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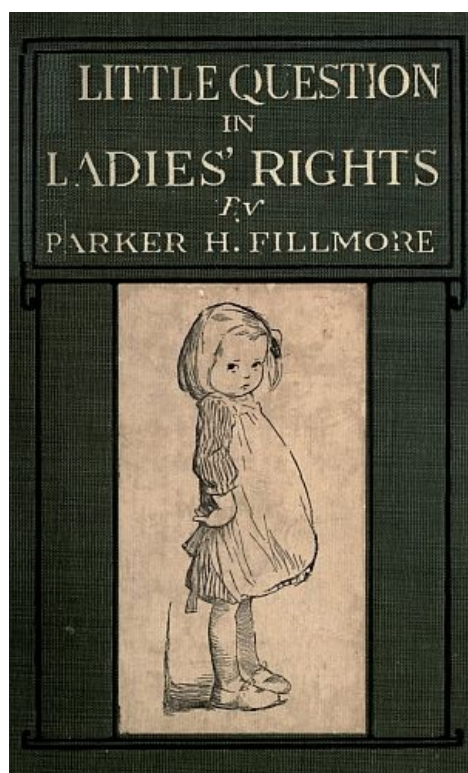
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A LITTLE QUESTION IN LADIES' RIGHTS

[3]

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE HICKORY LIMB

Illustrated. Cloth. 50 cents net

"The joyful pathos is so true that it chokes you all up but leaves you happy, and one likes to be left happy."

"An hour of amusement, a series of laughs from the heart out and a pleasant vista backward to the days of childhood will come to the reader of 'The Hickory Limb.'"

Cincinnati Tribune.

JOHN LANE COMPANY
NEW YORK

[5]



"What's the matter, Margery?"
"Nothing. I'm just waiting."

[\(See page 13\)](#)

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A LITTLE QUESTION IN LADIES' RIGHTS

By

PARKER H. FILLMORE

AUTHOR OF "THE HICKORY LIMB,"

Illustrations by
ROSE CECIL O'NEILL



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[7]

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A LITTLE QUESTION IN LADIES' RIGHTS

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PART ONE

[13]

MARGERY was sitting under the cherry tree with a certain air of expectancy. She seemed to be waiting for something or some one. Willie Jones's head popped over the back fence and Willie Jones himself, a tin pail in one hand, dropped into the Blair yard and made for the cherry tree. But Margery still gazed earnestly, tensely, into nothing. Willie Jones, evidently, was not the object of her thoughts.

"What's the matter, Margery?"

"Nothing. I'm just waiting."

"What for?"

There was no reason for telling Willie Jones, but, by the same token, there was no reason for not telling him. So Margery answered frankly:

"I et a whole bagful of bananas and now Effie says I'm going to be sick and thr'up. So I'm just waiting."

[14]

"Whew! How many was they, Margery?"

"I don't know, but a good many."

"Think you might have shared with a fella."

"Well, you see, Willie, I didn't know anything about them. None of us did. I thought I smelled something good in the pantry, and when Effie went upstairs I sneaked in to see. Sure enough, there was a bag of bananas, real soft and sweet, don't you know. I et one and then I et another and, before I knew it, they were all gone. Then Effie caught me as I was coming out."

"Will she tell on you?"

"No, I don't think she'll tell on me. But she says I'm going to be awful sick. I was once before. So I'm just waiting."

"Aw, you're not going to be sick, Margery. That's only Effie's bluff. Listen: I'm going out blackberrying. There are just dead loads of great big ripe ones on the graveyard patch. My mother'll give me ten cents if I bring her back two quarts."

[15]

Margery looked at the tin pail longingly. She, too, would go blackberrying, but she realized that home was the best place for sick folk.

"Aw, come on," Willie urged. "You're not going to be sick. I bet anything you're not."

Confidence begets confidence, and, looking at Willie Jones's tin pail, Margery began to wonder whether, after all, Effie's prophecy might not prove a false one.

"I tell you what, Willie: Wait a minute and I'll ask Effie."

"Why do you got to ask her?"

"Because mother's not home. Besides, if I do get sick, I'll want Effie to take care of me."

This last was too sound a reason for Willie to gainsay, so Margery called Effie to the kitchen door.

[16]

"Blackberryin'! And in the sun!" Effie repeated, when Margery had delivered herself. "Well, I guess not! Here you are just stuffed full of ripe bananas and you want a-go out trampin' in the sun! Not much! You stay right where you are, me lady, and take care o' yourself."

"You see," Margery explained to Willie Jones.

"Aw, rats!" that young gentleman exclaimed, turning a hostile front toward the kitchen door. "Come on, Margery. What do you care what Effie says? She's nuthin' but an old hired girl! I wouldn't let any old hired girl boss me around!"

"Any old—*what?*" gasped Effie, her face turning red and her eyes opening wide with horror.

"Any old hired girl!" Willie Jones repeated defiantly. "Ain't she nuthin' but an old hired girl, Margery?"

[17]

It was a question Margery had never before considered. To her Effie had always been merely Effie—merely the person who cooked and sewed and swept and waited on table and combed your hair and buttoned your dress and did all the thousand and one things about the house that had to be done and always were done. She was merely Effie and, come to think of it, she must be the hired girl, for in every house in the neighborhood the person who did the things or a few of the things that Effie did was undoubtedly the hired girl. And if you are a thing, what's the sense pretending you aren't? Margery did not wish to offend Effie, but facts is facts.

"Of course Effie's our hired girl."

For a moment Effie looked hurt enough for tears.

"Oh, Margery, how can you? And after all the years I've took care of you and loved you! You don't mean it, do you? You're not going to call your poor old Effie such an ugly name, are you?"

[18]

"Well, I don't see why you talk that way, Effie. You are a hired girl, aren't you?"

