

Alan Takes A Wife

MARJORIE LITTLE

THE Dobbinses never had seemed to belong to Wayneboro society. Their children had always been my biggest problems in grade school, and scarcely a year went by that I didn't gain a new Dobbins while I still had one to cope with. Some of them could not help being problem children. They should not have come to school at all, for I didn't have either the time or the training to help their slow moving minds. Others seemed bright enough, but they were indifferent to school and left it any time a better occupation offered itself, perhaps to work in the coal yards, or peddle trinklets for a few days, and their school attendance was spasmodic.

Even though not all of them were feeble minded, the Dobbinses all had another fault: They were dirty. Of course, one must understand that living in the last house on Walnut Street, across from the coal yards, would make nearly any woman despair of keeping her home very clean, but Mrs. Dobbins was fat and lazy and did not mind a filthy house. She did nothing to account for her woman's existence in this world but to bear children. I remember that once she came to the school with real distress in her face and voice, to ask my advice about one dull child. After she left, I couldn't bear to breath until I had opened the windows to let in clean air.

"Mama wants to know would you read this for us?" Kinney Dobbins was standing before my desk. "It's a letter from my brother Alan's girl in England, and Lou and Peggy and Ellen can't make out all the words." I was surprised to see that the letter was written in delicate handwriting, from a girl who evidently had refinement and education. I read the letter aloud to

Kinney and he took it home again to read to the rest of the family. After this one, several more letters were brought for me to read. I thought them beautiful.

Big brother Alan was one of the brighter Dobbinses. He had learned quickly and seemed to enjoy it, but he had left school while he was nearing the eighth grade. The other school children usually kept away from the family. "They smelled." Sometimes, talk they had heard at home would make the children taunt the Dobbinses with, "Your father doesn't work hard enough to feed you!", and other such cries. This taunting had first hurt Alan, for he was sensitive to the point of being what I thought weak, but gradually the cries hardened him. They were responsible for his not returning to school after his father got a job for him in the coal yards and led to his lying about his age and enlisting in the army when he was seventeen. He had been gone for about two years when Kinney came to me with his mother's request.

As more letters came, I could see that the girl was in love with Alan, and it made me heartsick to realize that the Dobbinses had lied to her about their position. Her letters showed that she believed they owned the coal yard, for she would write, "I am glad to hear that your coal business is progressing well." I was afraid that Alan had helped to deceive her. With his background I thought he must have developed the attitude that if he wanted something badly enough, it was all right to cheat in order to get it. I hoped that she would discover in time what the family was like, but of course it was none of my business, so although I greatly wanted to write to

her, I did not do so.

Gossip ran high in Wayneboro when the pretty English girl's picture appeared in the "Sunday Record." "The announcement of the engagement of Miss Rosemary Johnson of Northumberland, England, to Mr. Alan Dobbins, of Wayneboro," the item read. It went on to say that "Miss Johnson brings with her a veil which was worn by her grandmother at her marriage in London nearly seventy years ago." No one was more sorry about the approaching wedding than I, and I couldn't help wondering if I was to blame for not writing to tell her the truth. Early one Saturday morning Rosemary arrived on the train. Alan, who was now a civilian, and the other Dobbinses met her at the station, and it was not mere chance which brought me there. Those of us who "happened" to be there could see that she was a charming girl, happy at being in America and at meeting her fiance. We all pitied her, as we thought of her going home to that small, crowded shack at the end of Walnut Street, and we wondered whether she would really marry Alan.

At church the next morning the minister announced that everyone was invited to their wedding. Nearly everyone in town came, most out of curiosity. It was quite an elegant wedding. The four oldest

Dobbins girls came down the aisle, thoroughly enjoying being looked at, because it wasn't often that people noticed them at all. They had filmy dresses, and capes over their shoulders that greatly resembled window curtains. Alan stood as straight as a soldier, smiling. When the bride came, I gasped, because she looked so beautiful in her white satin dress and heirloom veil. Mrs. Dobbins, fat and overdressed, had tried to squeeze out tears most of the time before the wedding, but after it was well under way, she became so interested in the ceremony that she forgot to be emotional.

After the service we crowded outdoors to see them off. Mrs. Dobbins started out to the jalopy first, looking pious, while Mr. Dobbins shuffled along beside her. The girls and boys ran out to the car and last of all went the bride and groom. I had pitied Rosemary until that moment, but, startled, I realized that she was not thinking of the Dobbins family; she was looking up at Alan, kindling pride in his face, and her eyes were full of love.

On the way home I scolded myself, "This isn't anything for you to worry about. You're just an old maid school teacher and not supposed to know about love." But I couldn't put the thought of the English girl and her heirloom veil out of my mind.

Every man felt the authority of the skipper like the sting of a whip. One could almost picture the green sea in his sharp bright eyes, and his graying hair reminded one of the white caps on a rough sea.

The Skipper

TOM KING