

It was already dark at mid-afternoon; a fearful night lay ahead of her.

Both Skip and Dave were in danger. The fault was hers. Had she made friends instead of enemies—all morn-

ing the phone had jangled, but not once had she heard her ring.

The hours dragged through the longest night she had ever known. At first she paced helplessly. At last she

sank down into a chair and held the cat because he was alive and warm.

Slowly, in the quietness, forgotten words came: *He shall give His angels charge over thee—to keep thee . . .*

She dozed at last, and awakened to an utter stillness. The cat jumped down as she moved and rose unsteadily to her feet. Beyond the window was the pale wash of daylight.

It was the creak of leather she heard first, then the strong breathing of a horse. Was it bad news? Such weakness overcame her that she clung to the chair and couldn't take a step.

SO IT WAS that Dave and Skip found her, eyes anguished, fearing to hope. Then, with their reassuring arms around her, the tears came, the half words, the clinging as if she would never let them go.

Later, with Dave across the table, and Skip by her chair, they told her. "Pepper dumped me, Mom; he went in some sort of a hole, and I couldn't catch him. I made it back to the Martins. I tried to phone you, but nobody answered."

"I must have been at the barn."

Dave took it up, then. "When you called the school, little Susie Jacobs listened in. It wasn't until later she told her mother that Skip wasn't home. Mrs. Jacobs called you, but the line went out."

He put down his cup slowly. "But you told her I'd gone out, Phyll. Everybody was—listening in. They all heard you."

"Tell her the rest, Daddy." Skip's eyes shone.

"Well, they knew I hadn't a chance, Phyll, taking that cut. The snow closes in; you can't see a light or anything. But they figured I might hear a noise. They blew car horns, shot off guns. I—I wasn't sure at first I heard anything, and then Darby's ears went up. I turned and the sound grew louder—"

"It was Gramma Bevins," Skip burst out, "beating on her washtub with a poker."

Then, beautiful its sound, the phone rang. Dave jumped up. "Saw the phone crew out working when I came by. It was a tree down."

He lifted the receiver. "You bet," he said, tired face smiling. "All okay."

Phyll rose. "Give it to me, Dave." He met her eyes and handed over the receiver without a word.

She said hesitantly, "I—I hope you're all listening." Her voice grew stronger. "Last night when I was so afraid, I clung to just one phrase: *He shall give His angels charge over thee*. That's what you were, angels—angels on the party line. I hope you'll forgive me and let me make it up somehow; let me be the kind of friend you have all been."

Voices were in her ears, reassuring voices, all talking at once. "I'll listen in, too, after this," she promised shakily, between laughter and tears. "I'll be just like the rest of you."

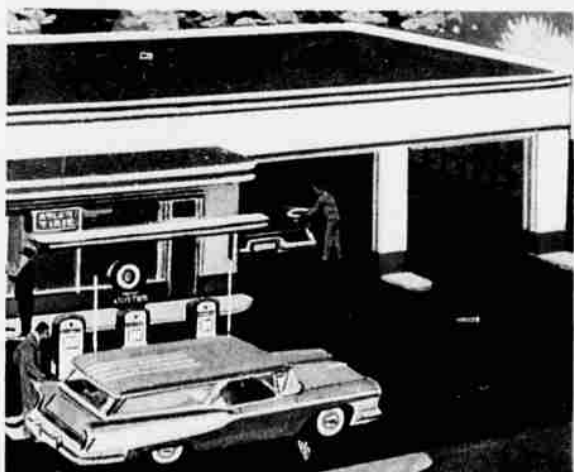
"Land's sake, Phyllis," Gramma Bevins' voice came crackling through, "that's all we've been waiting for—for you to join us snoopin' sinners."

They let her hang up at last. "I think," she told Dave unsteadily, but smiling, "that if I work at it I'm going to be a party-liner in good standing."



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