"Of course she's a hired girl," Willie Jones insisted. "And I'd just like to see any old hired girl of ours telling me what I dast do and what I dassent. Come on, Margery, we can't wait all day."



"I'm only the hired girl!"

"Any old hired girl!" shouted Effie. She was angry now, so angry that Margery and Willie Jones retreated a few steps in case of personal violence. "So I'm like any old hired girl, am I? I'm only one of them good-for-nuthin' tramps that go traipsin' about from house to house and never keep a place for more than two weeks, am I? I'm a dirty, careless, ignur'nt hussy that's out all night and sleepy and lazy all day, am I? In other words, I'm a hired girl! Well, it's just what Tom's been tellin' me all along, and I didn't believe him. 'Nonsense,' says he, 'they don't care nuthin' for you. To them yir only a hired girl,' says he. 'Now come over to my place and I'll make you the housekeeper,' says he, 'and all you'll have to do is give your orders to the servants.' And every time I says to Tom, 'No, Tom,' I says, 'I'm not ready yet. I've been with these children since before they was born and I can't leave 'em yet. But thank you just the same,' I says. And Tom says, 'Effie, yir a born fool! What do you think them children care for you?' he says. 'Only what they can get out of you,' he says. And," concluded Effie, her voice again choked with tears, "I am a fool and Tom's right. They don't care nuthin' for me and I'm only the hired girl!"

[21]

"Who's Tom, I'd like to know?" Willie Jones demanded offensively.

"Who's Tom?" echoed Effie. It was plain that insult was being added to injury. "Why, Tom, me young friend, is Thomas McGinniss, ConthraCTOR *and* Builder, that built the house yir living in and every house on your street. And it's ten to one, me young gent, that yir own dad is still payin' his monthly installments to Tom McGinniss, brother of Effie the Hired Girl."

[22]

Effie turned haughtily away, then paused to add: "If either of yez ever again have anything to say to Effie, when ye ring Mr. Thomas McGinniss's doorbell, ye had better mind yir manners and ask for Miss McGinniss."

Effie slammed the kitchen door and Willie Jones showed how deeply impressed he was by putting his thumb on the end of his nose and wiggling his fingers in a manner that Margery had often been told was highly improper.

"Well, come on," he said briskly. "It's time for us to be moving or we never will get two quarts picked."

So off they started, a good half hour's tramp in the sun. The blackberry patch was in a far unused corner of the graveyard, adjoining a plot of unconsecrated ground where, as Willie and Margery had often heard, only murderers were buried. There was, of course, the usual *No Trespassing* sign to meet and pass, the wire fence to slip under, and a short stretch of clay and rubble which ended suddenly in a thick brake of blackberry bushes. Once in the patch all that was necessary was to keep a sharp eye on the gravedigger's house, which stood on a knoll beyond, in plain sight, but far enough away to give one a good chance of escape in case of detection.

[23]

"Now, I'll let you hold the pail, Margery, and I'll pick into my hat. Jiminy! They haven't been picked over to-day at all. We'll get our two quarts easy."

"H'm," murmured Margery, tentatively. There was a little matter upon which she had been speculating ever since they had left home. "Are—are you going to give me half the money?"

[24]

"What money?"

"Why, don't you know, the money your mother's going to pay you for these berries."

"Oh."

The *Oh* was all Willie had to answer.

"Well, are you?"

"Are I what?"

"Are you going to give me half the money?"

"Well, I—I hadn't thought about it," Willie admitted.

Margery felt perfectly sure of this and sure likewise that he never would think of it unless she herself insisted on her rights.

"Then just think about it now. Here I am picking berries for you as fast as I can. I haven't et one. Now if you go sell these berries, you ought to give me half, oughtn't you?" [25]

"I dunno but what I ought."

A timid creature would have rested content with this, but Margery had had too many dealings with the other sex to put undue confidence in any concession so vaguely expressed, so grudgingly admitted. It was rather a hard thing to do—she knew beforehand Willie Jones would hate her for it—but a nickel is a nickel, and now or never, she realized, was the moment to demand a definite promise.

"Well, then, will you?"

Willie seemed not to hear.

"Will you?" Margery repeated, stopping her picking to make her question more emphatic.

Willie looked up apprehensively toward the gravedigger's house.

"If you don't stop arguing and go ahead picking we won't either of us have anything," he burst out querulously.

It was hard indeed not to act upon a suggestion so plainly expected to be of benefit to them both. Fortunately, Margery knew that if she had but character to persist a little longer she would probably gain her end. So, by a great effort of will, she continued idle and reiterated tiresomely: [26]

"Well, will you?"

"Will I? Why, of course I will!" Willie raised his voice and screwed up his face into a tight little knot of impatience and disgust. "Haven't I been telling you that for half an hour? You are the dumbest ox sometimes! Why, do you suppose I'd ask you to help me if I hadn't expected to share with you? You must think I'm an awful tightwad!"

Margery bent her head humbly under this tirade. She had nothing more to say, no defense to utter. By her unwomanly persistence she had very clearly lost whatever admiration and respect Willie Jones might once have felt for her. But—but—but she was in for half the profits! . . . Women are so prone nowadays to prefer some petty material gain to the grand old-fashioned whatchemaycallit. [27]

"I think we're going to get our two full quarts," Margery remarked amiably. Of course she was amiable. She had every reason to be amiable.

Willie Jones, who by this time had fallen silent, made no comment.

"Don't you think so?" Margery pursued sweetly.

"Huh!" grunted Willie Jones.

When the tin pail was about full an accident happened to Margery. She stepped into something soft and clayey, and the next instant, seeing what it was, she started off by leaps and bounds, crying out the shrill warning: "Run, Willie, run! Bumble bees! I stepped on a bumble bee nest!"

