

Illustrated by
SKREND

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UTTERLY IRRESPONSIBLE

"What's the matter, Jen? Mad because we came out and used up all your Sunday?"

"No," she said, "I like you to come. But I like to know you're coming. I hope I haven't seemed inhospitable or anything. Pot luck was all right in the old days when cellars were full and people had their own orchards and smokehouses. It's not quite the same nowadays. If you hadn't brought a few fillers."

"Well, just bread and butter would have been all right. Lord, it's quiet out here!"

"Yes, isn't it?"

"You don't sound as if that were a selling point."

"I thought it was when I came. I'm not so sure now. The winter gets pretty long. I was keen to buy this place, too. But when you're in town rushing about madly to this boring place or that, you think: 'If only I had more time for reading!' But you can have too much time."

"I daresay you're right."

"People in a place make it seem quite different. Or work. But I haven't any special work. And no family. Peter has his printing and he uses most of his evenings for it."

"Why don't you have a family?"

She was silent a moment. "You know about what Peter earns," she said at last. Her voice had suddenly lost its warmth. "And if we had enough for a baby, it'd probably go for a first edition."

"Well, if I see a little girl anywhere, cheap, I'll pick her up for you," he said, grinning.

You're going all edgy, woman. You need to get out more. Didn't you tell me you were lonesome? You can run in to town now whenever you want to! See a show—get out of yourself!"

"I'm not lonesome for town," she said, "I'm lonesome for you, Peter. . . I wouldn't care if I never saw another soul provided I really saw you when you were here."

Once inside he pulled her to him and looked at her with that engaging grin of his. "I'll bet you *do* love me, all the same," he defied her.

She pressed her cheek against his. "Yes, I'll bet I do," she admitted.

One night, with the larder low, pay day four days and Christmas ten days off, Peter said: "What'll we do for Christmas?"

"I've asked your mother here," Jen said steadily.

"For all day? I thought maybe we'd go in and have dinner with her and then . . ."

"I've asked her here," Jen said again.

SHE took what little there was and bought tiny presents for Peter and his mother. It was easy to get a tree and to make wreaths for the light green front door of their little white house.

There was one strange package with a great red satin bow and Peter didn't quite look at Jen as she opened it. It was an autographed first edition of Sara Teasdale's poems. Jen sat looking at it, holding it gently in her brown hands. At last she looked up. "It's lovely," she said. "I love it!"

Peter grinned.

The second week in January the phone rang one day. "Hello—Jennie?" Hi Amber said. "Got you a little girl!"

"Really? Where?"

"In my pocket. I meant to get her to you for Christmas but I couldn't quite make it."

"Red hair?"

"No. Brown. But quite nice, for all that. Snub nose. Sara Brenner's little girl. Sara's got a chance to go to Rome for a couple months. Her mother-in-law who always took Amariyllis went and died on her!"

"Amariyllis?"

"Wait—wait a minute, Jen. The name's nothing to do with her—doesn't fit! Snub nose, I told you! . . . Well, how about it? This is a toll call, remember, gal!"

"Oh, I'd love to, Hi, but I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Peter doesn't like children around. Really doesn't, I mean."

"Oh, I thought you were lonesome."

Jen looked away from the phone toward the door of Peter's workshop. "I am—sometimes," she said seriously. "But I couldn't, Hi. It would tie us down. We couldn't ever get to town or—no, I couldn't, Hi. But tell me who gets her, will you?"

"All right, Jen. Sorry," Hi said, and hung up.

Jen had been knitting. She went back and picked up her work; the topaz needles began to click. Presently she threw the knitting on the table, walked to the phone, rang.

"Hello—hello, Hi? . . . Jen . . . Hi, is it too late to change my mind? . . . No. I'll come in and see Sara tomorrow morning. . . Bye, Hi."

At dinner she said quietly enough: "Peter, I'm going to have Sara Brenner's little girl here for a couple months. I'm going in to get her tomorrow."

"Good heavens, Jen—are you crazy?"

"Maybe. Anyway, I've said I'd take her."

"You're mad. Why, we'd have to have someone here to look after her if we so much as stepped out nights!"

Amariyllis was packed and waiting and Sara was volubly grateful. There was a funny little snort of mirth from the corner. Jen looked and her own face wrinkled into an answering smile. Amariyllis had pushed herself into her own woolly brown coat and it was on back-wards.

"Come on, my little girl, I'll help you," Jen said in just the right tone. And in less than ten minutes they were in the car speeding toward the little white house on the rim of the lonely valley.

"Amariyllis is too much," Jen said after the first mile.

"Nanna called me Poll," Amariyllis said.

"Poll?" Jen considered that doubtfully. "Well, all right."

Amariyllis was round with red cheeks and straight brown hair and brown eyes that sparkled nearly all the time with a delicious merriment. She looked as if she found life very good and very funny.

AFTER she was in bed at last, scrubbed and kissed and patted, in the other tiny bedroom, Jen came and sat on the stool.

"Peter," she said softly, "you don't really mind her, do you?"

"Mind her? I think she's a nuisance but I suppose I can stand it for a couple of months."

"Nuisance? Amariyllis?"

