

"GIRL UNAFRAID"

A fascinating story of an American girl who seeks the destiny of real love.

by GLADYS JOHNSON

(Continued from page 1)

st. Ardeth, say you're my girl." She had begun to struggle wildly, but in silence. Fighting herself now, because it was exciting and pleasant to have Nell's arms about her.

"Please let me go! Neil, they'll wonder—somebody'll come out and find us—"

"Sh-h-h!" The warning stifled her. She ceased to struggle and Nell's arms grew tense about her as footsteps scraped on the wooden steps outside. The front door opened. Heavy footsteps going up the stairs over their heads.

The girl smothered a nervous giggle, and in the dark Neil grinned. "A door upstairs opened. Shut. 'It's Tom!' The girl's whisper. 'I've got to go!'"

The spell was broken. He did not resist when she drew out of his arms, but he hung on to one hand and asked softly: "Want to go to a movie tonight?"

"Can't." She was groping for the banister. "Have to wash out some things for tomorrow." "Why?" came his quick, suspicious whisper. "Who are you going out with?"

She laughed teasingly. Snatched her hand away and ran lightly up the steps. He thrust a quick hand through the spokes of the banister and caught one silk mangle.

"Who you going out with?" he repeated darkly. She squirmed. Smothered a laugh. "You! Foolish! Now will you let me go?"

"I'll be up in the morning—" He freed her and she fled up the stairs. In the dark upper hall she stopped for a moment to collect herself, pressing fingers against her hot cheeks to cool them. Sharp eyes were waiting beyond that door which showed a yellow streak of light at the threshold.

Ardeth pulled her hat straight. Tucked the ends of her hair under. Smoothed her blouse crumpled by Nell's embrace. Nell shouldn't do that—wait each night for her to come home. He reached the house a whole half hour before she did. At the sound of her footsteps he would slip out of his own flat and meet her in the hall.

The dark space under the stairs had seen many such silent skirmishes as it had witnessed tonight. Of course there was nothing really wrong. After all she was Nell's girl. Some day, she supposed, they'd get married. That was the way marriages happened in Ardeth's circle of life. You saw a boy you liked—or sometimes you didn't even like him—but there was no one else around at the moment. You went to a party with him—or to a movie. You went again. Pretty soon people began to expect you to be always together. Pretty soon you found people expected you to get married. So you did.

Ardeth was Nell's girl. For three years she'd been called his girl—before then, in fact, he'd had a girl with her. Ever since she'd come to live with aunt Stel and found Neil Burke in the flat below.

But Neil shouldn't stop her at night like this. It made her late for dinner—and she wasn't sure she liked it.

Something leaped in her heart at the memory of his eyes about her there in the dark, but she wasn't sure she wanted Neil to kiss her like that.

A shrill voice lifted beyond the door and Ardeth hurriedly entered. The blaze of the room was dazzling after the dark hall. For a moment the girl stood leaning against the door after she had shut it, blinking.

She could dimly see the others look up from the dinner table. But they could see her and though none of the five could have expressed it in words, there was something vital about the girl as she stood there, which kindled her to a flame dancing across the common eery of their lives.

Long after she had passed out of their sphere each of them could recall Ardeth as she stood against the door. A golden girl—not even the blaze of unshaded electric light could dim the radiance of her youth and dancing passion had kindled a fire which played in her eyes. The hair which escaped from her hat shone with vitality and the cheek it caressed was the golden pink of a ripe apricot. Tender and lovely—as she stood there, her eyes touched with dreams, her lips tipped with a smile.

But dreams and smiles had nothing to do with Stella Harrison. From her place at the end of the table where she was carving the pot roast, Ardeth's aunt relieved her mind.

"It's a wonder to me you wouldn't try to get here to your meals on time for once! Of all the inconsiderate ones! Here I can cook my face to death over a hot stove for you and you think you can come in like a lady when you please, with never so much as a thank you!"

The flame died down in Ardeth. She had the startled look of one rudely awakened. "Oh . . . I'm sorry, Aunt Stel. I—I had to stay a little later. Mr. Hugeson wanted us to check some new stock."

She was checked by a snort from Bet, Aunt Stel's elder daughter, a girl a year younger than Ardeth. "That's a hot one!" jeered Bet. "I suppose you think we don't know you were down there in the hall necking with Neil Burke! Honestly, I should think you'd be ashamed! I'd die with shame if anyone opened the door and walked in on you!"

A hard, prim little line came around Bet's young mouth when she said this. You saw, in that

moment, how like Aunt Stel she would be in a few years' time.