A young gravedigger—if it be correct to call the offspring of an old gravedigger a young gravedigger—caught sight of the poachers just at this moment, and, shouting out, "Hey, there! You!" started toward them down the knoll. The incredible speed with which the poachers fled seemed to give the young gravedigger an erroneous idea of the fear that his presence inspired. There was small likelihood of his overtaking them before they reached the safety of the other side of the fence, but they seemed to him so little to realize this that, for the mere pleasure of pursuit, the young gravedigger pounded on, brandishing his arms and roaring his threats. By the time Margery and Willie made the fence they had so far outdistanced the bees that Willie had courage to face about and shout back defiance to all threats and to show his contempt for the whole race of gravediggers by pointing his thumb to his nose and wriggling his fingers in that same derisive and, it must be conceded, effective manner already mentioned. Although still at a considerable distance, the young gravedigger caught the full meaning of the insult and almost exploded with rage. [28]

"You—you little——" he began. But he did not finish. They saw him stop suddenly, look up, and then, flinging his arms over his head, rush madly back the way he had just come. [29]

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" Willie Jones shouted, hopping up and down in the intensity of his enjoyment. "Margery, do you see him? The bees are after him! Jiminy! Jiminy! *Jiminy!*"

Willie Jones lay down on the ground and rolled and kicked and plucked up handfuls of grass in an effort to work off the exuberance of his joy.

"Oh!" he gasped weakly, as the humor of the situation finally expended itself. "Isn't that the funniest thing you ever saw?"



"Margery, do you see him? The bees are after him!"

As Margery made no answer, he turned, suddenly conscious that from the start she had not been sharing his transports. [32]

"Why, what's the matter, Margery?"

There was a pained expression on Margery's face and she was panting.



"I'm stung," she murmured.

Willie Jones did not have to ask "Where?" for the middle finger of one hand was already standing straight out, swollen and red.

"I'm awfully sorry, Margery, honest I am. Put some mud on it. That'll help some."

"I don't see any mud," Margery panted, looking hopelessly over the green meadow.

"Can't we make some quick enough?" Willie asked, digging his heel into the turf. "Now, Margery, spit on this. . . . Aw, that's not enough. Watch me."

By their united efforts they succeeded in mixing a mud plaster large enough to cover the wound.

"There now, does that feel better?"

"I don't know, Willie. Maybe it does. But do you know—do you know—I—I think I'm getting sick."

[33]

"Oh, no, you're not. You just think you are. Brace up now and you'll feel all right." Then, by way of changing the subject and giving praise where praise was due, he added: "That was dandy of you not dropping any berries when the bees chased us. There are not quite two quarts, but don't you care. I think my mother'll count them for two."

But Margery was not to be diverted.

"Oh, Willie," she groaned, "I feel awful sick! Oh, if I could only thr'up!"

"Well, thr'up if you want to," Willie advised. "There's no one around here, and I won't look, honest I won't."

Margery shook her head sadly.

"I can't do it alone. I got to have hot water and things. Come on. We better go home or I think I'll die. Oh, if my head just didn't ache so! Maybe you better lend me your cap, Willie. Thanks. I suppose that'll help my head some, but I don't believe it will. Oh, Willie, do you know what I wish?"

[34]

"What?"

"Oh, I do wish I had never et a single banana! And I knew all the time I oughtn't to eat so many, I knew it just as well! Oh, Willie, isn't it turrible the way a person does a thing even when they know they oughtn't to?"

All the way home Willie had very little to say, but he listened politely as Margery talked on and on, punctuating her sad moralizings with long labored breaths and weary headshakes.

"And then afterwards, Willie, if I had only sat still as Effie told me to, I might have got off all right. But no, I had to come racing off here in the hot sun and I knew I oughtn't to, and then I went into the blackberry patch and I knew I hadn't any right to, and all I got to say is, it's a wonder a hundred bees didn't sting me instead of one. . . ."

[35]

Willie looked at her curiously.

"Do you think you got stung because you picked those berries?"

"I just know that was why."

"Well, the gravedigger was getting it worse than you, and I guess he had a right to be there, hadn't he?"

For a moment Margery was stumped, but only for a moment.

"Yes, Willie," she said simply, "he had a right to chase us, but—he had no right to use such turrible langwedge. I'm not one bit surprised he got stung for it. You heard him yourself, Willie, you know you did."

Yes, Willie had heard him, and Margery was certainly right in intimating that the young gravedigger was exceptionally fluent in cuss words. With cause and effect so clearly demonstrated, Willie Jones had no further argument against Margery's conception of a prompt and well-deserved judgment. He was silent a moment, then went back to something else.

[36]

"So you think you oughtn't to have gone into the blackberry patch at all?"

"Why, of course I think so! I know so! Wasn't there a sign up not to? Why, taking blackberries when there's a sign up is not much better than downright stealing!"

"H'm," murmured Willie Jones with interest. Then after a pause he said: "Now, Margery, listen here: if you feel as bad about it as all that I tell you what I'll do—I'll take your share of blame for the berries. I'll tell everybody that I picked 'em all."

Margery turned heavy eyes on her companion and, sick as she was, saw through his little scheme at once. He was offering her a chance to give up her share of tainted profits.

"Thank you, Willie, thank you very much, but I guess I'll just tell the truth about the berries. It wouldn't be fair to you if I didn't."

[37]

Willie protested that it would be all right, but Margery was firm.

"No, Willie, I did pick half of them, that's all there is about it, and you mustn't pretend I didn't. . . . Oh, oh, I wonder do I look as sick as I feel?"

Willie scanned her colorless face and, under the delusion that sick folk desire to look as nearly well as possible, said: "No, you're looking all right." The expression of indignant protest which his cheerful remark excited showed him his mistake, and he added, rather lamely: "You do look kind of thin, though."

"Thin!" Margery snorted. "Why, Willie Jones, if you were one-half as sick as I am this minute, why, you—you'd be dead long ago! O-oh! My head, and my stummick, and my finger, too! But my finger's not as bad as my head and my stummick. Oh, how I wish that Effie was here!"

