

The Blessed Spot

BY ANNA V. HUEY

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HAROLD DENISON



RS. PARKER presided over the breakfast-table, her plump hands hovering about the percolator, and her solicitous glance alternating between her husband and Grace Ann. To cajole her daughter's elusive appetite, and to surprise Edward with the muffins he liked best, were joys that made her placid face luminous. Mr. Parker's emptied cup had scarcely touched the saucer before she reached for it.

"Well, daddy, what's the news this morning?"

"The usual thing." Mr. Parker folded his out-of-town paper gravely. "A number of young people caught in the weekend raids. Some of them from good families, too."

Mrs. Parker made a clicking noise against her teeth.

"Reverend Bridges was saying, just yesterday, that if all homes were like—well—like ours, such sad things wouldn't happen to young people."

"Pass the muffins, please, mama." Grace Ann lifted her eyes sweetly to her mother's face. They were large, pale eyes, like Mrs. Parker's own. Her red lips, at once soft and wilful, and her curling yellow hair, were part of a young girl's prettiness which Mrs. Parker had once shared.

"Don't forget to eat your egg, dear. He says we haven't any idea of what goes on, living in a quiet place like this."

"Well, it's bad; but some ministers worry more than they need to." Mr. Parker pressed his lips together in a judicial manner. "I think Bridges is one of them."

"Why, Edward!" Mrs. Parker was mildly reproachful. "It's because he knows. He was right about Nan Morgan before the rest of us even guessed."

Involuntarily the Parkers looked at Grace Ann.

"Nan's working, mama. I saw her at the 'Five and Ten,' yesterday."

They noted with relief that she spoke carelessly.

"That's good. It won't be so hard for you to avoid her then—without hurting her feelings, I mean."

"No, mama."

There was silence, a moment too long, and Mr. Parker broke it with jovial intent.

"Well, girls, what's the plot for today?"

"The Ladies' Aid meets this afternoon, Edward."

"School for you, of course, baby. How about a movie to-night?"

Grace Ann looked up quickly.

"I can't, daddy." Then because her voice sounded too vehement in her own ears, she added mildly: "I've got to go to the library to-night to look up stuff. Excuse me, please, mama. I've got to hurry."

She slipped about the table noiselessly, her hair making a bright curtain as she bent to kiss her mother.

"Right on the bald spot, daddy."

Before he could reach her she was gone.

"Too-de-loo," she called from the doorway. "You always forget, daddy. You must say Pip-pip."

"Pip-pip," repeated Mr. Parker obediently.

She waved gaily and disappeared down the hall.

"I was sorry I mentioned the Morgan girl." Mrs. Parker's eyes filled with tears. It always happened in moments of strain, as in the sad scenes at the movies. "Grace Ann liked her so much. Of course we all did."

"It couldn't be helped, mother." Her husband rose and stretched comfortably. "Why, you haven't finished your coffee."

"I thought I'd take it on the porch." Mrs. Parker was faintly apologetic.

"That's a good idea."

His spare figure preceded her ample one down the hallway. The vine-shaded porch was cool and restful and he lingered a moment beside his wife's chair.

"Kinda hate to go," he said. "I won't be home this noon. Kiwanis luncheon, you know."

"That's so. Well, come home as early as you can."

"Sure thing." He bent and kissed her smooth forehead.

Mrs. Parker smiled as he moved reluctantly down the steps. She held her coffee untouched so that when he waved at the gate she could wave back.

When she put the emptied cup beside her chair she rocked for several minutes, a long rhythmic movement that sprang from the balls of her feet. It filled her with a pleasant sense of guilt to sit idly at this time in the morning. She could hear Molly moving about in the house, rattling the silver, and humming in a soft husky way.

Mellow, early summer sunshine filled the street, and all the shadows pointed away from her. Her eyes rested proudly on the lawn, rich and green, with flower borders and cement walks. She knew just how her house looked from the gate, its white, wooden pillars and green shutters showing through the trees. How much she had to be proud of; Edward's factory, with his name in electric lights; his position in town—why they wanted him to be mayor, now; and of course there was Grace Ann.

Her mind drifted pleasantly down the list, ready to enlarge on any part of it; but she roused herself with an effort. This was no time for just thinking, when there was so much to be done. Molly was a good girl; but she needed watching. Besides, she had planned to make a sponge-cake for Edward and Grace Ann.

Time, as always, flew for Mrs. Parker. For a few minutes in the afternoon she even thought she could not make the Ladies' Aid; but she did. There were just minutes enough to hurry into her sprigged dimity dress, adjust her hat with its wavy gray plumes, and pin her

coral brooch at her throat. The cake was out of the oven and she would be back in time to frost it for supper.

The great trees which lined the street leaned across it to touch each other in a friendly way. Mrs. Parker enjoyed their shade; but she would have enjoyed it more if she had not been persistently accompanied by a picture of Grace Ann in a hot schoolroom, and Edward in an airless office. They were always in her mind. Even when the reports were read at the Aid, she was thinking of them.