Ardeth flushed hotly. "You—you nasty little spy!" Her voice was low and it shook. "A person doesn't have to spy to see what a fool you make of yourself—you boy-struck thing."

"Boy-struck!" Ardeth was stung into defense. "You're the boy-struck one! Hanging around the phone every night hoping—" "Stop it!" Aunt Stel leaped into the breach. Pointing the carving knife at her niece to emphasize her words. "Let me tell you one thing, my girl. If you—" "Oh, for God's sake!" Tom's bellow drowned them all out. "Shut up, can't you? How'd you expect a guy to read his paper with a pack of women yelping about?"

Crushing silence followed, for Tom was clear here. Though only twenty-six years of age, he was the elder son and had been the mainstay of the family since Uncle Ed had died.

He transfixed them with a glare before he returned to the sporting page. With an air of injured innocence Bet subsided. Fan and Paul, the twins, who had brightened up at the promise of a quarrel, returned to their broad and resumed their efforts to kick each other under the table, undetected. Aunt Stel set her face and grudgingly served another portion of pot roast.

Ardeth went into the bedroom and pulled off her hat and coat. She hated these scenes coming at the end of a hard day's work. The depression which she always felt in this shabby house was creeping over her again.

She hated this room which she shared with Bet. She hated the "golden oak" bed and dresser, scratched and warped with the years. The worn carpet. The broken-armed rocker.

All the little softening touches the room owed to her. The pink-shaded lamp on the dresser—Neil had given her on her last birthday. The cretonne curtains—three Sundays had gone into their making. The pink bedspread—that had taken the savings of a month.

About the frame of the mirror, little photos of her Sunday outings. Pictures Neil had taken. One of herself feeding the swans in the lake. She was looking up and laughing, her hair a light-touched tangle. That was her last Easter dress . . . She'd sewed on it for a month and she had saved for it for three.

Ardeth's bitter eyes looked back at her from the mirror. So much struggle for so little. This ugly room. That cheap dress. And there were girls who had everything they wanted. The girl she talked to in the store today—Jeanette Parker. Would the time come when she, too, would have everything she wanted? Ardeth wondered.

CHAPTER 2 Her father had named her Ardeth. As Aunt Stel succinctly remarked, "He would!" It was indicative of Jim Carroll's love of the strange and the beautiful, even in sounds.

Ardeth was amazingly like her father—which was perhaps Aunt Stel's chief reason for disliking her. You don't care to have a reminder of your secret and hopeless love underfoot day and night, though you deny that love, even to yourself.

Jim Carroll had worn that same look of gay courage. That almost rapt air of gazing at some brave sight hidden from others. Charm had played like a flame within him—an unconscious magnetism, which had drawn hearts to him as a light draws moths.

The flame of him had drawn the pretty pale moth of Ardeth's mother. She had married this golden boy of hers—had born him a golden child. And in her secret heart she had never ceased to marvel that Jim Carroll had ever wanted to marry her at all. It had lent her a dazed, slightly breathless air at times. She never had understood the vivid joy of life in him. She was



A silent struggle in the dark hall.



"Shut up, can't you? How do you expect a guy to read his paper?"

content merely to idolize him. A frail, slightly pathetic figure Thelma Carroll had been swung violently through life by the blazing comet of her love. She lived only in the vivid flame of her man and when that flame went out Jim Carroll could not resist the hot excitement of war, though he had a wife and child dependent upon him—Thelma had quietly faded away from the earth.

Ardeth had come to live with Aunt Stel at the death of her parents. Aunt Stel had hidden her feelings well. No one had guessed the violent jealousy which swept her when handsome Jim Carroll had come courting the younger sister, Thelma. After Thelma's marriage Stel had married Ed Harrison, just to show Jim that she could.

Not even Ardeth guessed why her aunt was so severe with her. She supposed it was because of Bet.

To a certain extent she was right. Betty Harrison, sandy-haired and pasty, seemed more uninteresting than ever by comparison with her cousin.

At twelve, Ardeth could not be sent to the corner store without annexing at least one attentive male escort. But Neil Burke, by a sort of squatter's right through his residence in the flat below, quickly established his monopoly of the girl. It was then that Bet experienced the same jealous pang her mother had known some years before.

Curled up on their mutual bed now, elaborately filling her nails, Bet registered large scorn of Ardeth before the mirror.

"For the love of Pete quit primping!" she said sourly. "A person's skin you're going out with the Prince of Wales."