[38]

"Effie?"

"Yes, Effie. She'd have me well in two minutes."

"I hope you don't think we'll find Effie when we get home."

"Why not?"

"Don't you remember what she said when we started out? Don't you know she said she was going to her brother's house because we called her a hired girl?"

For the moment Margery had forgotten, and now, at this sudden reminder, she was so overcome she had to sit down for a few moments and rest on the curbstone.

"Oh," she groaned, "you don't think she really meant it, do you, Willie? What'll I do if she's not there? There's no one else knows how to make me thr'up like Effie! She always does it for me. Why, I'll just die, I know I will, if she's not there!"

[39]

"I'm sorry, Margery, but even if she is there, I don't think she'll do anything for you this time. She's pretty mad at both of us."

"Willie Jones," Margery said, with sudden determination, "you've got to do something. You've just *got* to!"

"What?"

"You've got to apologize to Effie for calling her a hired girl."

"Well, ain't she a hired girl?" Willie protested.

It was the same question Margery had asked herself earlier in the day. Now, however, she was ready to answer it differently.

"No," she said firmly, "she's not a hired girl. She stays with us because she loves us and wants to take care of us. Once a lady sneaked in and tried to get Effie away from us, and do you know what Effie did? She chased the lady out of the yard! So you see she's our true friend and just like one of the family, too. Now you're not friends with a person you call a hired girl, are you? Effie was just right not to let us call her that. Why, do you know, Willie Jones," Margery concluded impressively, "I love Effie much better than I do some of my relations!"

[40]

This seemed an irrefutable argument to Margery, but Willie Jones again protested.

"She's a hired girl even if you do love her."

"She's not, I say!" roared Margery. "And, Willie Jones, you stop arguing! You're making me sicker! Just see how my head wobbles!" She wobbled it shakily a moment to show, and then demanded sharply: "Now, then, Willie Jones, is Effie a hired girl or isn't she?"

Many a man before Willie Jones has been forced to make a choice between facts and a lady's increasing illness on the one hand and fancy and her smiles on the other. Like most of his kind, Willie Jones had not the moral courage to face the lady's increasing illness.

[41]

"Well, if you say she's not a hired girl, I guess she's not. You ought to know."

"And will you apologize to her for your mistake?"

"Yes, if you want me to."

"Well, I do want you to. So come on. I'm nearly dead now and I just tell you I can't stand it much longer."

When they reached the kitchen, they found Effie with nose a-tilt and eyes suspiciously red. At sight of them she burst into a loud and cheerful strain:

*"Wait till the clouds roll by, Nellie,
Wait till the clouds roll by, . . ."*

"Effie," Margery began. Effie did not hear, so Margery had to try again. "Effie!"

[42]

"Oh," remarked Effie, stopping her song and looking at them, as it were, for the first time. Then she asked, in her haughtiest tone: "Is it me yir talkin' to?"

"Willie Jones wants to say something to you, Effie."

Margery gave Willie a push and he began bravely:

"Say, Effie, I'm awfully sorry I called you that. But it wasn't my fault, honest it wasn't, because, don't you know, I thought you were. But Margery says you're not. She says you're one of the fambly."

"Did she honest?" cried Effie, eagerly, her face lighting up.

"Sure she did, Effie. Why, do you know, Effie, she says she loves you better than she does any of her real relations!"

When you undertake to do a thing it's a pleasure to do it properly.

"No!" said Effie, incredulously.

[43]

"Cross my heart!" vowed Willie Jones, suiting action to word.

"Oh, you darlint!" Effie cried, opening her arms to gather in her repentant child. Then she stopped in concern. "What's ailin' yir finger?"

"Stung!" Margery quavered. "But don't mind that, Effie. It don't hurt much now. It's my stummick! Ugh! Ugh! I'm just dying to thr'up! Please get the hot water and things, quick!"

"And are you feelin' sick, you poor lamb," Effie crooned, compassionately, as she rushed about making preparations. "Now, dearie——"

"Effie, make Willie Jones go out first."

"Whoop!" shouted Effie, turning upon Willie with brandished arms.

"Wait, Effie, wait a minute! Tell him when his mother pays him, he can bring over my nickel, and if I'm not here he can give it to you."

"Do you hear that, now?" Effie demanded roughly, pushing Willie out by the shoulder and closing the door.

[44]

"Now, then, darlint, just drink this down. That's right. Drink it all. Now swally yir little hand. That's right. That's right. Oh, now yir goin' a-feel fine! Now ye'll soon be a well girl. Once again. That's right. That's right. . . . It's just a good thing to get rid of all that nasty old stuff, ain't it, now? . . ."

When this part of Margery's illness was attended to, Effie bathed her finger, extracted the sting, and in a short time had her feeling delightfully convalescent.

"And, Effie," Margery began coaxingly in that moment of sweet intimacy between nurse and patient when relief has come, "you're never going to Tom McGinniss's house to live, are you?"

"Tom McGinniss's house!" snorted Effie, outraged and indignant at the mere suggestion. "Well, I should say not! Who's been puttin' such ideas into your head? Why, those McGinniss kids, even if they are me own flesh and blood, are a set of young ruffians! And Tom's wife! Whew! Would you believe it, she's tryin' to break into society! And the things I know about her! No, siree! Me and Maggie McGinniss couldn't live twenty-four hours under the same roof! Don't you ever insult me again by suggestin' such a thing! . . . And now, darlint, I think it will be just as well if we go to bed and take a little rest."

[45]

After she had punched the pillow and smoothed the sheet and had been assured several times that the patient was feeling just lovely, honest she was, Effie lingered a moment uncertainly.

