



DEAREST IN THE WORLD

A Story of the Light that did not Fail

By FLORA BALDWIN



IT is only a strip of the river bank between the swing bridge that has never been known to swing, and the foot bridge. A more than ordinarily wise town council has made a little wild park of it. The big elms that were born there stand on the grassy slope and a row of military maples sentinel it along the street border, while courtseying willows make a gentle pretence at keeping the river from intruding. Unpretentious as it is, the townspeople love it more than the formal and bedecked parks with high-sounding names, whose chief reason for existing is to be pointed out with pride to visitors, who praise their dignified loveliness unstintedly. But the green strip of river bank has never been christened, it is just "the park," and needs no more particular designation. A few seats have been scattered throughout its length, and a little mushroom bandstand is hidden among the trees.

The whole town turns out whenever the band plays there. The old folk come early and sit on the benches, listening to the music and watching the town go by. The not-so-old sit on benches, too, if any are left, with a detaining hand on the baby carriage while the "good man" lies on the ground near by and smokes, and the children play games around the tree trunks.

But the young things.—No benches for them, bless their hearts. No sitting on the grass, either, except for a restless moment. They stroll round and round the path that compasses the maples, reversing sometimes so as to meet the friends that may otherwise be missed. There are stops to be made for greeting of chums not seen since before tea, and all the quips and jokes and merry laughter that go to spell youth.

There is just one higher joy than being young, and walking round the maple ring, and that is being young and forethoughted enough to have rented, at least three days before, one of the few rowboats old Jerry has for hire; then with the nicest girl in the world to row idly about in the dark shadows of the willows, while the music from the little bandstand filters down through the trees.

For just one night this summer Roger Allison and Margaret Scott belonged to that superlatively blessed class. Earlier in the evening they had laughed and joked with the occupants of the other boats and with the people on the shore, but had finally pulled in near the bank where Roger's light hold on a drooping branch kept them from drifting. There a silence had fallen upon them of that unconstrained kind that can only endure where there is the spirit of companionship.

"What financial value do you put upon your thoughts, Margaret?"

"They are so very commonplace that it would be a shame to charge even the proverbial penny," she laughed back, "and yet they seemed new to me. You know how all along, ever since father first spoke of it, I've been building my hopes on that two years of study abroad. It just seemed like putting in time till the day came to sail away from this dull town. Now that all those slow-footed days are behind instead of before, the funny thing is that I'm not so sure of being glad."

"Why, Meg?"

"Case of funk, Brother Jack would say. I'm scared to think of German professors. Do they all have spectacles and hair that needs a barber, Roger?"

"Every one of them, Margaret, and when they are annoyed you can hear them roar all over Berlin."

"Now you're laughing at me, but it is a very real fear. There's another thing, too. I've enjoyed myself so much this month past since—since you came home," she said honestly, with just a little flush on her usually colorless face.

"Have you, Meg? So have I. Feel as if I had discovered you, for at the school across the river there it always seemed as if you were so sedate and studious and cared more for books than for people. But this year—why you're the finest kind of a pal. You know I can't look at a book again till that New York doctor looks at my eyes in September, and honestly I haven't missed them since you have been so good about coming over to play with me."

"Are your eyes very bad?" she asked anxiously, passing over the praise—which would glow in her heart forever—to discuss this serious calamity.

"They can't be very bad, for I can see all right, but sometimes a shiver runs along my spine when I think of the way that doctor looked at me. But why be doleful, and on your last night at—"

"Well," came a fretful voice from the bank, as two people came through the grass and sat down at the water's edge, "you might have got a boat for to-night. All our crowd were on the river but us."

"I'm sorry, Gertie, but they were all taken. I was so busy in the office the first of the week."

Gertie apparently found forgiveness hard, for her complaining continued to affront the quiet of the night.

"Even that homely Margaret Scott could be on the river. Roger Allison could get a boat for her, though everyone wonders at his taste in choosing her."

Meg knew afterwards that she should have laughed it off instantly—the moment's silence was

"She won't stand for the arms, I know, and she's too honest to believe the other, but it would comfort me a lot to do it," he thought ruefully.

