

SHORT STORY

(continued from previous page)

Mrs. Pendleton, leading Sylvia in one hand and Gertrude in the other, and walked up towards the summit of the hill. There suddenly appeared an old Ford car with a caravan behind it. The caravan door opened and out stepped God in a long, white robe and a gold crown.

My good and faithful servant, he said to Mrs. Pendleton, as she knelt before him.

My wayward child, he said to Sylvia.

My well beloved, who has come to me through pain, he said to Gertrude.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the pure in heart, thundered the angels' chorus, and the children leapt and danced with glee, scattering their garlands all about God, Mrs. Pendleton, and Sylvia and Gertrude.

But what about me, cried Mrs. Fowler. What about me? and anguish tore at her throat.

Then out of the crowd stepped a man in a long, black cloak, who pointed an accusing finger at her and said, The channel was muddy.

Then the children joined hands and danced joyously round her, chanting, A

muddy channel! A muddy channel! Ha, ha—a muddy channel!

Her humiliation and fear were so great that she woke, trembling and gasping.

* * *

THE next morning she could scarcely wait till after breakfast to go to her neighbour.

Mrs. Pendleton, she said in a shaking voice, I had a prophetic dream. The Lord has called you. You are chosen. You must come with me to little Gertrude to-day.

But, I—I—stammered Mrs. Pendleton, horrified at the thought of being thrust into prominence.

You must come, said Mrs. Fowler so portentously that Mrs. Pendleton nodded without another word.

That afternoon Mrs. Fowler sat in tense expectation on one side of the bed, watching to see what Mrs. Pendleton would do on the other. Gertrude lay between them, listless and uninterested. She seldom bothered to talk to or smile at Mrs. Fowler, and she didn't see why she should at this other woman either. She wished they'd both go away and leave her in peace.

Well, my dear, said Mrs. Pendleton, rather helplessly, I brought you some flowers.

She laid the little bunch of rosebuds on the quilt.

Alfie picked them, she said, then added confidentially. He's my little elf boy, you know. I haven't got a little boy of my own, so I made up Alfie. You've no idea the tricks he gets up to.

A glimmer of interest showed in Gertrude's face. She reached out for the rosebuds and fingered them.

Of course, said Mrs. Pendleton, lowering her voice confidentially, I know you're too old to believe in elves and fairies and all those silly things, but do you know, Alfie's so real that I had to wipe his nose this morning. Silly boy! He went out and played in the gutter in the rain yesterday, and got his feet wet. And his ears too.

Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. You know, don't tell anyone, because he doesn't like me to talk about it, but his ears have long points. She nodded emphatically. Yes, long points! Four inches long to be exact. I measured them with the tape measure. And he insists on wearing balaclavas to cover them. He likes coloured ones, so I have to knit him blue ones and red ones and pink ones and green ones, and sometimes striped ones. Peculiar taste he has, hasn't he?

How old is he? breathed Gertrude, her eyes round with interest.

Ten, said Mrs. Pendleton firmly. And do you know, for the last five years he's refused to get a day older. It comes

round to his birthday and I make a cake and put eleven candles on it, and he just takes one off and says, Oh, no—you don't put that one across me! And he just stays ten!

Mrs. Pendleton sat back with folded hands, and a mystified expression on her face, eyebrows raised, lips compressed.

Now, what would you do about that?

Bring him to see me, breathed the girl. Will you? Bring him to-morrow. Her eagerness was pitiful. Her little hands were clutched round the flowers, her face was strained.

Well, said Mrs. Pendleton doubtfully, I'll have to ask him. He's an awful one for being on the go. He wouldn't sit still a minute if he were here. You'd have to chase after him and catch him if you wanted him to stay.

Oh, I'll do that. I promise. You just bring him—I'll see he stays.

All right then, promised Mrs. Pendleton. I'll see he's here with me to-morrow at two.

* * *

BUT there isn't any Alfie, expostulated

Mrs. Fowler, as they went down the street together. What'll happen to-morrow when you turn up and you haven't got any Alfie? Are you going to borrow one of the neighbour's little boys?

No, smiled Mrs. Pendleton, Gertrude knows he's not real. She's only make believing just like I am. Only she needs

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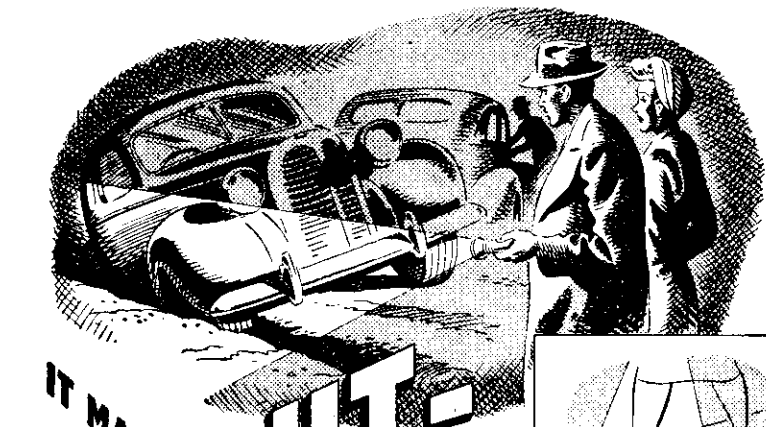
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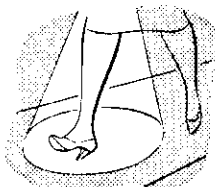
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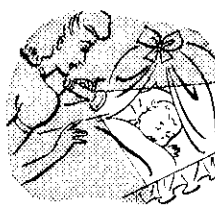
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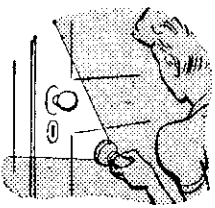
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