"And, darlint dear," she began half shyly, "you ain't never again goin' a-let any one call your poor old Effie that ugly name, are you now? It's a turrible thing to bunch a decent, hardworkin' girl with a set o' tramps like them neighborhood hired girls. I just tell you a girl has to be mighty careful nowadays what she lets folks call her. Even if she's a perfect lady, they're only too quick to take advantage of her. Especially these here men and boys."

[46]

"You just bet they are!" Margery agreed heartily. "They're always trying to get the best of us! But just let me tell you one thing: You needn't think I'm not going to get that nickel, because I am!"



PART TWO

[47]

THE next day Margery saw nothing of Willie until afternoon. Then she caught him just as he was leaving his own gate. Apparently he did not see her, and she had to gain his attention by calling him.

"Willie, wait a minute. I want to ask you something."

Willie seemed to be in a great hurry. Nevertheless, he paused.

"Well?"

"Did your mother pay you that dime yesterday?"

"What dime?"

"That dime for those two quarts of berries that you and me picked together."

"O-oh!"

"Well, did she?"

"Did she? Of course she did!"

"Well, have you got my nickel?"

Willie looked at her scornfully.

"Of course I've got your nickel! Do you suppose I eat 'em?"

Margery was very sure that that was exactly what he would like to do with both their nickels—transmuted, that is to say, into eatable commodities. But she didn't care to lose time on verbal quibbles. She came to the point at once:

"Will you please give me my nickel now? I want it."

Willie squirmed impatiently.

"How can I give you your old nickel before I get the dime changed? I don't see what you're in such a rush for! Besides, I'm in a hurry. I got to see a fella."

Margery held out her hand.

"Give me the dime and Effie will change it for us. It won't take two minutes."

"Effie nuthin'! What do you think I am? I tell you, you got to wait! I'm in a hurry."

"And I tell you, Willie Jones, I'm not going to wait any longer! I've been waiting ever since yesterday afternoon, and now I've got you I'm going to stay right with you until you pay me!"

With a grunt of disgust Willie turned and ran. As the weakness of sex and the helplessness of young ladyhood had not yet had time to settle down upon her, Margery promptly ran after him. She was as good a runner as he was any day, so he was mightily mistaken if he thought he was going to get away by running. After a few moments he seemed to realize this, for he drew up, panting, and, with a change of tactics, turned a smiling face to Margery.

"Do you want to spend your nickel, Margery?"

Did she want to spend her nickel? What a question! Did he suppose she wanted to punch a hole in it and hang it around her neck?

"Of course I want to spend my nickel! And I want to spend it myself, too. I don't want no one else to spend it for me."

Willie lounged up to the window of a bakery shop.

"Jiminy, those cakes do look good!" He turned to her blandly. "Say, Margery, do you want me to buy some cakes?"

"No, I don't want you to buy some cakes! All I want is my nickel."

Willie sighed, and went back to the cakes. The longer he looked the hungrier he became. He sighed again.

"I just guess I'll have to buy some cakes—that's all there is about it. You can wait out here for me, Margery."

But Margery did not care to wait for him outside. Bakery shops sometimes have back doors that let out on little alleys. So Margery said:

"I think I'll just go in with you, Willie."

Willie knew the cakes he wanted, but, being a wary trader, he priced other kinds first.

"Them's two for a nickel," the German lady behind the counter told him, "and them's a cent apiece—ten cents a dozen. Oh, them's real expensive—five cents apiece."

Finally he pointed to the objects of his choice. They were long, thick, yellow cakes, fancifully encrusted with chocolate.

"Three for a nickel," the German lady said.

Willie sighed so hopelessly that the German lady relented.

"By rights, they're three for a nickel, but I tell you what I'll do: I'll make 'em to you a cent apiece. But you mustn't tell no one."

[48]

[49]

[50]

[51]

Willie promised he wouldn't, and bought two. In payment he offered the German lady a dime. Margery looked significantly at the change as the German lady counted it out; but Willie quite mechanically slipped it all into his pocket.

[52]

The German lady beamed on them kindly.

"Say, yous two can sit down at one of them little tables, if yous want to, and eat your cakes. By rights, only ten-cent orders can sit down, but I'll let yous this time."

"Thank you," Willie Jones said politely. "That'll be much nicer."

So they sat them down at an ice-cream table, and Willie at once proffered Margery his open bag.

"Don't you want a cake?"

In one sense Margery did want a cake, but under the circumstances she deemed it wise not to humor her appetite. So she said:

"No, thanks; I'm not hungry."

Willie gallantly urged, but Margery was firm, and at length he was forced to begin alone.

[53]

He ate with zest. Gazing at him, Margery had time to ask herself what in the world was possessing him to act so. If that nickel were owing to Henry, or to Freddy Larkin, or, in fact, to any boy, Margery knew with no possibility of doubt that Willie Jones would pay up at once. Among his own kind, he passed for a fellow that was honest and square, but for some reason, some utterly illogical but nevertheless generally accepted reason, just because she was a female creature, in dealing with her he felt at liberty to cast aside that code of conduct by which ordinarily he acted. And—if the outrage needed a climax—the rest of mankind, should they hear of Willie Jones's behavior, instead of turning from him with the cold shoulder of disapproval, would merely laugh amusedly. Oh, think of it! The injustice of things! The rank, the black injustice! Margery turned wild eyes to heaven to register her dumb but not for that reason any less vehement protest.

[54]

Willie, meantime, munched calmly on. As the moments passed, he ate more slowly. Naturally. The cakes he had so carefully selected were not hollow inside, but as solid as they looked, and consequently somewhat dry and crumbly. Dryness and crumbliness induce thirst, and thirst, as every one knows, is one of the first things to eat up a man's wealth. Willie Jones swallowed hard, and inquired:

"Would you like a glass of milk, Margery?"

"Would I like a glass of milk!" Margery's tone seemed to add: On my own money, I suppose you mean! Aloud she concluded: "I should say not! I can get milk at home."

Willie got up and went over to the counter.

[55]

"How much is your milk a glass?"

