbornly refused to countenance the attack on Mr. Ward. Huff lapsed into sullen silence, his eyes on her. The other men found every argument met by silence, except for one passionate outburst.

"He is my friend," she said. "I have never had any friends, except once, years ago, a girl. It was Boroday then who used my friendship for her. It was the Rutherford matter. Walter would not remember, but the rest of you—I tell you, I won't do this thing."

Talbot tried a new method. "It's a wealthy congregation," he explained. "It is not much for them, and it's safety for us. If we let Boroday go up, and he thinks what he will about us, he can make it bad for all of us."

Elinor turned on him.

"I don't care a rap for the congregation. Do you think he will let that money go without a struggle? The moment it goes into the offertory it ceases to be money and becomes a divine trust to him. He'll fight and—someone will be killed."

It dawned even on Talbot after a time that her subtlety was for none of them. When he realized it, at last, he sat back with folded arms and frowning brows. Here was mockery, for sure, old Hilary's daughter, reared on pure violence, and in love with a parson—old Hilary's daughter, and successor, defying the band in its hour of need, and quoting a divine trust, in extenuation!

In view of her attitude, there seemed to be nothing to do.

"We'll give it up, of course," said Lethbridge, after a pause.

There had never been any drinking in old Hilary's house. Only abstainers were ever taken into the band. But it was the custom of the two older men to remain at the table over their cigars, giving Walter and Elinor a half-hour together. That night, when Elinor rose from the table, Huff, although he rose with the others, made no move to follow her. She looked back from the doorway, a slim, almost childish figure, with beseeching eyes.

"You must all try to think kindly of me," she said wistfully. "I care for you as much as I ever did. You are all I have, you three. It is only that I—have been thinking."

For the first time since the organization of the band, there was quarreling that night in old Hilary's paneled library. At the end of an hour Walter Huff swung out of the door, white with fury. He stumbled through the garden toward the garage, muttering as he went. In the rose alley he met Lethbridge.

"I was waiting for you," she said

simply. Huff stood before her, and the anger left his face.

"You're the one thing in all the world I felt sure of." His voice was heavy with despair.

"I've been thinking about Boroday—"

"Elinor, how far have things gone between you and this man at St. Jude's?"

She recoiled. "I hardly know him."

"You think about him." She looked down into the valley. "I think of the things he stands for. It just seems to me that, when a man like that, not a dreamer at all, but human and—keen, when he believes all that he does—"

"It was Ward on the ridge-pole, the one who nearly fell?"

"Yes."

"And you were frightened?"

"It made me sick. I—"

Quite suddenly he crushed her to him. It was as if he meant to drive away this barrier between them by sheer force of his love for her. But, although she held up her face for his kiss, he released her as suddenly, without it.

"You're crazy about him," he said thickly. "I'm not blind. I'll get him for this!"

CHAPTER VIII.

Saturday evening it was the custom of the Bryants to entertain the rector at dinner.

Now, in his absence, it was the assistant rector who dined in the paneled Jacobean dining room of the Bryant house, swallowing much unctuous dictation as to church policy with his dinner.

Not that Ward was mild. But he had an easy way of listening to the advice of his various influential parishioners and then going ahead and doing as he liked. In essentials he always yielded. To him the church was so much bigger than his ritual.

That evening Mrs. Bryant had taken up the question of women in the choir. "Frankly, Mr. Ward," she said, ignoring her fish, "I do not approve of it. It's the feminist movement, I tell you. Before long they'll want to be on the vestry!"

Ward glanced up, half smiling. The pear-shaped pearl, which usually hung at his mistress's withered throat, was, naturally, not there. From the pearl to the parish house, from the parish house to Elinor—thus in two leaps of Ward's mind he was far from the subject in hand.

A president of the Chancel society said Mrs. Bryant, "as honorary president of the Women's Guild, I protest against women in the choir."

Ward looked at her with a jump came to the choir with an errand mind.

"I wonder," Ward reflected, "whether a master of tradition and custom will prevent women from singing in the heavenly choir?"

Mrs. Bryant stabbed at her fish. But she had not finished. There were many things about Saint Jude's that did not please her. The burial of old Hilary Kingston had been one. She seized on that.

"A non-communicant," she snapped. "An infidel, an atheist! The daughter is living alone up there at this minute. It isn't respectable. It's a bad example to the girls in the village. The house is full of men all the time."

"That must be a mistake."

"It is quite true. Servants talk, you know. What can you expect? Raised out of the church, with no belief, and, of course, no moral instruction."

Ward bent forward over the table. "That is a very serious statement, Mrs. Bryant. His eyes were like steel. 'Of course you are not basing it merely on what you hear from servants?'"

Mrs. Bryant flushed, a purplish spot in the center of each sagging cheek. "I do not gossip with the servants," she said, shortly. "It is common talk. And there are other things. Machines come and go from the house at queer hours of the night. The girl spends a great deal of money. Where does she get it? Where, for that matter, did old Hilary Kingston get it?"

Ward looked at her. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know where she gets it. I don't know where she gets it."

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