

Interlude

Margaret Himmel

S. '40



MECHANICALLY, Arlene's eyes strayed over the rows and rows of desks to the little copper alarm clock squatting on the long row of brown filing cabinets at the far end of the room. Just a quarter until five! How the minutes dragged. The persistent annoying buzz, buzz, buzz of a huge green fly brushing rapidly across her face made her look up a minute as she brushed it away.

Moist heat was prickling her skin like so many thousand gnats. Her aqua print dress was damp where her aching back touched the back of the chair. Little rivulets of sweat were trickling down from her shoulder blades. Her hair hung heavy and hot on her neck. If she only could get it out of the way! She flung her head.

SPASMODIC breezes from the huge revolving fan perched on a chair in the left aisle rustled the carboned onion skin sheets on the desk. She must get back to work. "Where's the place?" she thought. A slender left forefinger slid over the smudged sheets—Freemont, Page, Taylor, Ringgold, Decatur. With her other hand she picked up a yellow pencil and began rhythmically punching with short staccato strokes on the comptometer at her side, her sensitive, flexible fingers skipping hither and thither over the keyboard.

It wasn't hard work. She didn't even have to think. In fact, she was more accurate if she didn't think at all but just sat there and let the figures flow up through her eyes and down again through her arm and fingers into the "comp." Numbers to be added, subtracted, multiplied or divided—that's all they meant to her because they were written in code. Some day Mr. Hall would interpret them with a key. He would put them in his bulletin, "The Economic and Social Aspects of Soil Erosion," but no one would ever know about the hours she sat there punching, punching, punching so she could go back to school next fall.

MARY and Ruth and Jane and Phyllis didn't seem to mind. They worked here year in and year out. Only this morning Mary had said to her, "I can't see why you want to go to school. You've got a job earning pretty good money. You can have nice clothes and good times. What more do you want?"

She couldn't make Mary understand that she wanted more than anything else in the world to work with people—not machines. Mary could have her linens and laces, her silks and furs—so could Ruth and Jane and Phyllis. They could have their good times, too, if that's what—

Suddenly, Arlene became acutely aware that her comptometer was echoing loudly throughout the room. She could no longer hear the incessant hollow roar of the electric Monroes, the steady staccato on the "comps," the crisp "chunk, chunk" of the Burroughs calculators, the erratic jerking of the hand Monroes.

Three minutes until five. She could tell without even glancing up. Paper began rustling, drawers screeching, windows squealing, fans droning—then dying away, doors banging.

"Hey, Arlene! Wake up! It's time to go." It was Mary yelling at her.

"Just a minute. I want to check this last column so I can start a new set tomorrow."

"Sucker!" Mary responded vigorously and disappeared through the doorway.

THE room was quiet now. It seemed queer and unfamiliar, like a football stadium without any people. Punch! Punch! Her tired fingers kept on to the end of the last column. Ah! it checked. She breathed a long low sigh as she pushed back the chair and pulled her dress loose from its seat and back. Her moist fingers stuck to the thin sheets of paper as she arranged them in a neat pile in the center of her desk.

It was good to hear the "thang" and "thud" of the tin cover going down over the "comp," the snapping crack of the light cord, and the scraping of her chair under the desk. They all seemed to release. The hollow click of her heels across the floor accompanied by the brassy tick of the alarm clock blended into a little chant, "Through until tomorrow. Through until tomorrow."

The clock was pointing to four minutes past five. Arlene slammed the door and ran swiftly down the steps.