

the Girl who cared too much!

by Barney Jones

IN THE PALE BLUE kitchen of the three-room apartment, Katie Briggs stood at the cupboard, transferring cans from her enormous grocery bag to the second shelf. The second shelf was devoted to baby food and each time she returned from Winkler's Super Mart with fresh supplies, she would smile in anticipation of her heir-to-be's appetite.

The last time Phil had glanced in the cupboard, his blue eyes had crinkled in amusement. "You're making Mr. Winkler rich." And she'd felt herself blushing as she told him how wonderful she felt, after four years, to be a full-time housewife, shopping at her leisure instead of hurrying from her job to reach the grocery before it closed.

Phil had laughed. "You've laid in enough baby food for triplets." Then, immediately, his face had grown apologetic, for he knew as well as she did that they wouldn't have triplets. They'd have the single child the adoption agency promised them soon.

Soon. That was what young, gentle-eyed Miss Donovan, the newly assigned social worker, had told Katie and Phil. That was all that mattered.

She and Phil had been eager to adopt a child for three years, since the doctor had said she would never bear one. Numb with grief, she'd felt Phil's arms around her as they pressed through her hospital nightgown.

"We wanted four children," she murmured feebly, staring up at his

ashen face. "We wanted—" but she couldn't continue. There were tears in his eyes. He seized her roughly, and his lips were against her ear, a harsh whisper repeating: "You care too much!" Everything will be all right. Darling, don't care too much!"

For months after that Katie had moved from home to job and back again, in a sort of daze. Phil bore no visible scars. Occasionally in the evening as they sat in the living room, she holding a book but staring into space, he'd say, "Don't care too much."

There were times when she wanted to explain her grief. But as months passed she would tell herself, no, I won't explain. Phil should understand my hunger to be an especially good wife, an especially good mother. To give everything I missed getting during my years in the orphanage.

Of course I care too much, she admitted to herself. I always will.

Katie liked to believe her life had really begun when, at 17, after a year of working days and studying nights, she came to Connors & Beane as a secretary. There she met Gwen Stahr, a vivacious blonde with the easy friendliness she felt lacking in herself.

One day at five when everyone was leaving, Gwen stopped at Katie's desk and said, "Touch up your lips and grab your coat. We're off to Dutton's Grille. I meet Stan there."

"I'll be a third wheel," Katie said.

Gwen grinned. "That means we'll need a fourth."

Good as her word, she came to Katie's desk one morning a week later. "Dutton's after work, hon. 'There'll be a surprise for you named Phil Briggs."

Katie's eyes filled with panic. "My hair's a mess. And this too-businessy suit—why, I can't—I'll make an awful impression."

But she went; and met a tall, blue-eyed man with cropped sandy hair and amiable features. Phil Briggs met a shy pretty girl with yearning dark eyes and a slow, vulnerable smile—a girl unlike the glossy independent types he usually met and exchanged light-hearted quips with.

Katie told herself: I could love him. But she didn't let herself dream further. Even when he continued to take her out, she didn't believe he was seriously interested.

Still, she tried to captivate him and seem a fun-loving, laughing girl—like Gwen. But the pose was hard to maintain. The punch-line of a well-rehearsed joke would stick in her throat, and the bright animation would drain away, leaving a different girl with tears beneath the gay façade.

Nevertheless, one evening, walking her home from a movie, Phil said casually, "I think it'd be a great idea."

"What would be a great idea?"

"If we—got married, Katie. Will you marry me?"

She'd drawn close and whispered, "Yes, Phil. I love you, Phil." They'd walked on silently, and Katie hadn't

felt the need to seem gay just then.

She married Phil just weeks after Gwen married Stanley. The couples remained inseparable, Katie still trying to be as Gwen-like as she could. On the Briggses' first anniversary, Katie and Gwen stayed away from the office for an extra-long lunch hour. Gwen, with impish laughter in her eyes, gave Katie a beige-and-blue silk maternity dress.

"Oh, Gwen," she said mistily, "there's nothing I'd like better than to have to wear it!"

MONTHS LATER, when she became pregnant, she took the dress from its box and hung it in her closet. But after the operation, she returned the dress to its box.

Katie remained a secretary while Gwen became the mother of a son. Then a daughter. All Katie got was the promise of an adoption agency that they'd have a child for her and Phil—eventually.

That was months ago, and Katie thought: if it were my own child, my back would hurt now. I'd feel bulky, awkward—tingling with expectancy.

The phone rang. "Three guesses!" cried Gwen's bright voice. "Doc Simms says I'll have to haul the crib down from the attic again in six months." She went on to say that three-year-old Susan had demanded the new baby be a sister, while 18-month-old Tommy had closed his ears to the announcement.

"I'm happy for you, darling," Katie said. She babbled on cheerfully, struggling against a thickness in her throat, against the question: when will they give me my baby?

"The kids are yelling for their lunch," Gwen said. "Why not come over tomorrow and spend the day?"

"Love to." She'd be able, by then, to congratulate Gwen without getting a catch in her throat. And she'd have a lovely time with the kids. She adored them.

Katie told herself: our first will come soon. And that'll be just the beginning. We'll have a family like others. We'll be a family.

She was in the utility room, later, painting a small play chair, when the telephone rang.

"Mrs. Briggs?" said a friendly female voice. "I'm Miss Sherwood at the agency. You don't know me. You've been dealing with Miss Donovan."

Phil laughed, "You've enough baby food for triplets." Then he grew apologetic. They both knew they wouldn't have triplets, just the single child the adoption agency had promised them . . . soon.

