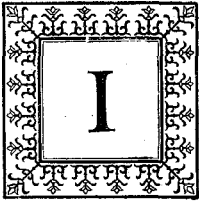


The Path-Treader

BY VIRGINIA CLEAVER BACON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALICE HARVEY



SUPPOSE, after all, it is people like Emily Briggs who keep the world going. People, I mean, who live by the rules and do things the way their folks have always done

them. So many senseless things and stupid and cruel and funny things have to be done every day, just to make life move along. And it is Emily and her kind that hold the rest from going off at a tangent and upsetting it all. Path-treaders they are, and not trail-breakers, but they keep down the weeds and make the landscape tidy. Not that Emily wasn't rather more so. She was little and frail, with a sort of gray-and-pink prettiness; but she was set in her ways, and she had never in her life done a thing that was even unusual.

Never, that is, until she insisted on Ted's funeral, and that only seemed unusual because people didn't understand how Emily's mind worked. When other Amity mothers lost their sons, there were always funerals in the Presbyterian church, with a tolling bell and white camellia gates-ajar sent from Isaac Hessel's greenhouse, and the mourners sat in the second pew while Mr. Minnett preached a sermon meant to comfort them. Then it was done, and life went on in its regular way. Not that they were comforted, but living was resumed; the window-blinds were up, visitors rang the front-door bell, and the mothers walked along Main Street on their way to the post-office and Simpson's store.

With Ted's body adrift somewhere in the slow wash of the China seas, with nothing to punctuate her days and nights of weeping, how could little Emily Briggs get into life again? She had to have the funeral. It was her only way back to normality. I don't suppose I would have

seen that any more than the rest did, but Jane Piper understood the minute Emily told her; and if Jane and Emily both wanted to have a funeral, nobody was going to stop them, no matter how queer it seemed to most Amity folks.

I was clicking away at my typewriter and Jane was posting her books when the news came. She always stood, straight and trig, and never seemed to be tired or flurried. We were both busy, for though Amity is a small town, yet Simpson's is the only good store, and then there are three branch stores back in the mountain towns—they were Indian trading-posts in the early days—and the office work for all of them is done at Amity. Jane had been at Simpson's since her mother died, the May Jane finished high school, eight years before, first as assistant bookkeeper and then as head, with no assistant. Henry Simpson thought a lot of Jane, and used to boast about how much she could accomplish. It never occurred to him that any one could overwork in that store.

Piggy Nellist, who clerked in the hardware, had been out late to lunch. He stuck his head in at the "Pay Bills Here" window and said, all breathless with his hurry so soon after he had eaten and with the news he had to tell:

"Ted Briggs's mother just got a cable from China he was washed overboard in a hurricane and drowned."

It is queer how fast one can think. I was thinking how disgustingly fat Piggy was, and how hard it was for him to keep from smiling, not because he was glad, but because he was excited; and how it served Ted right for flying in the face of Providence by giving up his good job in Simpson's at Clear Lake to run off to China like a silly boy; and how I could not bear to think of ocean slime over his laughing face; and all the time I was wondering what was the matter with Jane. She took the ledger she was work-

ing on and shut it and beat on it softly with her brown fist. All the color drained out of her face till even her lips looked like milk. I heard Piggy snuffle and knew he was watching her too.

"Stella," she said, "I must go to his mother. I must go now." Her voice was hard and tight and very quiet. Before I could think of a thing to say, she had gone out the door.

"Well," marvelled Piggy, "what made Jane act like that, I wonder."

"I wonder," I snubbed him, "if you haven't been away from the hardware about an hour and a half." But it did seem odd to me. There wasn't any reason for it. Of course, Ted and Jane had been in high school together, and when he came back from college they might have played around a bit before he went to war as our boys and girls do. John and I lived in San Francisco after we were married, and I didn't know much about what went on at Amity. But I was a widow, back in my old job at Simpson's for months before Ted was demobilized. Though Jane was five years younger than I, still we had always been friends. It made it easier to come back to have her there. All that year she and the two high-school teachers and I tramped through the redwoods and hunted mushrooms on the hills, and drove a battered Ford back to the mountains on fishing trips. Jane wrote Ted army letters. Emily asked her to, I know. She even asked me. She was so afraid Ted might get entangled with some French girl. But no one ever thought Jane and Ted might care specially about each other. Jane was a woman's woman, and Ted—well, he was a woman's man.

