

The Reign of the Automobile

By Myra Nye.

ELIZABETH GLENNEN glanced down her pergola's sun-splashed perspective with longing eyes. It was not so much its shade she desired, though the September sun pushed the mercury—no true Californian would care to say how high; but it was with a longing for the work that the shade entailed. Her flower-lover's fingers fairly trembled in their eagerness to be removing dead leaves and staking bending stalks; but heat or not heat, the figs must be preserved or the silly linnets would get every one.

She turned resolutely from the artistic, home-made pergola, went down the path, paused at the corral fence to give Jerry a friendly pat. Once through the gate she pushed Jane's intrusive nose from her shoulder so that she might get the ladder lying against the barn. She had not quite mounted to the top when a bell ringing made her pause. Beth, lingering behind to hunt a basket for the figs, called insistently: "Telephone, mother, telephone!"

"Oh, dear!" It was a disgusted exclamation that fell from her lips as Elizabeth set the basket down on the top step of the ladder among the bees and fragrant Smyrnas. She gathered her skirt in one hand, descended and reached the telephone with characteristic and capable haste.

"Hello!"

"Oh, it's you, George."

"What—what did you say?" It was an italicized exclamation more than a question.

"Oh, George, isn't that fine?"

"Do I like it? I should say so. It is simply great! What good times we will have. Come here as quick as you can. I must tell Beth."

Click went back the receiver, and Elizabeth turned to her little daughter, her blue eyes black with excitement and eagerness.

"What do you think, girly, father has a new—guess what?"

"Oh, mother, I can't guess; tell me."

"No, you must guess. What would you rather have than anything else?"

"A little baby sister. Goodie! Will he bring it home right now?"

The quick change in her mother's expression made her eagerness lessen a degree. "Isn't it a really, truly baby; or is it just a doll?"

"Neither, Beth. What made you guess that?"

"Well, you said that father was going to make a deal with Dr. Strong today, so I thought of course it would be a baby." Beth's crestfallen face escaped a pout only because the corners of her mouth were not made to turn down.

Elizabeth herself felt a slight abatement in her enthusiasm. "It is an automobile," she said.

Beth looked at her mother with big earnest brown eyes widening into a questioning gaze which her mother could not interpret as gladness.

"Why, don't you like it, Beth? Aren't you glad? It is a great big touring car."

"Yes—I'm glad, but mother, will we have to sell Jane and Jerry?"

"Yes, I suppose we will, but just think of the fun we will have. We can go everywhere we want to, we can take all the girls for a ride, we can go to the beach and back in one day."

"Oh, mother!" Beth gave a little jump. At last she was won to unreserved gladness.

They talked it over at length with increasing interest till the sound of a Gabriel horn made them pause. With lips rounded for ready exclamation they gazed for an instant through the open door in silence.

"There's our automobile!" Beth's sentence was pregnant with ownership. Her slender form slipped through the screen door before Elizabeth could reach it. Her good fellowship with her child made her hurry to catch up with Beth to be on the ground when the great new possession should appear.

Under the big pepper tree, with its festooning branches brushing the seats and its red berries already littering the tonneau, the shining, resplendent car stood incongruous between the modest four-roomed bungalow and the still more modest, almost shabby barn.

Jerry stood at the corral gate with ears pricked forward, and Jane, with feminine inquisitiveness, thrust her nose through the bars. They regarded the intruder and usurper with an air of reserve.

When throbs and sputters and jerking sounds subdued sufficiently, George managed to say flurriedly:

"Elizabeth, let me present Mr. Masters."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Masters."

Elizabeth's provincial reply had at least feminine composure under exciting circumstances. Neither she nor Beth was going to be indecently jubilant before a stranger when it was a matter of trade. They had been in California real estate business too long for that. Not that they were going to lead this fashionable easterner to suppose this was the first car that ever came into their yard. Even Beth could have told him that Los Robles had more automobiles for its size than any town in the state. This was one of her father's stock pieces of information in selling real estate, and he was a truthful man notwithstanding his calling and the place of his calling. Beth Glennen could sing Los Robles' praise in tune with her father.

Later, when the two men turned toward the corral gate and George lowered the bars, mother and daughter with one accord walked slowly to the house, not once glancing at the new possession that monopolized the driveway.

"I just can't bear to see dear old Jane and Jerry go, mother!"

"Neither can I, dear." In the instant Elizabeth regretted her sympathy; for sensitive little Beth broke away and ran sobbing into the house.

When Mr. Masters drove out of the yard, a sound suspiciously like a sob came from the screen porch. Elizabeth turned to her husband.

"Beth is broken-hearted, George. What shall we do?"

"Poor little girl, she did love Jane and Jerry so."

"So do I."

"Yes, and so do I." George smiled ruefully, then he called out to Beth: "Come her, little girl, and I'll tell you how it happened."

With George's arms around both "his girls" they walked through the cooler pergola, he talked to them, until Elizabeth said:

"The best medicine for the dumps is a ride. Let the figs go to the bees, let my ironing go. It's too hot to iron, anyway. My sprenger is all pot-bound. Never mind, let it go. We can afford to let anything go. We are rich. We own an automobile."

George had already mastered the steering wheel, the gear-shifting levers and the brakes. The three ventured for their first ride. It was a joy! This devouring of space made them greedy for more. So each night for a week found them on the road. No lamplight shone through the windows of the little country bungalow to cheer the old people in the big house on the hill. Often the whole day was spent in riding.

One day George came home in the middle of the forenoon, an unusual thing with him. He was white and his hands were trembling. Elizabeth hurried to him.

"What is it? What is the matter? Are you sick, dear?"

