



Emma

Helen Pundt

H. Ec. Jr.

IF YOU were a doctor you explained things simply. You said, "Blood clot on the brain. It often happens in childbirth." But if you were a small-town pharmacist whose favorite niece had just died, you weren't satisfied with that explanation. You remembered and wondered.

You remembered the smell of peanuts and the hard bleachers, and a moist hand no bigger than a maple leaf that dug into your palm when the trapeze artist tumbled into the air.

You remembered sitting by the fire while your sister and her husband quarreled in the kitchen. You tried not to hear, and you thought, "the damned young fools," and suddenly you felt sturdy legs climb into your lap and a warm body, smelling of the bed, wiggle into the crook of your arm. Emma didn't say anything, just burrowed down like a frightened rabbit. You held her tight and pointed out the frost pattern growing on the window pane. Soon she fell asleep, and every time you moved, she clutched your arm and sighed. The snow had mounted cornerwise on the window ledge, and the fire was grey when you finally put her to bed.

Yes, and you remember a china-doll voice saying, "Swing me higher, Uncle Seth." And the shadow of the leaves on her hair. You remember wondering if one day her hair would be the color of those shadows, and, of course, it was, in time, except for a spell when she bleached it. You were angry then, and because you knew she could not bear to be ignored, you did not speak to her for several days. She went around the house looking lost. She brought you your pipe and tobacco and your slippers, and still you didn't speak to her. And then she went up on the attic steps and cried. You brought her down and told her it was all right this time, but for God's sake not to do it again.

You remembered her climbing the hill one day, tossing a loaf of fresh bread into the air and singing at the top of her lungs,

"They all went up to Amsterdam dam dam. They all went up to Amsterdam."

And her mother running out into the road calling,

"Emma, for heaven's sake, hush." The song stopped on the last dam, leaving it high in the summer air amidst the cadences of the crickets. Emma handed over the loaf of bread which by now was dented in on all sides and with the look of a pixie sidled past her mother. Under her breath, she was still singing,

"They all went up to Amsterdam."

And all the time you tried to push back the memory of that one day, but it would crowd through. You could see her with her hair snarled into buns over her ears and those ridiculous boots that the girls were wearing then, clear to the calves of their legs with open buckles that clanked at every step. You could see those boots like two bats coming through the door. You were waiting on a customer, but you called out, "Hello."

And she said in a depressed tone, "Hullo." You looked up to see what was wrong, but she hurried past you, jingling at every step, back to the storeroom where the cases were kept. Later you found her there sitting on a box of castile soap.

"What's wrong, Puss?"

"Nothing."

"Come on, you can tell your favorite uncle."

Then the sly smile creeping around her mouth.

"Who said you were my favorite?" That was more like it.

"Come, now, open up," you said. She ducked her head.

"Were you ever in love?" she asked not looking at you. Oh, lord, you thought, has it come at last?

"Sure," you said, "lots of times."

She protested with big grey eyes.

"There's only one real time."

You had forgotten that youth could be so young.

"All right," you agreed. "Who is he?"

"Johnny Burgess."

You recalled a freckled boy with gangly legs that were always draped around something, and you said, "Good God, woman!"

Then she said wistfully, "He can't even see me any more."

"Bosh," you said, "Go after him. Start courting." You felt her body stiffen.

"Women don't do the courting," she said, spitting against your cheek as she spoke.

"The heck they don't."

"Well, then," she said, "Did my mother court my father?"

That was the trouble with youth, always pinning you down to cases. You snorted for reply.

She was silent on the way home. Her galoshes clanked through the snow. The pixie look was in her eyes.

Two days later, you heard her yowl as she hung up the phone.

"Uncle Seth, I'm going to the Reserve Officer's ball. Guess with whom?"

"How should I know?" you said.

"With Johnny, remember?"

"How did you do it?" you asked.

She wouldn't look at you, and she didn't answer right off.

"Do what?" she asked.

"Look me in the eye," you said, and then she laughed.

"I sent him a valentine," she confided, "But—I didn't sign it."

"No?"

"Well, not with my name. I just said, 'From one who thinks you're wonderful.'"

"Go on," you said.

"That's all."

You lifted an eyebrow. Then she laughed again and stuck her head around the corner of the door as she was going out.

"Of course," she said, "I told Sissy."

“Why didn’t you let me know?” you shouted after her, “I’d have put it in the papers.”

Spring came early that year and with it a flock of adolescents to clutter up the front porch. Every night you stumbled over half a dozen of them. To you they looked much alike: lean, big hands and feet, a little hair on the chin and upper lip, and pimples. They sat with Emma in the April dusk and shouted and giggled. And you sighed and thought to yourself,

“In the spring, the sap runs.”

By summer, they were all gone like birds that migrate early—that is, all of them but Johnny. You rather liked the boy after a time. Sometimes you wanted to say,

“Look, son, just put your feet on the floor and leave them there. It’s easier that way.” Still, if he wanted to tie himself in knots, it was his business. And besides he made sense when he talked.

About four o’clock one morning, you awoke with a burning pain around your heart. As you went into the bathroom to find the charcoal tablets, you heard whispering in the hall. It was Emmy, head thrust out the side window, calling *sotto voce* to Johnny in the yard below. He saw your head come popping out the window beside hers, and his jaw dropped as if released by a spring, and the slow red crawled up his face.

“For the love of sweet, gentle Joseph,” you said.

“Johnny’s delivering milk now,” said Emma. Her face was ablaze, and she wouldn’t look at you. She threw Johnny a kiss, moved away from the window, and sat down on the stair landing.

“What the devil are you doing up at this hour of the morning?” you demanded.

“Johnny and I want to get married,” she said. “Look, he has only two more years of school, and now he’s got the milk route besides, and, oh gee, couldn’t I work in the store, Uncle Seth?”

You looked at the small, earnest face with the smile all gone from the mouth and the brown hair rolled tightly in curl papers. From somewhere in the house came the pungent odor of lemon lilies.

“Well,” you remarked, eyeing the paper knots all over her head, “He can’t say you didn’t warn him.”

She was married in the fall. After the ceremony she came out into the garden to find you. Her heels clicked on the flagged

walk. Her train and veil were over her arm, and she was running as she always ran when she was happy. Then you heard a thin, ripping noise. Her veil had caught on a rosebush.

"That's good luck," she told you. "It's always good luck for a bride to tear her veil."

The next spring when you were puttering in the garden, you found a piece of torn veiling still clinging to the rosebush.

Good luck. A flushed face on a white pillow.

"It's a girl," you told her, "and her feet are as big as yours."

That pixie smile for a moment.

"Shall I send her back?"

"Not on your life."

She put her hand on yours. It was hot and damp.

You walked home from the cemetery. For a while you stopped by the brook and watched the water bubble under the ice. You saw it break and separate into grey blotches that spread into strange shapes and then dropped back in the full stream. It may have been hours that you stood there watching the bubbles break and spread and disappear. Then you went back up the hill, feeling the cold wind and hearing the ice crack under your heels. Just above the spruce trees, a misty moon glowed through the clouds. In front of the house you stopped and took a deep breath.

When you opened the door, you heard a baby cry.

Mood

Franklyn Brooks

Sc. Jr.

Gleaming headlights whizzing by,
Muffled crickets,
You and I.
It's night, my dear,
And in the sky
The stars and moon
Chase away the gloom
Of darkness.
It's night, my dear,
And you and I . . .