"Well, she's been here a few hours and already she monopolizes all the conversation—ah, the attention. . . He grinned a little at her. "Don't look hurt, lady. You ought to feel flattered!"

She stood up. "I don't especially," she said. "It seems as if you ought to have a little overflow of charm to use for little girls. Well," she ended sharply, "perhaps she'll turn into a ghost, like me."

Daytimes, Jen bundled herself and Amariyllis into coats and hats and overshoes and they were out of the house and into a world of snow and exploration, of adventure and laughter. They built an enormous snowman. They hollowed out a cave where the snow had drifted into the corner by the woodshed. They followed mysterious tracks. They rode down hill.

But there was always a look of waiting in Jen's eyes. The evenings were the same as always. Peter was printing something for a friend of Bess Kelsey's.

Amariyllis and Lincoln had a birthday together. Twins, Amariyllis said. Peter couldn't get off and Jen and Amariyllis planned a full day.

The afternoon before Peter phoned. "They've drawn the lottery," he said.

"How much?"

"Not a cent. But I've got the day off after all and Bess is going to have an all day consolation party!"

"Tomorrow?"

"Beginning at eleven."

"Peter, it's Amariyllis' birthday."

"Well, what of it? She can celebrate with mother, can't she? I called mother and fixed it all up."

"Peter—I can't. She's counting on it."

"I tell you—it's all fixed!"

"You'll have to unfix it."

He was sulky that night but in the morning he seemed to have forgotten his grievance. After breakfast they made the cake. Just as it came out of the oven Peter went to the phone. Jen slipped a jacket on, picked up the chicken feed and opened the door. When she came back Peter was whistling.

"Well," he said, "they're all coming here for the consolation party!"

Jen just stared at him. Then she turned without a word, took Amariyllis' leggings from their hook.

"Come on, Poll!" she said. "All ready for the long hill!"

They made ready in silence. But at the door Jen turned. "If you need anything, you can drive over to North Collins," she said.

"I thought you'd be tickled! Aren't you the one that's always getting lonesome out here?"

"No," she said, "I'm all over that." She and Amariyllis dragged the sled to the road, to the little level place before the long dip. "Hang on like a limpet! Like a barnacle!" Jen said.

The door opened. "Hi, Jen!" She didn't turn. Peter came across the yard in his green sweater. "Jen, wait a minute!"

Jen said: "Like a barnacle, now!" and they were off, speeding like the wind, faster than the wind, down the long hill. Their caps were a red stretch, their voices only a laughing thread floating back up the hill to Peter. They moved away and away. . . Then the branch was there in the snowy road. A big, dead old branch. Jen swerved.

THE next day Jen opened her eyes and Peter sat beside her. "Why are you at home?" she said.

"Why do you think? I'm looking after you, Mrs. Zurbrick."

"Oh." She shut her eyes. Presently she said: "Is Poll all right?"

"Poll's practically perfect. She's getting dinner, aren't you, Poll?"

There came from somewhere an explosive little giggle.

After some long period of time Jen opened her eyes again. Peter was doing nothing, just sitting there beside her, her hand in his. "Hurt much now?"

"No."

After another long time. "Jen, may I say something?" He let go her hand and folded his arms. "Once you get up and around I probably couldn't. . . Jen, I never knew what lonesomeness was till. . ."

"Till when, Peter?"

"Till you went off with Amariyllis yesterday and left me. You can learn a lot in a minute, I guess. . . I found out what the country was like, alone in it all day—and how it felt to sit knitting while I printed and how it felt to have somebody you care about—not very dependable. . . He got up, and began a little awkwardly but lovingly to smooth the covers. "Don't ever do it again, will you, Mrs. Zurbrick?"

She was silent. When she spoke again her eyes were on a bit of exotic lavender loveliness in a vase on the table.

"What's that?" she said. She looked as if she might cry, though she never did.

"That? Oh, that's an orchid. Peter said, his voice too casual. Then, defensively: "I know I couldn't afford it, but this is different, Jen. Honestly, it is different. It really is a celebration and you mustn't scold me."

"Oh, Peter!" She grinned faintly, helplessly, but she put out her unbandaged hand and let it rest in his.

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Then the branch was there in the snowy road. A big, dead old branch.

THE autumn wind was keening across the fields and around the house. There was no sun and all the world was gray and heavy. Jennie Zurbrick straightened from her task, screwed her eyes tight shut in a special kind of weariness and opened them to the frail white

and green box of a house with the banking of straw.

She huddled into her leather jacket and her brown skirt whipped in the wind along with a lock of hair beneath the edge of an old brown felt hat. Her face was thin, bony. She was tall and walked with a free swing. In spite of her sombre eyes, everything about her was quick and alive.

The door of the little white house opened violently. "Hi, Jen! Where's my breakfast?" He stood on the step in a red and brown striped flannel robe, his fair hair ruffled.

"Where do you think?" she called. Her grin was eager, matching his.

"How about a cupacoffee for a man what's crippled and has seen better days? . . . Good Lord, but it's cold! What do I smell?" He strode across the little square living room to the kitchen, pulled open the oven door. "Baked beans!" He clasped Jen to him ecstatically.