When Ted came back I did see Jane with him a few times, but what girl in that crowd wasn't with him? I don't believe she ever missed a Sunday trip with us. Almost right away Ted was promoted from the store to be manager of the branch at Clear Lake, and he hardly ever came to Amity. Emily talked of moving there when she could find a renter without any children or pets. Jane did say always how good Ted's store reports were when they came in, but that was natural enough when we'd all gone to school together.

But though I had never before seen anybody look as Jane did while Piggy and I watched her, I knew how it felt to feel the way she looked. It's not likely I will ever forget that first minute after I tore open my official telegram. If I had not been so busy all afternoon that my brain had only half worked, I never could have persuaded myself that Jane was merely sorry for poor Emily Briggs. Yet that was what I was thinking when I went around the path through Emily's dahlias at six o'clock. Jane always was passionate in her pity, so I had that excuse.

A red-eyed, shaky Emily met me at the kitchen door. The neighbors had all gone because it was supper-time. I hugged her since I didn't know what else to do. Pretty soon she wiped her tears away and tried to steady her chin.

"Come on in to poor Janey," she said.

"To Jane?"

"Yes. Stella, she and Ted were engaged. I wish they had told me before, but it is such a comfort to have her now."

There wasn't much to say to Jane, and I'm not the talking kind. I was hurt that she hadn't told me before, but I hope I wasn't selfish enough to let that show. None of it seemed in the least like Jane, but you don't have to understand your friends to love them.

My second surprise was next morning. Henry Simpson came in the office to tell me Jane wouldn't be at the store.

"It's inconvenient, of course," he said, "but under the circumstances——"

"She and Ted were engaged," I interrupted. He evidently resented the defence which I hadn't meant to be in my voice.

"She told me that before he went away," he said dryly. "I wonder—if she and his mother want any dry-goods from the store, we'll make a cost price to them. I called there yesterday, but I could hardly mention it. Will you let them know, tactfully, of course." Now, why had she told Henry Simpson, of all people?

When I went around at noon Jane asked me about the funeral. That was Thursday and Emily wanted it Saturday afternoon. By then Mr. Balcomb could set up a granite slab in Ted's memory beside his father's grave. Well, I wasn't going to argue with Jane, and I could see



Drawn by Alice Harvey.

"Ted Briggs's mother just got a cable from China he was washed overboard in a hurricane and drowned."—Page 187.

what she meant about how necessary it was for Emily. So I promised everything she asked me to promise about helping. Only, when I was picking out a black sailor for her and watching Ella measure the length of a crêpe veil, I hated doing it. Mourning wasn't like Jane. Emily would wrap herself in black and be broken by grief, but Jane took blows standing. I did not want her wide gray eyes and her sun-browned cheeks hidden behind a black veil.

I arranged the flowers at the church. The undertaker usually does that, but while a funeral without a corpse was just possible, they couldn't have an undertaker, could they? Even Emily saw that. Everybody sent flowers. We do, always. The *Amity Banner* on Friday had a black-rimmed insert, and bouquets came from Clear Lake and Paul's Crossing and Sequoia and all along the line. The church smelled sweet and sticky. I wanted to get away to Pebble Beach in the Ford and tramp up and down in the sand. Though Jane had not said so, I felt sure she would like that too, and it would be better for her than sitting in the second pew by Emily Briggs while Mr. Minnett droned about the ways of a mysterious Providence and the choir sang Emily's favorite sad hymns. No one knew whether Ted had had a favorite hymn, though I guess there were plenty of people who could have said which was his favorite one-step.