After the meeting, there were refreshments, and pleasant chatting among the ladies. In the best of spirits Mrs. Parker started home, so happily preoccupied that she almost ran into a young couple who were sauntering past her house.

It was the Morgan girl, walking with a boy. Red hair under a gay sport hat, skirts that danced far, far above slim ankles, an impudent laughing voice, and eyes that sought her own, boldly!

Mrs. Parker reddened and said, "How do you do," in a breathless fashion.

The Morgan girl said, "Hello, Mrs. Parker," in a jaunty, amused way; and they passed on.

Mrs. Parker was shaken. She was indignant; but even more she was shaken. The girl's manner was flaunting, intolerable! Ever since she had broken off Grace Ann's friendship with her it had been that way. She had done the right thing, though. Every one assured her of that. She couldn't let Grace Ann go with a girl who was said to be "fast."

When she turned in at the gate the familiarity of her own things reached down and enveloped her. No one in town had such luck with flowers as she had. The smell of freshly turned earth greeted her, of mown grass and honeysuckle. The peaceful loveliness of it claimed her, wiping the disturbing encounter from her mind.

Before the mirror in the hall Mrs. Parker stopped to take off her hat. Her hair, touched with gray, was parted and smoothly brushed; her face, plump and pink, looked back from contented eyes. The years had lined it happily, even where they deepened the corners of her soft, uncertain mouth. When she started to the kitchen she walked lightly, for so

large a woman, suggesting a comfortable abundance rather than overweight.

"Hello, Miz Pakah." Molly beamed her welcome. "Aigs is on the table foh you."

Mrs. Parker tied a white apron about her waist and set capably to work. She moved with nice precision, a heritage of the first ten years of her married life, when she had done all the cooking. That was past now, for the fortunes of the shoe factory no longer fluctuated. Still there were few days in which she did not prepare some favorite dish. It was Mr. Parker's boast that no one could fool him on "mother's cooking," and Mrs. Parker's joy that this was undeniably true.

The front door-bell rang loudly.

"Some one foh you," announced Molly. "I tole him you was busy but he sez he'll wait."

"Oh, dear! This syrup's about to hair. Watch it carefully, Molly. If it's a book agent, I'll settle him."

As she passed through the dining-room Mrs. Parker stopped to straighten the silver at her husband's place. The napkins were the wrong ones! With so much to see to she certainly had no time for agents. At the farther end of the hall stood a man, and she walked toward him determinedly.

"Did you want to see me?"

"The lady of the house? Why—yes——"

The voice broke off and Mrs. Parker stopped. All the placid prettiness fled from her startled face.

The man's face changed, too. He was a little man with full red lips and quick, incredulous eyes. For a moment his expression wavered between surprise and uncertainty, then it slipped into habitual assurance.

"Well, well! Louella Johnson—" He held out his hand, and like a person under a spell Mrs. Parker put out hers. A soft moist palm closed about it. Her knees seemed made of water and she reached for a chair to steady herself.

"Why—Monty—I never thought I'd see you—here." The climbing vine on the wall-paper, the hall-tree with Edward's coat and Grace Ann's other hat, the shining curve of the banister, all turned strange. A background for Monty's face.

"Well, I sure didn't know you was the lady of the house. Say— You haven't changed much. Married?"

"Yes."

He still wore the yellow diamond flashing in the lion's jaw. The derby in his hand was brown, and his suit was brown, too; sharply familiar, like something taken from an old trunk.

"Nice place you got here." His voice rode smoothly on the shivering silence. "Whose your husband?"

"Edward Parker."

"Shoe man?" Monty whistled. "Say—you did pretty well for yourself, didn't you?"

Mrs. Parker made a valiant effort to pull herself together. Mists of apprehension clouded her mind; but her words came mechanically.

"Come into the sitting-room, Monty, and we can talk better."

The walls marched solemnly past her as she walked down the hall. In the sitting-room she raised a heavy hand and pointed to a chair.

"Sit down, Monty, and—and tell me about yourself." Her thoughts groped desperately. Why was she so afraid? There wasn't anything to be afraid of. It wasn't like she'd ever done anything really wrong.

"Nothing much to tell, Louella. Same old round. On the road most of the time, working hard—but—well, I have my fun." His smiling gaze trapped hers. "Every once in a while I get back to the old town. Pretty dead now. You're gone—most of the old gang's gone. Say, we used to have some great times—didn't we—when you was clerking at the Five and Ten—rowing on the river nights—and goin' over to Houghten's place. But you're what's interesting me, Louella, not myself."

His words were like a too familiar touch. Mrs. Parker wet her lips.

"Well, when I went away to work I met Mr. Parker and we got married. That's seventeen years ago now. Our little girl graduates from high school this month."

His eyes seemed to take in everything—her new Wilton carpet and the parlor suite, her books, with the de luxe editions of "The World's Best Literature," and

"Stoddard's Lectures," and "Court Memoirs."

"Say—now—you're too modest. Got the best house in town, haven't you? Richest man for a husband? Everybody likes you. Church leader, I bet. Regular big toad in a little puddle stuff, huh?" Monty's laugh was smooth and rich and

"I'm afraid it won't be possible," she said steadily.

