

First Things First

Mary A. B. Hurt

THIS latest quarrel with Janice was shorter but more violent than any of the previous ones and over a triviality, as usual.

Henry Dahlbert dashed out of the house, trying to forget the sight of the white-faced little boy with hurt and puzzled eyes, shrinking back into a corner of the room, and Sally, just a toddler, pressing her small body close to that of her brother, as though frightened of she knew not what. Why, he asked himself, must he and Janice always shout at each other when the children were around? But in the bitterness of the words exchanged during their verbal battles, he and Janice were equally guilty of forgetting that they had ears, and that the boy, at least, perhaps understood much of what was said, even if it left him bewildered as to its cause.

Henry hurried across the well-kept lawn, then over the adjoining acres, trampling down the young shoots of wheat and not caring. Reaching the road, he walked fast for a mile or more, trying desperately to still the pounding in his temples. The road ended at the lake, and there he stopped.

It was early morning, and none of the young people of the neighboring resort town had put in an appearance. The boats were all tied up, and there was a quiet that Henry craved. He threw himself down under an elm whose spreading branches had kept the dew from penetrating the turf beneath it. For a while he tried not to think. But no matter how much he pressed his fists against his forehead, he could not blot out his thoughts.

Finally, he sat up and leaned against the trunk of the tree, his eyes looking unseeingly at the beauty of his surroundings. The sun came out. The surface of the lake was so smooth it mirrored perfectly the branching trees and the outlines of the anchored boats. The trills of song sparrows cut across his turbulent thoughts. But even their song was irritating to him in his present state of mind.

How long he sat there he did not know, for he had left the house without his coat and without his watch.

A faint breeze springing up brought enough motion to the water to cause the boats to rock gently back and forth. The rhythmic motion had an almost hypnotic effect on him; he became more quiet and his thoughts more ordered. Why, he asked himself, couldn't life be like the quiet lake? Why? And why must he be the one to be forever caught in situations that disturbed and harrassed him? Why couldn't it be someone else? Well, Janice was to blame too. Maybe it was her fault altogether. But again, maybe not.

So engrossed was he in his thoughts that he did not notice the dark clouds banking along the far shore of the lake. When the sun-

light was completely blotted out, he looked up, startled. A chill breeze was penetrating the thin cloth of his shirt. The boats were no longer rocking gently, they were being tossed about by water which had become agitated. But they were tied up fast and would suffer no damage, he decided, as he continued to watch them.

His first impulse was to hurry home and reach it ahead of the storm. No, he said to himself, maybe a hard drenching will be good for me, and fighting the wind is better than fighting Janice.

Then something caught his eye—one of the boats was no longer rocking violently, but was drifting out into the lake, its anchoring rope torn loose. Oh, well, he thought, let it get away, it's no concern of mine. But it worried him, nevertheless. When he could no longer bear the idea of the boat being completely lost, he hurriedly untied another boat, scrambled into it, took the oars and pulled hard. It was no easy task, this fighting both wind and water. He was a strong man, but it took every ounce of his energy to get to the straying boat, which by this time was some distance away. But at long last he grasped its dangling rope, secured it to his own boat and started back.

All at once the rain came down in drenching torrents. It offered a new challenge and he welcomed the downpour. It gave him a feeling of zest and adventure. The rain beat down on his bare head so hard there was a feeling of distinct physical pain. But he felt exultant and almost wanted to laugh out loud. The way back didn't seem nearly as long as it actually was.

When he reached the pier, he tied up both boats, then stood absolutely motionless, letting the storm continue to beat on him. He drew in a long breath slowly. It ended in an audible gasp. He decided then he'd better go home.

Feeling utterly spent, he started to trudge along the way. His water-soaked shoes slowed his pace, so there was plenty of time to do some clear thinking. The boat, yes, the boat drifting out into danger all because it wasn't anchored. That's just it, things should be moored so they couldn't possibly tear loose. Tear loose, he thought. Funny, but that sounds like me. That's what I did. Just tore loose. And why? I don't know—maybe I didn't have an anchor. Good heavens, he said to himself, I do have an anchor. I have two anchors . . . there's little Jim . . . and baby Sally. Poor little youngsters! Why, they are important! I'd better not forget that again.

When he reached his house he went to the back door and opened it. He was dripping wet, his long hair plastered down over his forehead. I'm not a pretty sight, he thought, as he looked toward the kitchen sink where his wife was busy. She had her back to him, and although she must have heard the door open, she did not turn around.

Neither did she look up as he crossed the floor of the kitchen and stood directly beside her.

He called her by name—then she looked up at him. Her eyes were dull and expressionless and didn't seem to take in his sodden appearance. Again he called her by name and smiled. "It won't happen again," he told her, "I promise you. I've had time to do plenty of thinking and it shouldn't be too hard to keep my balance from now on. Help me, won't you?"

The look of joy that sprang into his wife's eyes, and her answering smile as she threw her arms around his wet shoulders, were evidence enough that she understood and was willing to try!

The Flat Tire

Jack Nieff

IN the morning they drove to the train in silence, and when Joe got out of the car he made no attempt to kiss her. "See you tonight," he said and walked away. Jane slid over behind the wheel and backed the convertible out of the station parking space viciously, her mind still busy with the previous evening. She remembered every bit of it, word for word, scene for scene.

It had really started when the Blakes arrived for dinner and brought with them a stranger named Marion Todd, an old friend of Helen's who had dropped by late in the afternoon. Helen said, "I called about six but you weren't in, Jane, but I knew you wouldn't mind." She laughed. "Marion eats hardly anything at all."

Jane looked at the girl and thought: "Just men." Marion was a sultry brunette with languorous eyes, a gorgeous figure and a full mouth. She wore a dress that was expediently cut two inches too low. "I hope you're not angry," she said in a husky voice, "but Helen insisted." Then she sank into a deep chair and crossed her long, lovely legs. Joe's eyes bulged.

Marion Todd, it was soon evident, approved highly of Joe. Her eyes left him only occasionally, and she laughed throatily at every limp witticism he uttered.

Jane could understand the girl's preoccupation with Joe without being enthusiastic about it, for Ed Blake was short and pear-shaped and a complete bore. Joe, damn him, still looked like the good half-back he had once been.

There were drinks after dinner, of course, and Marion found the stack of new records for the player. Politely enough Joe asked her to dance, and after thirty seconds Jane bitterly admitted that they