Mrs. Briggs and Jane came in while the bell was counting those twenty-six dreadful strokes. Jane held her head high as they walked down the aisle, but when they passed me I could see through her veil that her cheeks were fiery red. I was afraid she had a fever, for the color burned down her neck and over her throat. Emily, little and frail, leaned on Jane's arm, and Emily's cousin Sam followed them. As they were seated the bell stopped, and just as the choir stirred I heard the chugging of a motor.

There was a movement back at the door, and I knew something was happening that I must not turn around to see. Some one was sobbing back there, but that was not all. I couldn't turn. And then I did. Down the aisle, crying into her black-bordered handkerchief and leaning on her mother's arm, came May-

belle Pratt from Clear Lake, draped like a widow in yards upon yards of black crêpe! They went to the second pew and squeezed in beside Sam. The choir, which seemed almost to have been waiting, began "Rock of Ages," and Maybelle collapsed on her mother's shoulder.

In Amity, if you are tolerant in your judgments of people, you feel vastly broad-minded and superior to your neighbors, except for the times when you are uncomfortably wondering whether maybe you are not merely more slack in your moral standards than they are. I had belonged to the camp that said "poor Maybelle" instead of "that Maybelle Pratt," but I went over to the other side that evening. I only wished the group on my front porch had more tales to tell, more follies to remember. Such a thing to have had happen! It was bad enough for Emily, but think of Jane! For my part, if Ted Briggs had been engaged to them both, if he had been faithless to a woman like Jane, a square, honest-to-goodness woman, I was glad his body was awash somewhere in the long, slow swells of the China seas. Are the China seas like that? I had the picture in my mind and couldn't get it out.

When Jane came back to Simpson's on Monday, I knew straight off she didn't mean to discuss it with any one. And I wasn't forcing any confidences from her. She had a perfect right not to tell me her affairs, of course, even if she did tell Henry Simpson. Only it was just too strange—honest, outspoken Jane, of all people, with a secret love affair!

I suppose she thought one girl in mourning for Ted was enough, for she didn't wear black, but she had Ted's fraternity ring on her finger. I was so glad to see it that I was ashamed. Of course I knew Jane. I grew up with her; I had worked with her and played with her. We had built camp-fires together in the rain, and had figured inventories till after midnight. I knew what Jane was like. But that ring was an answer to everything Maybelle and her mother might say. They did do a lot of wild talking, but no one of any consequence ever listened to them. Maybelle had gone to see Emily the evening after the funeral. Emily didn't tell any one exactly what happened, but Maybelle never went back.



Drawn by Alice Harvey.

Down the aisle, crying into her black-bordered handkerchief, came Maybelle Pratt, draped like a widow in yards upon yards of black cr pe!—Page 190.

We all understood that Emily thought that Maybelle expected to get a lot of sympathy and attention by her dramatic entrance. She never dreamed Ted had a real sweetheart, and so she had not expected to need any proofs for her story. That was all the sense she and her mother had. She did not have even a scrap of a note to prove that Ted had made love to her. He had been at her house, of course. There were half a dozen other young chaps who thought it fun to hang around the Pratt house in Clear Lake and flirt with Maybelle and her silly mother. Mrs. Pratt was one of those women who say they are more like a sister than a mother to their little girls.

Maybelle couldn't even keep up her pose of mourning for Ted. In less than a month she had a black-and-white sport outfit for the Farmers' Picnic, and she went to the Labor Day ball in a water-melon-pink dress. We all smiled, and looked down our noses, when we told each other that. I got over hating Ted. It had all been a bluff of Maybelle's. Ted always had a streak of good sense under his foolishness. No sensible man would have wanted to marry Maybelle, especially not when he could have Jane. That didn't explain why he ran away to China—or did it? Emily said he went because he could make money so much faster there, and that Jane knew he was going. She seemed not to mind that she didn't know, if Jane did. Well, it was hard for the boys to settle down after the war, and I guess if Ted wanted to go the only way was not to tell Emily beforehand. He couldn't have forgotten the scene before he went to France. But still, why didn't he write to her when he got to China? If Jane knew about it—it was just queer. Maybe he had written to Emily, but I thought not.

