

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."

Katie's temples began to throb. Could it be—was there a child—

"Mrs. Briggs," the voice continued, "I'm calling to correct an error." She paused. It seemed a very long pause.

"You see, Miss Donovan is one of our younger staff members. When she met you and your husband, she liked you so much that she told you what you hoped to hear—that we'd have a child for you soon." Again she paused, and Katie waited, her heart pounding, tears burning her eyes.

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

Finally Miss Sherwood said, "Miss Donovan shouldn't have said that. We can never promise when, not even vaguely. I thought I should tell you, so that you wouldn't be holding your breath anxiously."

"But we are, Miss Sherwood." As soon as she spoke she regretted it.

"I understand," Miss Sherwood said.

"Thank you for calling," Katie murmured, and hung up. So Miss Sherwood understood, did she? How could anyone understand? Even Phil didn't. What had he said, exactly? That she cared too much—that was it.

Tears started, but she squeezed her eyes shut, refusing to cry. Oh, to be somebody else! Gwen, for example. To know that life was beginning, that love and trust and faith were creating a child. Katie even envied the months of ungainliness, the pains.

She went into the bedroom and drew open a dresser drawer of baby things she'd been buying for almost a year, each tiny garment a prayer. From a corner of the drawer she took out the box that Gwen had given her for a first anniversary joke.

The beige-and-blue dress was so pretty, so delicate, so unworn. She put

it on over the dress she wore, and still it was loose. She gazed at herself in the full-length mirror.

KATIE WAS about to take it off when she heard a key in the lock.

A moment later Phil walked into the bedroom and saw her. He stopped and all the color drained from his face, leaving it hard.

Katie could not speak or even go to him. His lips began to tremble, and he swallowed hard, looking like a small frightened boy having trouble with his Adam's apple.

"Darling—" Katie began.

"Take it off!"

She started toward him but he backed away, his voice rising. "I said take it off!"

She obeyed, while he stood immobile. She folded the dress. "I'm g-giving it to Gwen tomorrow." Her voice shook. "I wanted to wear it—just once—for a moment."

She moved into his arms, needing his strength. "Oh, Phil, the agency called—" And she told him what Miss Sherwood had said, while he stared at her lifelessly, saying nothing.

And suddenly Phil's face crumpled, his voice broke. "Why?" he demanded. "Why? I don't understand."

She couldn't answer. She could only see the piteous lines in his face, the misery she had never noticed before—because she had been so concerned with her own feelings!

Why, he cares as much as I do. He cares too much, too.

Now she knew what he'd meant in begging her not to care too much. If you cared too much, you could kill yourself with bitterness and heart-break. You mustn't. Instead, you had to go on, learning to wait, learning to live from day to day until the joyous time came.

You had to accept life, unless you wanted to die a new death every day. You simply must not try too hard or care too much.

"Phil," she said, with a smile she didn't believe she could manage. "You care too much. Darling, don't burn yourself out."

He stared in astonishment, as though it were impossible that it should be she who was comforting him. Then he took her in his arms, possessed by a certain new strength. "Do you mean what you're saying, Katie?"

Into his ear she said, "I'm going to buy baby oil and talcum powder tomorrow. You know, the agency could call us soon, no matter what Miss Sherwood said."

His arms tightened around her. She knew their marriage had never been so beautiful as now; they had never been so close.

"After all," Katie added, "we've got to be ready."

Phil held her away from him for a moment, studying her face as though he saw it for the first time. Then an exultant smile lit his own features.

"You and I are ready for anything," he said.



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.



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