As they came up the narrow walk to the house he found her cold little hand with his warm one and drew her gently into the shadow of a lilac bush.

"Margaret, Gertie is a little beast, but ("but a truthful little beast," she interrupted), if you care for my opinion. Will you do something for me?" he asked, breaking off abruptly.

"If I can," she answered, in the level voice that sounds like indifference, but is often sheer misery.

"I may never see you again, Meg."

"What an idea, Roger! Two years can't last forever."

"It isn't as nonsensical as it sounds. I want you to let me kiss the fact that, pretty or plain, is the dearest face in the world to me. Will you, dear?"

A few minutes later Roger was carrying a load of mixed feelings of anger and sorrow and joy and dread home with him under the trees, and Margaret was lying face down on her bed crying unfeignedly and broken-heartedly. It wasn't wounded vanity, for she had known her face was plain ever since she had stopped playing with the boys.

They had never stopped to consider whether she were an ugly duckling or a swan; she was a "good fellow," and what else mattered? But boarding school young ladies have other standards of popularity than the ability to play cricket and go berrying, and Margaret was soon left in no doubt whatever as to her lack of beauty.

Now she sat up with a half sob smothered by rueful laughter at her own expense.

"What a goose you are, Margaret Scott. You know you are ugly; Roger knows you're ugly, though he wouldn't say it, and you know that Roger knows. So why this storm when Gertie Lane says in our hearing what is no news at all? All the same it hurt like anything, and you couldn't help crying."

Then the remembrance of that good-night kiss under the lilacs came as balm to a wound, even though she thought "he must have been very sorry for me," and dared not trust herself to think it was for love, not pity.

Gertie's words, "She might better see a beauty doctor," came back, but they found a heart made immune by the potency of love. They sent Margaret to the mirror, though, to make an inventory of her un-charms.

"Sallow skin, frown between eyebrows, neck scrawny, shoulders rounded, eyes not bad when not used for tear-shedding, teeth fair, hair good. Not very promising list, Meg, but an honest one."

She pondered a moment till the pucker in her brow grew deeper.

"That's exactly what I will do. There is no harm in trying, anyway. I'll find a specialist and practise music and massage, exercises, both musical and gymnastic, all at the same time. Two years ought to be long enough to see results. Perhaps I'll have to thank Gertie yet, and perhaps, some day—Roger will think I am almost pretty. He said 'the dearest face in the world.' I would like it to be fairer for his sake."

Two years later Margaret Scott came back to Stillwater. She had left no young kin behind who would have kept her in touch with the events of the little town, or who would have been interested in what was happening to her. Her father was satisfied to hear that she was well and working hard, and confined his correspondence to adequate cheques. She found little change in Stillwater—a new house here and a fallen landmark there; but Stillwater held its breath—especially its feminine breath, at the change in her, and did not regain it properly until the night following her arrival when the band played in the park.

"Have you seen Margaret Scott, yet?"

"Yes, isn't it wonderful—?"

"When you think of her complexion two years ago, do you think this one can be real?"

"Her figure is splendid, too."

"I wish she would tell me how she did it," said one plain girl, wistfully.

It was left for Gertie Lane, who never knew how much she was responsible for Margaret's new



"She pondered a moment till the pucker in her brow grew deeper."

fatal, the delayed laugh couldn't be natural. But that moment she was stunned, the blow had been so sudden and had followed so closely upon the happiness of the evening.

Before Roger could conquer the indignation that seized him, the voice went on:

"Oh, yes, she's a nice little thing, but so pitifully plain. If I were in her place I'd go to a beauty doctor for my face rather than to Germany for my brains."

When the boat had been left at the boathouse, the two whose light had been turned into darkness by a breath of unkindness, walked slowly along in the friendly velvet blackness under the trees. Margaret was afraid to speak, for the tears were so near, and she did not wish Roger to know that his "pal" could be so deeply hurt by so trivial a thing. He was silent, because the only comfort he could think of at the time was to put his arms round her tight and declare that she was the prettiest girl in North America.