Jane and I were very close that fall. The high-school teachers didn't come back and we did not take up with any one else. We piled extra robes in the back seat of the Ford and drove over to the beach on the white, foggy nights, and made little driftwood fires to sit by while we listened to the surf. I knew it was good for Jane. She did not talk about Ted, but I had not talked much about John either. The ocean is so old and so big and has seen so many human sorrows.

I don't know why that comforts one, but it does.

I could have done with more of Jane than I had, though. So much of the time she was at Emily's, and then Emily took to worrying if we went when it was raining, or even when the roads were wet and she thought the car might skid. Jane never seemed to think Emily was preposterous. She loved humoring her. That was just Jane. She always loved the people who leaned on her. Once she told me that Emily was too little to be hurt.

About Thanksgiving Maybelle and her mother made another climax by marrying a truck-driver who had been working on the highway, and going off to Texas with him. That is, Maybelle did the marrying and they both did the going. I was so glad to have them gone that I did not even worry when Ella Aimes said he looked like a married man and probably had a wife and several children somewhere.

Jane wasn't like herself. She jumped when you spoke to her; she was getting thin, and had permanent blue shadows under her gray eyes. Ted's ring used to slip round on her finger and turn the emblem inside. Once or twice when Maybelle was in the store I saw Jane's hands shaking. I thought she seemed gayer the day Maybelle's wedding was in the *Banner*, though of course I didn't mention it to her.

I don't mind the rain in Amity, and a great, clean wind off the ocean and through the redwoods blows into my very soul and cleans the cobwebs out. But when they come together, rain and west wind, I build up my fire and stay at home. That is, I do if the rain and the west wind come on Sunday, and I do not have to fight my way down to Simpson's. I was really glad when the first Sunday in December turned out like that. Nobody would come in, and I would have a chance to be intimate with my own living-room.

When the telephone rang the wires were singing so I could hardly understand what Emily Briggs was trying to tell me. But I heard enough to send me racing into my oldest dress and my rain-coat and southwester. When I got to Emily's I went round to the kitchen. No matter



In less than a month, she had a black-and-white sport outfit for the Farmers' Picnic.—Page 192.

what had happened, no need to drip a puddle on her parlor floor. She was trying to make me some tea. In spite of a lifetime at Amity, Emily still thinks it is dangerous to get wet. The telegram was on the table and she pointed to it, so I picked it up.

"Will be home tonight tell May Bell. Ted."

Telegrams are odious things. Jumbled words on hideous yellow paper, striking

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the sun out of the sky. Even if they bring good news they do it grudgingly, discourteously. When I realized what this one was saying, I hated every word of it. If Ted Briggs was coming back to life just to send messages to Maybelle Pratt, I wished he had stayed dead!

But there stood Emily, frail and wavering as a wisp of smoke, with all the pink gone out of her grayness. So I did remember that, after all, Ted was her only son, and went over and took the kettle away from her and let her cry in my arms

till I got her all wet from my rain-coat. But when we had her wiped off and the coat hung up it was plain enough that even her happiness was tinged with uneasiness.

"It looks as if Maybelle wasn't lying," I said.

"Well, no. They were engaged in a way. She had a letter from him, asking her to come and tell me. She brought it here."

"She brought it to you, you mean?"

"Yes, after the funeral. He only wrote one, from San Francisco. Said sometime he would explain to her why he couldn't write any more for a while. She was to bring it to me right after he left, but she didn't. I suppose she was afraid I'd watch her goings-on if she did."

"But, Emily, what happened?"

"I burned it. I read it and threw it in the fireplace. She was across the room and couldn't get it out."

"How could you?"

"Why, of course I could! I had to have some consideration for Janey, didn't I? Maybelle would have made a regular scandal with that letter."

Well, people like Emily Briggs do keep the affairs of life in their decent channels. But what magnificent criminals they would make if their bent were otherwise! I could only ask, meekly:

"And now?"

