

WILD GEESE

By Susan B. Allerton

Candida Glowed... She Burned... She Was Lifted to the Heights of Romantic Adventure—

And Then She Came Down To Earth....

SNOW fell heavily in thin, small flakes. A wind from the north flung it swirling down street gutters; tossed it in twisting spirals around lamp posts; splashed it like so much icy spray in the faces of the man and girl coming out of the movie theater.

"What a night!" she exclaimed.

He put a strong arm around her waist, steadying her. "Makes the movie we've seen more unreal than ever," he laughed. "The lovely ladies, the too beautiful he-men; the chances they ran, and the love they lived!"

"Aren't you a he-man?" she queried, lightly. "I think you're good looking; and I certainly hope you consider me at least somewhat a lovely lady. After all, Davey, aren't we, too, living our love?"

"No question about your being a lovely lady, Candida," he assured her fervently, "but a lot of questions about our living our love. We haven't begun yet, darling, but it won't be long now. A few months more and you'll be glad for the horse races we didn't bet on; the restaurant dinners we didn't eat and the taxi rides we didn't take—when we're together, just we two, and the rest of the world is locked on the other side of our own front door. Here's our street cat," he warned. "Time to hop in."

Warm inside the car Candida looked up at David Trumble's profile and felt sure; sure of him she had known as a little boy; sure of herself; sure of the years to come.

"Listen to the wind," said David Trumble. "Listen to it howl. Pretty grand to be out on a night like this, when sensible people stay in. Nothing, really, more exciting than being on your own with all the elements to face. I suppose most women wouldn't understand; but do you know, darling, I've always thought you do. I've always thought you'd like to know the difference in a hound's yelp when he's treed a mountain lion, or when he's howling for his dinner. I've always thought somehow you'd realized that the prettiest picture ever etched was the proud, wild flight of geese across a stormy sky."

"Thanks, Davey," Candida said, for once in her life wholly serious. "Thanks a lot for what you've said. You've been more complimentary to me tonight than ever before in your life. I appreciate it. Indeed I do."

"Then what's the matter?" he asked. "Why are you smiling? What's so wrong with what I said?"

"Nothing," she assured him. "It's only because I'm a woman, I suppose."

"If you weren't a woman naturally I wouldn't be here now," he pondered.

"I know where you'd be," she said. "Not in town on a holiday; but in tall timber where you belong. You'd be with your logging operation, and at this hour sound asleep in a bunk house foul from the air you'd breathed all day. Your eyes would be dulled with the sights you'd seen and your head awheel with plans for tomorrow."

"Well," he objected, "and what of that, if my heart were full of hunger for you?"

"Then," she laughed, "nothing of it at all, except that I'm glad your heart's that way!"

HE WAS looking at his shoes, dulled with mud where the snow had melted away.

"I hope you don't mind my having worn these old clothes tonight," he said. "It was such dreadful weather. Before so very long I hope we'll be able to buy a small car. Then we'll go to real theatres all dressed up, and come home in style without feeling funny riding back in a street car. Or look as funny as that doped up bird down the line," he went on scornfully, "with galoshes pulled up over the ends of dress suit trousers."

"I don't think he looks funny," Candida argued.

"I do," he countered stiffly, hanging on to his point like a puppy to his bone. "I think he looks funny as he—"

"Well," she said as sweetly as if she'd been married ten years instead of never at all, "do you really?" and for the first time since she'd entered the street car took a good look at the man opposite.

Not so bad either, she reflected appraisingly. Too bad his soft felt hat was pulled so deep over thick black hair that she couldn't see his eyes; and too bad that his coat collar was raised so high around deep-hued cheeks that she couldn't see his chin.

Feeling her scrutiny the man shifted in his seat and turned, looking straight at her.

Candida smiled.

"Hi," said Davey Trumble, "don't you know it's nice to stare?"

"He's good looking enough to be a movie actor," mused Candida.

"Probably he's an artist," David suggested. "Probably he doesn't earn enough to pay his bills."

"He lives on dreams. All the beautiful



Candida helped Georges make his way through the ice to the shore.

things we feel and never say; what we hope and don't achieve; everything that's lovely and remote. He's getting out at this stop. What a pity!" said Candida.

The man took off his hat with sweeping old-world courtesy as he passed in front of them.

"D— fool," David Trumble proclaimed. "Perfect d— fool. So busy admiring you he walked off without his brief case. Wonder he didn't lose his hat. Wonder he didn't lose his head—"

"Or his heart," Candida put in suavely. "I'll turn his brief case in to the street car company," David said.

"No," said Candida. "Don't. I'll return it to him."

"But if you don't know him?" objected David.

"What makes you think that?" Candida asked, disarmingly innocent. "Didn't you see him bow?" and smiled to herself.