Ardeth laughed without malice. The discontent of the night before was gone. Such a simple thing as a Sunday outing could send the joy of life bubbling through her.

Ardeth loved Sundays. Loved the delicious sense of leisure they brought. . . to put on one's best things—even that was an adventure.

She was going for a ride with Neil in his cut-down Ford. But the sun was shining and she was wearing a sport dress which she had bought in a noon-hour sale the day before. At twenty that is excuse for being happy.

She turned before the glass now in innocent vanity. Ardeth loved being pretty—loved the feel of her silk stockings!

These silk stockings! Aunt Stel's basilisk gaze fell on them now as she stood in the doorway, swathed in a frayed silk kimono, whose painted iris had long withered to a discouraged green.

"New stockings again! Silk all the way up, I'll bet—though the Beehive basement had a sale on lisle tops last week! Why any decent girl has to have her stockings silk where they don't show, bet me!"

"It isn't just the looks, Aunt Stel." Ardeth explained absently, her attention going to pulling on her hat without disarranging her hair. "It's the feel. It's just to know that they're all silk."

"Well, be sure you don't have a tumble with your fine ideas!"

retorted Aunt Stel, darkly. "And those flimsy silk and lace things you wear underneath—going around half naked, the way no good girl would dream of going when I was young—"

Their heavy disapproval lay all about her like a wet cloud. But balm to her young pride, the look Neil turned on her as she came down the front steps in response to the toot of the auto horn.

Slim and vivid and golden in the morning sunshine, she was. Creams and browns of the new sport suit playing up to the gold of her—hazel eyes glowing under

the brim of the new brown hat. The young fellow's black eyes devoured her. He breathed "Gee, you're sweet—" as she sat herself beside him.

Ardeth's heart leaped under his gaze as it leaped when he put his arms about her, but there was a little uncomfortable edge on her thoughts at his fervor.

It was pleasant to have Neil say nice things—but when he grew so serious she was a little afraid of him.

Neil's mother was dead. His grandmother kept the house. A mystic old Irishwoman, half living in a fanciful world of her own.

The boy's fiery nature had been warped by the constant association of these two. At twenty-three he was on the defensive against the world. Romantically

by railing against everything. His quarrelsome disposition had won him a reputation as a trouble-maker. Work was becoming increasingly hard for him to obtain—that added to grievance and his railing; thus the circle rounded on itself.

good looking he fluttered feminine hearts in the neighborhood, but in all the world there was only Ardeth Carroll for him.

Perhaps he already had some inkling that he might lose her, for he was passionately jealous. He swept the girl along on the surge of his own emotions, trying to snatch by force the love he was not patient enough to foster. Ardeth had learned to dread the black moods of Neil.

She strove gallantly now to put the situation on a lighter plane. "Oh, it's gorgeous to be out in the sunshine!" She smoothed the pleats of her short skirt. "Go out through the park? Neil, let's see the other cars."

It was the first bright day after a week of fog. The park highways were crowded—sedan and limousine; snappy roadster and cut-down Ford.

Little of the snob in the heart of Ardeth, however. The big silent cars spinning past moved her to admiration, not envy. Enough to be alive and happy in the sunshine today. To know one was pretty and young. To feel this secret thrill of expectancy—holding one's breath, it was, in a way—waiting for something glorious to happen.

The cars were checked. The equestrian path crossed the highway here, and the traffic officer was permitting the riders to cross. Sleek proud horses carrying sleek proud people. They moved through a different world, these high-stepping horses and the men and girls they carried, thought

Ardeth. That blonde girl there in the linen trousers and black coat—a pretty girl, and so sure of herself. Look at her turn and speak to the man on the bay mare beside her.

That man! Ardeth found herself sitting tense—leaning forward, her heart in her eyes. A tall and laughing young fellow—riding so easily. The sun gleaming on his brown hair, flashing on his white smile—

As though the intent gaze of the girl drew his, the young fellow suddenly looked over. His eyes plunged deep into the eyes of the girl as he went by. At her side, Ardeth heard Neil draw in his breath jealously.

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Cashier of Bank Routes Bandits

FURLEY, Kas., Sept. 20. — (AP)—Armed only with his bare fists, E. D. Merrill, cashier of the Furley State bank Friday routed a would be bank bandit, forcing him to flee empty-handed. Merrill, whose institution often handles large sums involved in cattle transaction, met a stranger who entered the bank with drawn gun, with a right to the jaw. The man attempted to fire, but a safety catch on the gun prevented it. The pair battled around the lobby of the small bank for several minutes. The intruder finally fled for the door.

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