"Now everything will be all right. Maybelle is married and gone. Jane doesn't know about Maybelle, and she and Ted are engaged. Do you know, Stella, it began to comfort me the minute Henry Simpson told me that?"

"Was it Henry who told you? I thought Jane did."

"Well, of course, it was both of them. Henry was here when Jane came in. He mentioned it first. Of course, she had come straight to tell me." Of course she had. I remembered how she said she must go to Emily at once.

Jane didn't have a telephone, and Emily could not go out in a storm like that. She would have blown away. So I had to go to Jane's with the news. I did not hurry. I even went the long way round in spite of the storm, and stopped to look in her post-office box to see whether she had a letter. Emily Briggs would burn that telegram too, but was

I going to be clever enough to keep Jane from knowing that it had had two parts?

Well, I blurted the news in the first part right out in the hall. I guess I never broke anything but crockery. And for a moment Jane's face showed what perfect, holy joy looks like. Jane is not pretty, just good to look at, but she was transfigured. Why, God might have looked like that when he knew the world was redeemed! Then she blushed, a burning red in her cheeks that spread to her forehead and down on her neck and throat. I had known Jane all her life and I had never seen her blush like that—except when I looked through her veil at Ted's funeral. She dragged me up the hall to her room.

"Stella, I must leave town right away. I'll take the 4.15."

"Why?" I knew, but I told myself I did not.

"Why? Because I'd die if I were to have to see Ted Briggs. I've lied all along, Stell. I don't ask you to understand. There isn't anything to understand, except that we never were engaged and Ted never wanted us to be. You can tell everybody that. Do help me get my things packed now, everything, for I'm never coming back to Amity."

"I'll help you, of course, Jane," I said, "and I don't know a thing about all this. But I know you, and I know that whatever you have done is all right."

"No, I'm a liar. Everybody must know that now. But there's just one other thing I want you to know. Whatever this does to me, I thank God Ted's alive. I never want to see him as long as I live, but any kind of a world is better with him in it. You'd understand that, Stella, more than any one." We were both crying then, so we stopped talking and went to packing.

Jane left her trunks in her room for me to send later, and I helped her carry her suit-case to the station. Just as the train came in she said:

"I did try to tell Mrs. Briggs sometimes, but she always stopped me. Without knowing it, of course." I didn't go back to Emily's. She was little, but I had my doubts about the frailty. Anyhow, joy wasn't going to kill her. I went home and got John's picture and sat by my cold stove. After a while I tele-

phoned to Emily that Jane had gone to San Francisco.

"But Ted is coming home. Their trains will pass!"

"Yes," I said, "they will." Then I hung up and stuck the oven-cloth in back of the bells.

It was past ten when I let Ted in. He was stiff and embarrassed, and so was I. We talked like strangers—old Ted, who had been at my first party and was come back from the dead! I questioned and he half explained. A drifting sampan and then a tramp sailing-vessel and an illness; but he broke off the tale in the middle.

"Tell me, Stella, why did Jane Piper go away?"

"She said it was because she never wanted to see you again." I was glad at his hot flush.

"After all she's had to do for me, it is no wonder. But I wish she could have stood the sight of me for a month or two. Do you know how she saved me? No, I suppose she wouldn't tell even you. She hadn't told mother. Can you stand me long enough to listen?" For all his twenty-six years, he was the slender, handsome boy I had known in high school. And his voice was hurt and a little bitter.

"Ted, of course I'm glad to have you safe. There's so much I can't understand, and I love Jane. But I want you to tell me about it."