"Don't be silly!"

"Silly? The trouble with you is, Jen, you're undeveloped, aesthetically speaking."

"The trouble with me is," she said tartly, "that I've been up since six, lugging straw and manure and it'll take more than beans to stir me, aesthetically speaking. You'd better get some clothes on."

"Well, Hi'll appreciate 'em, anyway."

"Hi?" She turned toward him, startled.

"Oh, didn't I tell you I asked him out? Him and the Kelseys. I just happened to run into him."

She stood and stared at him. "What about your mother?" she said.

"Mother?" He slapped a hand to his head.

"Good heavens, I did say something to her about coming out today, didn't I? Oh, well—I'll fix that up!" He strode toward the telephone.

"Pour me some coffee, will you? . . . Hello—Hello—Give me Garfield 9321. . . Hello—Mother? We've had some unexpected company come in. . . I don't believe I can get in for you. Do you mind?"

"No, of course not!" Jen murmured. "Of course not!"

"How about coming back with me after

work some night this week and staying all night? Could you make it? . . . How about Wednesday? . . . Swell! Awfully sorry about today, Mother!"

He turned from the phone with a pleased grin. "There—that's fixed up!" he said, relieved.

"Oh, that's fixed up, is it?" she said dryly.

Suddenly he made a little sound, put his cup down and went into the bedroom. He came back and dropped a bit of cardboard into her lap. "It's a lottery ticket," he announced. "It's yours!"

"Thanks. What did you pay for it?"

"Only three fifty!" His voice defied her to find that any picayune bargain. "Of course, if you win thousands, you might buy me a new typewriter," he said.

"First of all, I'd get me a new dustpan," she said. "Or maybe a baby."

"You're not implying you're bored with my company, are you? This'd be a swell place for a baby—now wouldn't it?" A car came noisily over the brow of the hill. "Good grief, there comes Hi now! I'd better get a shirt on!" He called from the bedroom: "I thought we might as well make a day of it."

HI, EVERYBODY!" Peter called from the bedroom. He came out, kissed Bess Kelsey and hit Hi on the shoulder. Hi Amber was slim and short and always wore a tie and kept his dark hair brushed.

"Well, what are we celebrating today?" he said.

"Peter's foresight in buying a Mexican lottery ticket at only three-fifty!" Jen said quickly. "Of course we haven't paid for the last cord of wood. But when you think that for three-fifty—three-fifty, mind you. . . Hi, for goodness sake, keep out of that oven! The number of times those beans have been smelled of—there won't be any aroma left in 'em!"

"I've got a few little gadgets out in the car," Hi said. He brought in cheese and pickles, salt-rising bread and Italian onions. "Just for filling in chinks," he said.

"Hi, I love you devotedly. Devotedly," Jen said. "The truth is that Peter only told me five minutes ago that you were coming. Luckily, there's a big pan of beans and an apple pie. But there might just as well have been two chops and two cups of chocolate pudding!"

Bess wrote book reviews for the Express; William wasn't working just now but he had a line on several things at last and he'd done some first class poems that Peter was printing on his hand press.

Hi stood with back to the stove and said,

NOW, you can't tell me you didn't enjoy that more than you would have a day with mother, my girl," Peter said when they were alone.

"Oh, Peter!" she answered, a little helplessly.

"What do you mean—'Oh, Peter?'"

"Of course I like Hi and William and Bess—as people. But I couldn't help thinking all day about your mother and of how she'd probably planned and told people. I suppose she stayed home, alone, sooner than let folks know she didn't come."

"Oh, don't be a fool, Jen! Mother's not like that. She's not one of these over-sensitive old ladies you read about in books. She has a life of her own and she doesn't depend on me for it, either."

"All right, Peter, maybe it's just because it seems part of everything else. You take other people's feelings so for granted. Oh, no—I haven't enjoyed this day, Peter! I haven't!"

He leaned over and knocked his pipe on the woodbox. "Huh?" he said, a little skeptically.

"When I think of the money you throw away on tickets and the like—when, after all, your income is limited—you know it won't stretch, and you don't want children. And this business of collecting first editions. I know you run with an artistic crowd, but, after all, you're a business man and young and you're buying this house. You can't afford to collect first editions. Oh, well, maybe it's only that I get lonely and I'm taking it out this way."

That week cold set in earnest. Jen went to town one day and bought wool, began knitting Peter a sweater.

"Talk about my squandering!" Peter said. "It's for a sweater and won't cost as much as one from the store!" she said. "Besides, it keeps me busy."

"So you get restless, Mrs. Zurbrick?"

Sometimes."

TWO nights later he drove home in a new car. Not new, but new to the Zurbricks.

"Peter!" she said, and waited.

"Now, wait—wait, darling! . . . Don't get out your axe yet! It's yours!"

"Mine?"

"Yours." He took her by the hand, pointing out the distinctive points. "Even a clock!" he boasted.

"It's a grand car," she said, but slowly. "Only, Peter, we can't possibly afford two cars. Not possibly."

"There you go again, Mrs. Pinchpenny! Of course we can afford it if you need it."