"No, no, I'm all right; but Elizabeth—I met Mr. Masters with Jane and Jerry—the brakes wouldn't work—and—"

"You didn't hurt Jane and Jerry? Oh George, you couldn't—"

"No, but I just missed them. Think what might have happened!"

"I can't bear to think of it, George, and the worst of it is, it may happen any time."

"No, not me, never again. Besides, Mr. Masters told me that they begin cultivating tomorrow in dear earnest."

"That isn't any consolation. They were never meant to cultivate."

Each morning in her white nightgown Elizabeth stood in the sleeping porch and worked an improvised pulley which agitated and flapped numerous twists of newspaper among the second crop of figs. Shining lard pail lids were twirled in the sunlight to frighten

away the thieving linnets. It was by such vigilance that Elizabeth had, each year, a crop that was the wonder of her neighbors.

But this year the days followed one another with none of the white figs preserved in ginger, or the purple ones with lemon. The apricots had yellowed the ground, the peaches fell bruised while the fruit shelves went empty. This was the reign of the automobile. The sprenger ceased to send out its quick-growing fronds. The begonia leaves curled and lost their luster; the pergola changed from a cool retreat to a common, home-made clutter; the walnuts lay upon the ground ungathered, while the muscat grapes refused to become raisins, but mildewed on the roof for the lack of Elizabeth's care.

Yet there were rides! They sped through the white moonlight; over the prone, purple shadows of the eucalyptus-bordered roads. They whirled past acres and acres of oranges where fitful far breezes came winnowing through the smells of the many fragrant groves. They rode to the very base of the marvelous Sierra Madres till the time when the snow fell on the mountains. Then the amethystine glow of the peaks grew white—they were alabaster steps leading through the azure to the throne of the Most High.

No matter what the joy upon the road, the home-coming was never quite the same as it had been in the fugitive spring days which they remembered with Jane and Jerry.

"How can we help missing them? We loved them so," Elizabeth said.

"Why, we began loving them as soon as we were married when we took our wedding trip after them down to San Diego. The first time Beth ever left the house when she was a baby was to ride after them. They were always the best sort of company."

"All summer when I have frightened away the birds, the first friends I saw in the morning were Jane and Jerry. Every morning till they went away they would stick their dear old noses through the bars and show me that they were as glad to see me as I was to see them. Jane would nicker up to me on the sleeping porch and say 'Good morning' as plain as could be. But now that dead, ugly auto stands there and does nothing, just like an old dummy. Even when we ride in it, it is not as cozy as our little road wagon used to be with Jane and Jerry in front of us three. Beth and I bump around on that big back seat like two popcorns in a popper. Jane and Jerry are alive, alive! An auto is nothing but dead."

Elizabeth ended passionately, and a purpose crystallized in George's mind.

A short twilight was already shading its gray into the black dark of early winter. The fog was drifting in, bandaging the trees like cotton gauze. The lamps of the automobile must be lighted before Glennen started. Like a great black beetle, the machine at first crawled from under the pepper tree, then took wings and flew down the avenue of innumerable peppers.

Elizabeth watched its flight through the marshalled trees. Off-blooms of Valencias wafted their fragrance through the home door; yet a homesickness that is part of the dying season wherever it is, overcame her. The scent reminded her of a spring ride with Jane and Jerry to the Puente Hills, where the maidenhair ferns were like a carpet to tread upon in the small canyon. There the yellow violets, shooting stars and lupine studded the slopes as thickly as stars in the Milky Way. Such a wealth of beauty to bring home for their garden and fernery.

"We can never go so far up into the hills with a new auto; for we might get it scratched," she said to Beth, who was just coming in from play.

"No," was the mournful reply, "and next spring we can't go up the hill roads where the mustard blooms, nor in the washes where there are millions and millions of flowers. We'll just have to forget what they look like, I guess."

"Oh, it isn't so bad as that, and spring hasn't come yet. We do go lots of places, dear, and farther than ever before. But we surely are singing a different tune than we did when we first got the auto, aren't we?"

"Yes, but autos are not such fun, after all, when you think of Jane and Jerry."

Soon supper was ready. The home-cured olives gleamed green against the scarlet pimientos, the savory smell of

bacon and frijoles reached out to George Glennen returning. The smell added zest to the satisfaction of his planned surprise. The gleam paths of light held the moving shadows of the two whom he loved, to whom he brought joy.

Elizabeth stopped suddenly as she returned from her last trip to the cupboard.

"Listen! Someone is coming WITH HORSES!"

"Jane and Jerry!"

Elizabeth put down the cake plate and followed Beth's dash through the door.

"Father! Father!" Beth's voice pierced the night with its clear, glad treble, and Elizabeth's alto was just as eager.

"George!"

"Yes, yes," came the answer. "Here we are; hurry up!"

It was superfluous instruction. With unerring footsteps in the dark they reached the open space by the corral. Elizabeth's arms went around Jerry's neck, while Beth shouted:

"Lift me up, lift me up on Jane's back, so I can hug her good! Jane, dear Jane! Oh, Janey dear, have you come back to stay?"

"They are ours. I bought them back." In the lantern light the husband and father watched these two eager children with amused fondness.

"How good it is to have them here! But did you have to lose in the trade, George?"

"No, no loss. Anything is valuable according to how much you want it. I paid a little sum for experience, but that always comes high, you know. Anyway, I wouldn't take two autos for just one of Jane, let alone Jerry."

"Neither would I!" chorused Elizabeth.

If asparagus has turned yellow it ought to be cut out and burned. It will kill spores of rust, which should be disposed of before they are ripe enough to be scattered by the wind.

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