NEXT morning, however, Candida eyed the brief case lying on the table in her bedroom with misgivings. Beneath the catch the initials G. B. were boldly stamped—something at least to guide her in returning the case to its rightful owner. A silly thing to have done, she told herself severely, for the sake of plaguing David.

David was all a woman could wish for in the man she was going to marry: good looking, ardent, with a job which would eventually put him in a position of real prominence in the community; but, thought Candida, her imagination flying to the merry sparkle in the bright eyes of the owner of the brief case, if only David wouldn't take life quite so seriously!

At the bottom of the column of lost and found ads, Candida discovered an appropriate item.

Lost: On or near Greenwood street car a leather brief case containing articles valuable to a musician. Initials G. B. Reward MU 1925.

"Pandora," cried Candida, "spring that catch!"

Inside Candida discovered a frayed but immaculate shirt—a musician is also a man, she reminded herself—and sheets of barred paper, some with musical notations, some without.

She rang up MU 1925. Had a gentleman at that number lost a brief case? Would he tell her what was inside, so that she could be very sure she was returning the case to its rightful owner? A shirt and manuscript notes for a symphonic poem? Very well, Candida would bring the brief case that very afternoon.

She was informed she would find the name Georges Barât outside a ground floor studio apartment. Georges Barât would be waiting for her. He couldn't begin to tell her his gratitude until he saw her. Perhaps never

adequately in his apologetic, halting English. She had hardly rung the bell at the address given when her street car friend presented himself, bowing deeply with truly continental ease of manner. Beyond him she caught a glimpse of walls stained the deep brown of a seasoned pipe, and the aristocratic lines of an open grand piano.

"Never, never can I thank you enough, mees," he said with an expressive lift of the shoulders and flutter of long white hands. "I have work months and months on my symphonic poem, an' last night I lose him, my only copy. Now you have bring him back to me. How can I thank you? How reward you?"

Candida, remembering the frayed cuffs on that clean shirt, stretched out a hand impulsively. "Reward me when I am so glad to have been of service?" she cried. "Never!"

He kept her hand in his a heart's beat or two. "You will please come in then, mees. You will give me that great pleasure. You will drink with me perhaps a cup of tea? And noting her hesitation, "You will be very safe, mees. Don't you see all the world goes by my windows? Please, mees, you will do that for me?"

"I'd love to come in," said Candida swiftly, "if you really will play to me. In fact, I can't think of anything I'd rather do."

HE LED her to a seat before an open fire. From the ashes he took red hot charcoal and dropped it into the tall chimney of a brass samovar on a side table. While the water heated Georges Barât seated himself at the piano.

He skimmed the most inspired moments of Debussy, he sentimentalized with Chopin; he grew confessional in the notes of his own symphonic poem. When he had done he brought Candida tea prepared in the Russian fashion and, seated on the sofa before dying embers, he told her of the life he had lived once in Europe: of summer nights, full of strolling couples, the men in brilliant uniforms and the women in lace dresses; and winter afternoons of skaters flying like the wind over frozen lakes and rivers.

"We will meet again, mees?" he asked with prayerful eyes as he accompanied her to the door. "The winter days are cold here also. Shall we not fly over the ice together? Let us skate down the river one day when the sun is bright and the ice hard like steel. Then we shall find a nice place and have supper together at a little fire we have builded on a quiet shore."

Candida didn't say yes, but, on the other hand, she didn't say no. She glowed. She burned. She was lifted to the heights of romantic adventure—too high by far for David Trumble to follow when he came that evening to see her.

She decided it would be best not to tell David about drinking tea in the Russian manner, and definitely unwise to mention the prospect of a skating party. She knew David would not approve. It wouldn't be merely understandable jealousy. It would be something more than that, David thought musicians lived on the fringe of society, and acted in borderland fashion. Europeans in no way could be compared to hard-working Americans. As for skating, it was all right if you were going places, but skating in order to picnic on a bank in zero weather would be—Candida could hear him say it—would be just plain nutty!

Yet Candida knew where it would be fun to go. David himself had shown her that particular part of the country. Every winter with two other men he rented a tiny cottage on a slough off the river, and Sunday after Sunday the three of them blazed away at the ducks and geese hurtling by on their long flight south from Canada. He had taken her there once and had been somewhat disappointed because she didn't like to see bright birds knocked down out of the sky as much as he did.

They could take a bus part way there, skate to a sheltered cove, eat supper and skate back to the bus station. It was a good idea. Georges Barât thought so too when she explained it to him. He would bring coffee and she, sandwiches. They would have a wonderful time.

WHEN he met her at the bus station he was wearing so many clothes Candida thought he looked more like a Muscovite bear than a man. As the bus rolled along she began to wonder whether he could hug like a bear.

