

The FICTION Corner

LIFE WITH JEAN

By HELEN LANGWORTHY

DORIS WALTERS ran a clean, white sheet of paper into her typewriter. Very determinedly she began, "Susy Cow was out in the meadow eating the green grass when—"

That was it "when"—what? In her mind's eye she tried to total all the stories she had written about Susy Cow, Timothy Piggie and Horatious Horse. The stories would reach to the moon, of that she was sure. But they did keep a roof over the heads of she and her daughter, Jean.

Doris went to the window for inspiration. The same dull yard, the same dull neighborhood of the town of East Branch was there. She wished desperately that she might write something altogether different but according to the publishers the youngest generation had not had their fill of Susy, Timothy and Horatious. They wanted more. Sometime, she reflected, she would burst out and write something but those too-familiar epics, publishers or no.

Doris smiled then, for from the window she saw 17-year-old Jean standing on the corner with Petey. They were talking with intense interest. Doris went to the kitchen and fixed a thick sandwich in readiness for Jean. She reflected that for one so dreamy looking, so ethereal, Jean had no loss of appetite.

She practically marched to the typewriter then, determined that Susy Cow would be doing something before Jean breezed in.

As it happened, an idea hit Doris, an idea so overwhelming that she sat and whistled like Jean. Could she? She would! She was whizzing away at her typewriter when Jean came in.

"Hullo, Mov," Jean called loudly. "I'm starved!"

"There's a sandwich," Doris answered shortly and went on typing.

Jean munched the sandwich and asked, "Got an idea for dear, dear Horatious at last?"

"Yes. Brand new," Doris answered absently, clicking away.

Jean was in the mood for conversation and altho she might have noticed that her mother had a far-away look she had to tell her the school gossip. "Alice had a new dress on; called it a rag, but she was careful to let the label show. Petey liked me in bangs, but Chuck says it puts me in the kiddie car class— Mov, you're not listening!"

"You'd be surprised what a good listener I am," Doris answered, but Jean turned on the radio full blast then and Doris resumed typing.

Days passed. Jean talked this day of Petey, that day of Chuck and forever worried whether she looked kiddie car young or hideously old, even twenty!

"Can't you forget the seven-year-olds and concentrate on the 17-year-old?" she asked plaintively after finding Doris typing for many days.

"This story is—different. Maybe I ought to tell you—" Doris began. But Jean clapped her hands over her ears and ran from the room. "Spare me the details. I've positively heard my last Horatious yarn." She grinned wickedly. "Just let me help with the check."

There was a reward for Doris' tired fingers the day the publishers wired her that the synopsis had been altogether satisfactory and to rush on the completed manuscript. They sent an advance that left Doris dizzy.

"I'm made, Jean," she crowed. "It's easy street for us from now on."

Jean picked up the check, unbelievably. "Did Timothy and Horatious do this? Oh, I love 'em to pieces. What will we buy first, Mov?"

That evening there was no typing for Doris and Jean mentally spent thousands, maybe millions. "We ought to move to New York," Doris told Jean. "I'm sick of this town. An apartment—with someone else to shovel snow all winter and weed all summer!"

"It will be just too-too wonderful," Jean relaxed in dreams of their future. One minute she appeared as still as the Sleeping

Beauty, the next she went tearing to the phone. "Gotta tell Petey," she called.

"Wait! Something could go wrong—" Doris cautioned.

But Jean was already saying, "Guess what? Horatious came thru in a big way!"



"Can't you forget the seven-year-olds and concentrate on the 17-year-old?" she asked plaintively after finding Doris typing.

FROM then on things were even more hectic than they usually were around Jean. The crowd dropped in often, thrilling with Jean over the move or mourning that they'd perish if she dared leave.

It seemed to Doris in those frantic weeks that life was a round of typing and cleaning up the kitchen after the raids of Jean's gang. The publishers were getting impatient and already sending a few sample ideas of their promotion plans for the book.

The day it was finished Doris felt vaguely uneasy and went for a long walk. On the path by the river she told herself she wouldn't dare sit down or after all those nights of work she would do a Rip Van Winkle.

Back home Jean came in with her usual, "Mov, I'm starved!" Munching an apple she sat down at her mother's desk and picked up the top page of the new story. She was curious about the excitement her mother had uncorked for the seven-year-old gang.

The title appalled her. It was "Life With Jean." She began reading; she skipped pages. It was all there. Her story. It began with her first date with Petey. They were 12. At a kids' party Jean had thought Petey "hers" but afterwards he had gotten on his bike, waved casually and rode away leaving Jean to walk home alone.

Jean gasped. Skipping a few pages, she read: "—she was washing her face—washing—practically scrubbing. When asked why, Jean answered calmly, 'Petey kissed me.

some and Jean had an inspiration to require a rescue. He had paddled all 15 years of her and then shown her the picture of his wife and small boy. Even Jean's wail, "Why are such good looks wasted on married men," was there.

She read of the time Chuck had come to East Branch. His convertible had won Jean over at first. Petey and Chuck eventually settled it "man to man." Jean thrilled hearing of Petey's bloody nose and Chuck's dislocated jaw. "I'm infamous. I'm notorious. I've been fought for," she had crowed.

Jean was crying stormily as her mother came in. "How could you!" she demanded.

Doris' heart sank. "But, honey, it was so cute. After all, New York, new clothes—" she coaxed.

"I'd perish if Petey read this drivel," Jean told her coldly.

"Horsefeathers!" Doris straightened the jumbled pages. "Think what it means. If East Branch smiles a little now, it will be forgotten a year from now."

"I'm not living in a year from now," Jean cried furiously. "It's now!" She blew her nose loudly.

She tugged at her mother's arm. "Say you'll cancel it, Mov. I'd run away, honest." Her voice trembled. "Petey means more to me than old New York."

Doris gave her daughter a very searching look. She took a quivering breath and managed a faint, "You win."

Jean danced, she turned on the radio. "Come on, Mov, let's put the old thing in the furnace." She was all smiles now.

Doris had sat down weakly at her desk. But her voice was stern. "No! Label it yourself, 'Open in 1968.'"

"I'll be frightfully old then," Jean complained. "I'll be aged. 37!"

"But it will make such beautiful reading for your own 'teensters,'" Doris commented acidly. She ran a clean sheet of white paper into her typewriter and began, "Susy Cow was out in the meadow—"

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