"Three cents," the German lady said.

Willie sighed, and turned sadly away. The German lady called him back.

"By rights it's three cents, but I'll give it to you for two."

Margery heard distinctly. Two cents for cakes, two cents for milk. Good! That left him one cent of his own money.

Willie Jones leisurely finished the last crumb of cake and drained his glass.

"Well, so long, Margery. I guess I better be going. I got to see a fella down in East Maplewood."

"Give me my nickel, Willie, or I'll have to go with you. I told you I would."

"Well, of course, Margery, you can come down to East Maplewood if you want to. But it's pretty far." He spoke as though the possible fatigue to Margery really concerned him.

Margery straightened her lips, and fell into step. She told herself that she was getting mad. The state of her feelings, however, seemed to have no effect upon her companion. He continued exasperatingly bland and friendly. At street crossings he warned her of the danger of approaching vehicles; he begged her to step this way or that in order not to muddy her shoes; and along the flower beds of Boulevard Place he insisted upon her telling him which she preferred, red geraniums or pink, and why.

[56]

As they came into East Maplewood his manner changed. A frown settled between his eyes, and he drew a long breath of rising indignation. He was deciding evidently that patience and forbearance had reached their limit. Stopping short in front of a little candy store, he turned upon Margery with a sudden grim threat in voice and eye.

"Now, then, Margery, I've stood this foolin' long enough! Beat it!"

[57]

But Margery gave him back look for look, and, instead of shrinking away at sight of his

determined glance, answered emphatic scowl with scowl just as emphatic.

"You've stood this fooling long enough, have you, Willie Jones? And what about me? There's just one thing I want to tell you: You'll never get rid of me until you give me my nickel!"

"Aw, go on——"

Willie Jones broke off as two little girls who were passing stopped to look inquiringly, not to say inquisitively, from him to Margery. They were both a few years older than Margery, poor children evidently, for one of them carried a parcel of afternoon papers that she seemed to be delivering. It was the other one who, after a moment's pause, addressed Margery:

"What's the matter, little girl? Has he got a nickel of yours?"

[58]

Margery hesitated. Her struggle with Willie Jones was so much like a family quarrel that she was loath to call in outside interference. Truth to tell, if Willie Jones had been her own brother Henry, she would have died rather than disclose to the world the disgraceful cause of their wrangle. But Willie Jones wasn't Henry, and, besides that, Henry, though he was a boy, would never act this way about a nickel that was really hers. This thought decided her. She would give Willie Jones one more chance, and then, if he still persisted in ignoring the justice of her claim, she would force the situation by inviting the assistance of these friendly strangers.

Her words, though directed only to Willie, told the listening world all that it need know.

"I don't know what's the matter with you, Willie. I don't see why you're acting so mean. You know very well that nickel in your pocket, on the right-hand side, is mine. Now, I ask you for the last time: Please give it to me."

[59]

Margery held out her hand, but Willie, excited, perhaps, by the presence of the newcomers, seemed to lose all sense of the fitness of things, for he dashed Margery's hand rudely aside, and shouted angrily:

"Aw, go on! What do you think I am? I'll give you that nickel when I'm good and ready, and not before!"

"O-oh!" the newcomers chorused, in horror, and the young lady who had already spoken to Margery exclaimed to the lady of the papers:

"Oh, Rosie, ain't he just awful?"

Then she turned to Margery.

"You poor thing! What's your name?"

Margery told her.

"Margery, did you say? Well, Margery, let me introduce you to my friend, Rosie O'Brien. Rosie, this is my friend, Margery."

[60]

"Glad to know you," Rosie said, putting out the hand that was unencumbered with papers. "And her name," Rosie continued, indicating the introductress of the moment before, "is Janet McFadden. Janet, won't you shake hands with my friend, Margery?"

Janet would, and did so most cordially. Then, pointing with her thumb over her shoulder, not deigning to waste even a glance on Willie Jones, she inquired haughtily:

"And what does he answer to?"

Margery told her.

"Huh! Well, we'll Willie-Jones him, all right, before we're through with him!"

Now, it has been said that for every great cause a leader springs up. This, no doubt, is also true of lesser causes. At any rate, the businesslike manner in which Miss Janet McFadden proceeded at once to roll up her sleeves was enough to convince one that the cause of Margery's nickel had called forth its champion—a champion, be it added, not only willing but able.

[61]

"Lay down your papers, Rosie," was Janet's first command, "and put a stone on them so's they won't blow away. That's right. Now I guess we're ready."

Willie Jones was regarding them all with dark looks, tinged, perhaps, with just a shade of concern.

"Say there, you better look out what you think you're doing! If you're not careful some of you'll get hurt!"

Janet McFadden answered this warning with an order to her own forces:

"Now, girls, don't hurt him any more than you can help!"

Willie Jones spluttered with rage, and while he was spluttering Janet murmured tersely:

"Now's our time! When I count three, we'll go for him. I'll go for his arms; Rosie, you grab his legs and feet; and Margery can make for his pocket. Now! One—two—three!"

[62]

Willie Jones put up a gallant fight, but what, pray, are two stout arms against six just as stout? What, say, avails two strong legs that are pressed, hugged, jammed together by a human snake who has twisted herself about them, and is sitting on their helpless feet?

The violence of the contest was over in a moment, and Janet was urging:

"Quick, Margery, quick! His pocket!"

But when you're not trained to the business, it's fearfully hard to slip your hand deftly into some one else's pocket. Margery bungled, and Janet, impatient at her slowness, loosened slightly her own hold. On the instant, Willie Jones wrenched one arm free, dived into his pocket, and before his captors knew what he was about had pulled up the nickel and popped it into his mouth.

"You villain!" cried Janet McFadden, unspeakably incensed at this fresh outrage. "You spit that nickel right out! Do you hear me?" [63]

Willie Jones made no answer. His mouth was too tightly shut to answer.