"I love Jane too. Who wouldn't? Well, it won't take long. I rotted around at Clear Lake and stole six hundred dollars from the store. Jane found it out. I'd messed an attempt to fix the accounts. So she sent for me. She didn't preach. She just said we were old friends and she was going to help me. That surely made me see the sort of thing I was. She wanted to lend me the money to pay back. There was one thing I wasn't low enough to do, to save mother or any other reason, and that was let Jane mess with her books. So she said she'd see Henry Simpson and fix it for me. She did, only he wouldn't talk to me. Just stipulated I had to get out. I met him as I came from the train to-night. He thought he was seeing a ghost. Then he came to, and talked a lot. Said he was free to say he had refused to overlook my

fault till he found out it meant Jane's happiness, but that that was all past now. Hinted I might come back to the store. Made a regular oration there on the corner in the rain. She didn't tell me how she got me off, but you see she had to let Henry think we were engaged. I had a chance in China—fellow I knew in France. I didn't have any security to give Jane, but I made her keep my frat ring because it stood for decent things I'd no right to till I paid her. Guess that's all, except that I have her money for her in a bank in China."

"And Maybelle?" I had to ask, I so wanted to know.

"I had made love to her just before the smash-up. And I couldn't break it off, but after that talk with Jane—well, I knew what a real woman was. I couldn't go on writing to Maybelle feeling like that, so I tried to send her to mother, because I knew she'd likely get into trouble if no one looked out for her. After the accident I felt I might as well brace up and stand by her if she wanted me. No good of my thinking of Jane."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Mother's told me how Henry put Jane in the hole. I suppose she didn't dare tell anybody she didn't love me, for fear he'd tell what I'd done. Now that I'm back and she's gone, all the town will be blabbing. Too bad that damn sampan came. But I'll go after her as soon as you tell me where she is, and get her to come home and put up with me for a little while. Then she can jilt me so hard all Amity will know about it, and I'll go back to China."

I don't want to be a meddling old woman. I don't even want to be a path-treader. But I saw Jane when Piggy's message came, and I knew how she felt; and I had seen her that day in the hall, though I can never know how joy like that feels, and I couldn't let Ted go to her with that proposition, now could I? So I said:

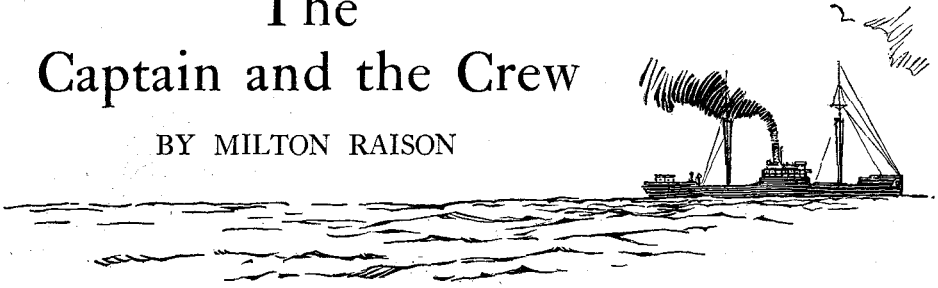
"Ted, I don't believe Jane will want to jilt you." He stood straight up, and though his cap was on the floor, his gesture seemed to sweep it from his head.

"Stella, it's not possible you are right, but if you are, God's blessing on that Chink sampan!"

Then I got him Jane's address.

The Captain and the Crew

BY MILTON RAISON



THE CAPTAIN

The captain was a silent man
Who never said an extra word,
He'd watch the sea for quite a span,
Nor let himself be heard.

It's queer that such a man as he
Should find himself so strange a friend,
And be companion of a sea
That talked without an end.



THE CHIEF STEWARD

The seamen hated him because
He sent back aft the rotten meat,
And all the half-cooked food there was
The passengers refused to eat.

So since he wasn't fit to live,
And anxious for the common weal—
They threw him overboard to give
The sharks, at least, a decent meal.



THE MESSBOY

He had contempt that was divine,
For every sailor that he fed,
For while they talked of girls and wine—
He read.

For while they lived the pain and strife
Their dull imagination brooks,
He could appreciate their life
In books.

He washed the dishes, made the bed,
And did their errands with fair grace,
Nor could their insults on his head
Erase

That fine, immobile pride of his
Which brushed against their baser sod,
And was as different as a kiss
Of God.