



"THE POOR MOTHER WANTED TO LISTEN TO YOU BUT THE BABY CRIED. IT WAS GREAT, MAMMA—I FELT AWFULLY PROUD OF YOU."

## NONE SO YOUNG

By THEODOCIA PEARCE

Illustrated by LYDIA FRASER

MARTHA KNIGHT returned from three happy restful weeks at the beach, a new woman, ready to go back to the old duties and the regular routine of her days, with a zest and joy unknown before her departure. She and her husband, Henry, had found love again.

Their children were a glad and noisy crew when they met them at the station the night they returned home; Bruce, unbridled and unconscious of his hilarity; Bertha, sweet and womanly, as Bertha always was; and Alma. She gave Martha an impulsive generous kiss, and turned without a word, to her father.

"Bless me, if you aren't the sight!" she exclaimed. "Burnt to a crisp almost. Honest, Dad, you remind me—at least your face does—of some sort of breakfast food."

Martha did not hear Henry's reply; her mind was upon Alma. There was something in that laugh of Alma's, something forced and artificial. Bruce was tugging at her arm.

"Say, Mom, give us pancakes for breakfast to-morrow, will you? I'm just sick for a decent plate of pancakes."

"The way Bruce eats is just terrible, Mamma," Bertha put in, patting out the cover of the baby carriage.

"And the way she feeds us is 'just terrible, Mamma,'" Bruce imitated her to perfection. "Golly! what do you think I had for luncheon yesterday?—that's Bertha's word, not mine. Well, two silver forks, two knives, half a dozen spoons, some awfully swell plates and a lettuce leaf with some juice on it."

"The Rileys were in," Bertha explained.

Bruce ignored her explanation.

"Say, Mom, do I get those pancakes?"

"You do!" Martha's tone was emphatic. Bruce, dear, boyish, irresistible Bruce—always he was the same to Martha. There was nothing about him unknown, elusive. Martha understood Bruce. Simultaneously, she thought of Alma and that laugh. Almost an empty echo it was to Martha.

"Wish we had a car to ride home in," Bruce said, then—"Hi there, you—kid!" He darted away after Tots, Bertha's older child, who was veering straight for a mud puddle.

Martha called softly after Alma.

"Want me, Mamma?" she waited until Martha came up and took her arm, "I was just asking Dad all about the time you had."

"It was lovely," Martha's voice was modulated in memory. "Lovely—and how did you get on, Alma?"

"Oh, fine, simply fine. Bertha was awfully dear to us."

"And Bruce—"

"Bruce was just great, Mamma. Honest, I had the surprise of my life over Bruce. He never contradicted me once."

Martha smiled and said nothing. She had the wisdom to let it go at that.

"Anything happen?" Martha asked next.

"Well, no—" Alma considered. "Nothing particular." Martha wondered just what had happened to Alma. They stopped on the curbing of Chester Street waiting for a small stream of autos to pass.

"We really should have a car," Alma insinuated. "Hilda says it makes life worth while."

"Isn't life worth while anyway?" Bertha asked, looking down at the baby. Alma followed her gaze.

"Don't be too serious always, Bertha," she warned. "Of course it is—and an auto helps."

"Glad to be back, Martha?" Henry questioned.

"Oh! yes," Martha smiled into the eyes of Henry—she was not afraid to smile into Henry's eyes now, "Oh! yes, where we are needed is best." She thought of Alma; lovely, radiant Alma, Martha herself re-born.

They walked home through the early evening of September, along the wide tree-bordered streets of the city, Henry and Bertha and her baby, Bruce and Tots on ahead, running and jumping and walking by turns, Martha and Alma in the rear.

"So you have your Fall hat," Martha said approvingly.

Alma tilted her head. "Yes, isn't it the cutest thing, Mamma? All the girls at the office are just crazy about it—and only ten-fifty at Weatherby's."

"Ten-fifty!" Martha exclaimed. A funny contortion of velvet, a silk tassel—no more. "Ten-fifty! That was frightfully expensive for an every day hat."

"I'll use it for best for a time," Alma was lenient to Martha's economical inclinations. "It really isn't so much, Mamma. It is new and chic. I really must look nice, you know."

Yes, Martha knew. It was her pride to have Alma "look nice," to see herself as she might have been and had never dared to be. Alma was so exultant, so girlish.

To Martha, Alma had always been a child, such a gay young creature, with Life ready to give her all she asked. Martha could not picture Life denying anything to Alma.

BUT that night, after the mild confusion of home coming, the arrival of Buster Middleton, the departure of Bertha and Ed. and the babies, Martha came to a startling discovery.

Alma was no longer a child—a gay girl. She was at last—a young woman. Bruce and Henry had gone for a stroll. "Just a couple of blocks, Pop," Bruce had pleaded, and Martha watching them off, smiled happily. The father and son combination—how it pleased her.

She left Alma and Buster chatting on the veranda and went up stairs to put clean sheets on Henry's bed.

She stepped out on the balcony to shake out the comforter. How chilly the nights were getting, almost too chilly for pleasure on the veranda. Alma and Buster down below, talking—the voices came up to her—Alma, with her dainty, sheer Georgette blouse—Martha must tell her to get a sweater. She went to the rail and leaned over, the voices coming up to her.

"But I thought, Alma," Buster was speaking. Buster, the fine every-day sort of a boy—the Knights had known and liked him always. "I did hope that you might really care about me some day, care a whole lot, Alma. And now—"

"And now—" Alma repeated, "You are acting terribly foolish, don't you think? You are acting like a boy who has been slapped and doesn't like it."

"But I hoped you would care some day."

Long silence—then the low tone of Alma.

"I don't care—yet. I can't help that, Buster. Why, we are young and I want to be free—oh! for years yet. I want to have a good time first, lots of real fun before I decide to settle down. I can't understand why some girls marry so early, take the first chance that comes along. Why, we can have heaps of fun together, visits and dances and movies and things."

"So now—"

"I don't care—yet."

"Some day, perhaps?"

"Oh! I don't know," Alma's voice came up to Martha, annoyed, impatient. "Don't be stupid, Buster. Tell me more about Harold McCoy."

Martha went back to the bedroom and softly shut the door leading out to the balcony. Then she sat down on Henry's bed, sat down on the clean folded sheets, the comforter held in her arms, and reflected.

So it was coming—a time when someone would want Alma, claim her, take her away. She could not belong to them always. And then Martha realized that Alma did not belong to her now.

She belonged to herself. Alma belong to herself! Convulsively Martha caught the comforter close.

"Oh! it comes so quickly," it was a half sob—"It comes so quickly—they grow up. One day so little and needful—the next—they go away."

The memory of her three weeks came back to her and stopped a bleeding wound.

She had Henry.

And Buster—a smile came—why not Buster for Alma? Martha loved Buster, ever since the day when, as a tiny boy, he had upset the ink on their carpet and had come to tell her about it. She had caught him close and wiped his tear-stained face, and sent him back to play. She did not mind cleaning the ugly black stain because he had told her. And she had loved him for it.

So why not Buster?

"I don't care—yet—" Martha smiled to herself in the dark—"No, Alma, you don't care—yet. It is so