Janet would have shaken him soundly, but Margery stopped her.

"Be careful, Janet, be careful! If he was to swallow it I never would get it back!"

Willie Jones's face lit up, and he nodded his head vigorously.

For a moment Janet McFadden was silent, then she laughed.

"All right; let him swallow it if he wants to! But if he does he'll turn green as grass and die of blood poison, won't he, Rosie?"

"You bet he will!" Miss O'Brien called up from below. "By this time to-morrow he'll be dead! Then the patrol wagon'll come for him, and they'll carry him off to the morgue like that Dago that dropped dead on our street. You remember about him, don't you, Janet?" [64]

"Sure I do. He had earrings in his ears."

The earrings seemed to be too much for Willie Jones. The look of triumph slowly faded from his face.

"Go ahead, swallow it!" Janet McFadden gently urged. She waited a moment, then declared emphatically: "Well, if he won't swallow it he's got to spit it out; that's all there is about it! Here, Rosie, we're going to lay him down on his stummick, so you lift his legs up. He can't do a thing—I've got his arms."

Willie Jones struggled, apparently on principle, not surely with any conviction that his struggling would avail him. In a moment Janet had him down and placed to her liking. A crowd was gathering, so there was no time to lose.

"Now, then, Margery," Janet commanded, "quick! Grab his nose and hold it shut real tight! That'll make his mouth open if anything will." [65]

This time Margery did her part without bungling, and in spite of the look of reproach that Willie gave her. His time was come. He held in as long as the human engine can, then exploded. The force of the explosion blew the nickel out of his mouth, and, lo, all Margery had to do was pick it up.

Thus the struggle ended.

Janet and the faithful Rosie, releasing their captive, jumped nimbly aside, and, amid the jeers of the onlookers, Willie Jones got slowly to his feet.

"Aw, shucks! You call that fair—three against one?"

Janet answered at once:

"I call anything fair when there's more on the girl's side!"

Turning her back on Willie Jones, Janet put an affectionate arm about Margery's shoulder. [66]

"Are you going to spend your nickel, Margery?"

Margery thought she was.

"Candy?"

"Yes, I thought I'd get some candy. Do you and Rosie like jaw-breakers?"

Janet and Rosie both adored jaw-breakers.

"Is this a good place?" Margery asked, pointing to the little candy store near which they were standing.

Janet was horrified.

"I should say not! The jaw-breakers here are the weeniest little things! No. A little ways up the street there's another candy store that has jaw-breakers as big as eggs! They last at least an

hour, don't they, Rosie? Come on, and I'll show you."

To their surprise, Willie Jones accompanied them. In spite of all that had occurred, he seemed still to consider himself an honored member of the group. Rosie O'Brien stared at him incredulously, and Janet McFadden, casting long-suffering eyes to the telegraph wires overhead, snorted out:

[67]

"Huh! The cheek of some people, coming along with you whether you ask them or not!"

The jaw-breakers at the second store were nearly as large as Janet had reported them. The mere sight of them made your mouth ache in delicious discomfort. To hold six of them Margery had to make a little basket of both hands. This basket she carefully carried outside, where she paused, ready to pass it around. To Janet's indignation, Willie Jones pressed forward as confident as any one, and Margery did not repulse him. In fact, in her own mind, Margery had already decided that she could afford to be magnanimous. So, to show how far she could rise above petty resentment, she was about to offer the jaw-breakers to Willie first of all, when suddenly his face took on an expression of overwhelming horror, and, pointing a startled finger over Margery's shoulder, he cried out:

[68]

"Oh, look!"

Every one, of course, looked, and while they were looking Willie Jones swooped down upon the unprotected jaw-breakers, grabbed as many as he could, and fled. While the others were still gazing stupidly at each other he disappeared around a corner.

Rosie O'Brien was the first to recover speech enough to gasp out:

"Well, what do you know about that?"

Janet McFadden, groaning in helpless rage, worked her arms up and down, clenched and unclenched her hands, and breathed hard.

"O-oh! Do you know—do you know—sometimes I get so mad that I'd just like to wring the neck of every boy in the world!"

[69]

Margery alone had nothing to say. She stooped to pick up the only two jaw-breakers that were left. These were on the pavement, for, in snatching, Willie had knocked them out of her hands.

"I—I don't believe I want any jaw-breakers to-day." Margery spoke with a slight quaver. "You—you two can have them."

She offered one to Rosie, but Rosie, instead of taking it, threw her arms impulsively about Margery's neck.

"You poor thing! That'd be nice, now, wouldn't it? And you not have even one of your own jaw-breakers! No! I just tell you what we'll do: You'll have one whole one for yourself, and me and Janet'll divide the other. I'll suck it for a block, and then Janet can suck it for a block."

This was the arrangement finally agreed upon.

"And wouldn't you like to come with us, Margery, while I finish up my paper route?"

[70]

Yes, Margery would just as soon do that as anything else.

Rosie petted and comforted her as best she could, teaching her how to wrap a paper that is to be thrown on a porch, explaining to her the scale of profits in the newspaper business, and giving her interesting bits of family history about the various houses where they stopped.

Had she been alone with Rosie, Margery would have been allowed to forget somewhat her recent troubles. In fact, she almost did forget them once or twice at moments when Janet McFadden was busy sucking the jaw-breaker. But the instant it became Rosie's turn to suck, Janet was back again on the old subject.

"Ha, ha! Don't you think I know 'em?" The 'em of Janet's acquaintance were, of course, Willie Jones and his kind. "Oh, I tell you, I know 'em just as well! They're all the same, every last one of them, always getting the best of us, and then going off by themselves and having a good time! I tell you, if I had my way, things'd be different! Oh, I tell you, if we'd all just get together and treat 'em like they ought to be treated, it—it—it—it'd be just good for 'em—it would!"