She was wishing she hadn't come, but once they were skimming along in the open she forgot everything except the exhilaration of the moment. This was adventure. Georges Barât was strange, new, exciting.

After a while he proposed dinner and headed for a bend in the shore. Candida demurred. A brook entered the slough there, she knew. She warned him of white ice, of unsure footing.

He tossed his head impatiently. Had he not been born in a cold country? Did he not know what he was doing? He was hungry. He was tired. It was time to stop and eat. Time to stop was time to stop.

He headed for the bend. Exactly as Candida had foreseen, six feet from the shore where blue ice turned to white he plunged through. He came up sputtering, his hat gone, and his long black hair hanging in streamers down his face.

Candida couldn't help laughing. "You look so funny," she said between gasps. "You look exactly like a seal in a circus, or a walrus, or anything you can think of all wet and black and shiny!"

Through chattering teeth he made very clear he didn't think she was funny or he was funny either. He was dreadfully cold and if

she didn't get him out soon he would die right then and there.

Near the shore Candida pried a fence post loose, and holding it with one hand while with the other she clutched a young alder growing by the water's edge, she helped him make his way through the ice to the shore.

The crease was gone from his trousers and the part was out of his hair. Dripping wet he didn't look in the least like romantic adventure. He wasn't good looking. He wasn't polite. In fact, he acted as if everything had been entirely her fault.

The box of matches in his pocket had been soaked through. No use in thinking of a fire anyway while he was in his present condition. He gulped down all the hot coffee in the thermos bottle without leaving any for her. Candida began to feel less amused and slightly irritated. It would be wise to hurry on, she suggested, before his clothes stiffened in the cold winter air. A half mile farther south beyond David's shooting cabin was another bus station. It would be better to go home from there than to try to skate back.

With mutterings which fortunately Candida could not understand, he accepted her suggestions in the whole hearted way he had accepted the hot coffee. He went even farther. He asked for Candida's help on the last quarter mile of the journey. His wet coat weighed like so much lead. He was so tired, so cold, so miserable. He allowed Candida to push from behind, and when they came to a place in the bank from which they could see the bus station he begged her to pull him to the top before he collapsed from absolute exhaustion.

CANDIDA made up her mind not to wait for the bus, but to thumb their way to town. She left Georges Barât under shelter and stood out in the road hailing cars. The first refused to stop. The second slowed around on icy ground. Candida recognized one of David's shooting companions.

"Lo, Candida," he said. "Thank goodness you're here. David's had me scouring miles of road to find you, but those aren't anything to the miles of river bank he's searched trying to discover some trace of you. The slough's not safe for skating unless you're thoroughly familiar with every stream that sets in from the shore."

"So we discovered," Candida admitted grinning. "Georges Barât went through." As she spoke he appeared, shivering.

David's friend began to laugh. "Looks like a drowned teddy bear," he said. When he could control himself he ordered: "Climb in, both of you. I'll leave you at the cabin, Candida, where David is by now, and I'll take this fellow back to town. David borrowed a company car, and he'll want to drive you home himself. If I were you I'd be gentle with him, he's been so worried."

Dust lay on everything in the cabin. David had built a fire and had a pot of coffee hot on the back of the stove. But David was not in a happy mood. David was ready to swear. "Of all the crazy things you've ever done," he said, "without doubt this is the worst. I've been worried stiff about you ever since your mother told me where you'd gone."

David's trousers weren't too well pressed and his coat was so old that it fitted into every line of his sturdy figure like a glove on a woman's hand; but Candida thought David the best looking man she had ever laid eyes on.

"When I couldn't find you skating along the slough I thought some dreadful thing had happened," he scolded. "After all, what did I know about that fellow you were with? What do you know about him? I simply can't imagine what got into you."

"Well," said Candida with her arms around David's neck as she sniffed the homey, peaty smell of David's coat, "for that matter, neither can I!"

At last David laughed. He held Candida so close that she knew she would never issue again from the warm tenderness of those encircling arms. "Davey," she said, "do we really have to wait any longer? Must you save any more before we get married? What do I care about ice boxes? What do I care about vacuums? What do I care about having an automobile of our own so long as I have you?"

Without answering he jerked back his head. "Listen," he said. "Did you hear that? Did you hear what I did? The honking of a flock of wild geese headed southward? They're awfully late this year. Can't understand why."

Candida grasped the lapels of David's coat in her two fists and shook him as hard as she could. "Goose yourself," she raged, "you make me furious! Can't you understand? Can't you see that you're running the risk of being late, too?"

David grinned. "I think maybe you're right," he confessed. "I think perhaps if you don't mind too much not having all the comforts and conveniences I'd like to give my wife we'll postpone buying labor saving devices. We'll find somebody to marry us tomorrow!"

Copyright,