[71]

Of course, everything Janet said was gospel truth, and there was no gainsaying it; but even truth is sometimes depressing, and not the thing one wishes forever to have dinned into one's ears.

"And I know just as well as I know my own name, Margery, that now, after he's acted this way, he'll be coming back trying to make friends with you. You needn't tell me! I know him! But listen here, Margery, don't have a thing to do with him! Don't ever speak to him again, and pretend you don't even see him. He's not worth it—honestly he's not!"

When Margery parted from them later in the afternoon Janet made her solemnly promise that henceforward she would consider Willie Jones as dirt beneath her feet. It was neither the time nor the place for Margery to ask herself whether she really wished to make such a promise, for, in the presence of so fiery an apostle of female rights, her private inclinations simply shriveled to fine ashes and blew away.

[72]

"Of course," murmured Margery meekly, "of course I'll never speak to him again."

"That's right!" Janet declared. "He don't deserve it."

"And say, Margery," Rosie O'Brien begged, in parting, "come down to East Maplewood again some afternoon, won't you? I start on my paper route at half past three—you know where. I'd love to have you come again."

"I'll come if I can, Rosie—honest, I will. Both of you have been just as nice to me! Good-by." [73]

Margery trudged homeward, feeling tired and a little down-hearted. Janet McFadden was entirely right: Willie Jones was a villain and a rogue. But, even so, wasn't it rather a pity to end things forever, after all the good times they had once had together? Dear, dear! In a maleless world, justice to ladies would no doubt prevail; but, alas, alas, in such a world the ladies who enjoy male society would probably feel a bit lonesome.

"Say, Margery, hold on a minute!"

The voice was unmistakable, but Margery did not turn her head.

"Say, Margery, I'm awfully sorry—honest, I am. I was only fooling."

There he was, just as Janet said he would be. Janet knew. So far as Margery herself was concerned, she would just as soon make friends, but she had promised Janet, and she must keep her word. Heigho! [74]

"And lookee here, Margery, here are all your jaw-breakers. I ain't et one—honest, I ain't."

Margery looked, and, lo, in his hand lay four jaw-breakers, three of them as black and shiny as the moment they had left the little candy store, the fourth sucked down only to the pink.

"I couldn't help tasting one of them, Margery, but I only sucked it a few minutes—honest, I did. And here," Willie Jones continued, offering her a little bag, "is a cake I bought for you with my last cent."

"Oh, Willie, did you really?"

"You just got to take it, Margery. I want you to. I'm awful sorry I was so mean to you, but, don't you know, when that old Janet McFadden butted in, I just couldn't help it. I always did hate a girl like her! But I was going to give you your nickel, all right. I meant to all along. Of course I did! Wasn't it your nickel?" [75]

"Oh, Willie, and did you really buy that cake for me with your own cent, and you didn't eat up all my jaw-breakers?"

"Of course you know I was just fooling about that nickel, don't you, Margery?"

There is no telling what Margery really knew down deep in her heart, and it didn't in the least matter. All that mattered now was this: Here was Willie Jones, genuinely ashamed of what he had done, and man enough to say so. Margery forgave him instantly.

"But, Willie, I just won't eat a bite of that cake unless you take half. Here, let me break it in two."

After they had eaten the cake, she insisted likewise upon sharing the recovered jaw-breakers.

"And I'm going to take the one you've partly sucked for one of mine, because I've had a whole one already, and you haven't had any." [76]

Willie Jones protested, but this time Margery had her way, and in a few moments, after the friendliest of partings, he was started home with a fresh jaw-breaker in his cheek and another in his pocket.

Of course, without a thought, Margery had broken her promise to Janet. Well, what if she had? Margery gave her shoulders an impatient little shrug. Who, pray, was Janet McFadden that she should come between friends? To be sure, in her way, Janet was a good, kind creature, and she meant well, but wasn't she a trifle excitable and a little too emphatic, don't you think? On the whole, too, her outlook on life seemed rather limited. There were certain things you never could expect her to understand. Come to think of it, she didn't look like a girl who received many valentines. It might be just as well if Margery never saw her again, for explanations would be difficult. [77]

Not so, though, with Rosie O'Brien! If Margery ever met Rosie alone, she could explain to Rosie, and Rosie, she felt sure, would understand at once. Rosie had bright blues eyes and pretty hair that blew about her face in soft, alluring ringlets. Rosie without a doubt would understand.

Poor Janet McFadden! Margery really felt sorry for Janet as she thought of her going through life weighted down with such a grievance. Of course, it was awfully good of her, the way she had espoused Margery's cause. Poor thing, she was probably still fuming over Margery's wrongs at this very moment, when Margery herself, sucking hard at Willie Jones's half-finished jaw-breaker, which she was in hopes of concluding before dinner, was feeling anything but injured and down-trodden. Perhaps, though, it was the poor thing's pleasure to keep herself always stirred up. [78]

For some reason Margery was not hungry for dinner, but she forced herself to eat enough to avert paternal questioning. The last jaw-breaker she was saving for bed. She could take half an hour's sweet comfort from it before going to sleep, and still have something to look forward to upon awakening next morning.

While she waited after dinner until she could, in decency, retire, she sat a while within the family circle, quietly musing upon the day's adventures. What a strange, delightful, interesting sort of a place the world was, to be sure, with all its fiery Janet McFaddens, and sweet Rosie O'Briens, and paradoxical Willie Joneses! My but she was glad that she was alive!

And she really was sorry for Janet. If she could only make her see——

"Well, after all, Margery, what do you think about it?"

[79]

Her father was looking at her with a quizzical expression, but his question chimed in so well with her own thoughts that before she realized what she was saying, Margery answered:

"I don't care if they do act mean sometimes—I like 'em!"

THE END



Transcriber's Note:

The two corrections made are indicated by dotted lines under the corrections. Scroll the mouse over the word and the original text will appear.

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