The mockery of it turned her sick. Edward might come in any minute now. She saw Monty's eyebrows rise. He knew! Still her voice went on, almost carelessly: "How long are you going to be here?"



"Say, we used to have some great times—didn't we—when you was clerking at the Five and Ten—rowing on the river nights—and goin' over to Houghten's place."—Page 714.

very wise. "Say—you're not trying to hide things from your old friend, are you?"

It was almost as if he read her mind, knew what was in it before she did.

"No, of course not." She tried to smile. "Why should I?"

"Why should you, indeed?" Monty laughed again. "Old friend drops in. Interested in your family. Wants to talk over old times." He waited, smiling. "Wants to meet the husband."

That was it! He would talk that way before Edward and Grace Ann. That was why she was afraid. For just an instant fear looked out of her eyes, stark as indecent writing on a whitewashed wall. Then her mind cleared of the mists.

"Well, I don't know." He pursed his lips as he looked at her. "I don't just know, Louella. It depends——"

"On—on business?" Her mind took a great leap as she said that. There must be some way to get rid of him. There must be!

"Yes. Business—as much as anything." Monty creased his trouser legs carefully and settled himself in the chair. "I got to sell just so much, you know."

"What are you selling?"

"Books. Say, I got the finest collection of stories and information for young people you ever laid your eyes on. A regular encyclopædia of knowledge, the equal of a college education, but written so——"

"How much are they?"

"Twenty-five dollars a set; but we make a very attractive instalment-plan offer."

Monty was carried away by his own eloquence, and as he talked Mrs. Parker's mind labored with unaccustomed speed.

"How many books do you have to sell here, Monty?"

"Well—four sets at least. I haven't placed any yet."

"Four sets." Unbelievable that this calm voice was hers! Right under her hand was Edward's pipe, and across the table was Grace Ann's sack of candy. A minute ago they would have stabbed her; but now they made her brave. They made her talk sure, and made her stiff lips smile. "I'd like to help out an old friend, Monty. I might buy four sets. I could give them away to Mr. Parker's folks. Then you wouldn't need to bother around here."

That last sentence wasn't right, too bald; but time was short. She had to be bald. Already the sun was climbing up the wall to the enlargement of Grace Ann's baby picture. It was like a halo there.

"Well, now, Louella, that's pretty nice of you." Monty's voice was deprecating and his eyelids dropped to cover his surprise. "Pretty darn generous of you. And I don't mind telling you business hasn't been extra lately. Four sets in a day. It'd be a record."

"Then you could get the 'Hummer' out to-night. It leaves at eight-twelve." This was the end of pretense.

"The 'Hummer.' Well, perhaps I might." Monty's thoughtful gaze slid from Mrs. Parker's face to the diamonds on her dimpled hands. "Yes, I suppose I could; but it occurs to me, Louella, it occurs to me that if I did so well in so short a time the boss would say why didn't you stay longer and do more! Then where'd I be?"

"Oh!" Mrs. Parker's heart skipped a beat, but her thoughts sped on. "How many sets would fix you right, Monty?"

"Six. Yes, six would sure do it."

Six sets—twenty-five dollars each—one hundred and fifty dollars; Grace Ann's graduation dress, her presents, and the party she wanted. But what were dresses, or presents, or parties—

Monty misread her silence.

"I might get by with five, Louella, if you think six is too much."

"No." Mrs. Parker shook her head.

"It's six. On one condition. You must catch the 'Hummer' out to-night, Monty. You must promise me. On your honor."

"Sure thing."

They looked, unsmiling, into each other's eyes. A wave of sentiment rolled over Monty and he blew his nose violently. "You always was a good kid, Louella. I wouldn't take this—this order—from you if business weren't so darn bad."

"You wait and I'll get the money."

Mrs. Parker's tone was as crisp as her muslin dress. Only one thing mattered—to be rid of him. She fairly flew up-stairs to her dresser. There it was, Grace Ann's graduation money.

Monty was waiting in the hall and she pressed the roll of bills into his hand.

"A hundred and fifty dollars," she said breathlessly.

"Thanks. Bein' as it's you, I don't even count them."

"No; but please go."

"You betcha. Don't worry."

"You'll get the 'Hummer' to-night?"

"Sure thing." Monty hesitated. "This ain't my territory any more, so you likely won't see me again."

Mrs. Parker closed the door behind him and leaned against it. The wall-paper, the hat-rack, and the banisters swam together before her eyes.

"Well, Miz Pakah, fer goodness' sake, what's a matter?" Molly came down the hallway and stopped short. "You is pale ez a ghost."

"It's nothing, Molly." Slowly the blur resolved itself to the outlines of her own things. "Just a light spell."

The hall-clock struck half past five. Mrs. Parker drew a long breath and started down the hall.

"Goodness! The folks will be here soon. We'll have to hurry."

Four blocks down the street, in the public library, another clock chimed the half-hour. Grace Ann Parker looked at it with a little frown. She sat before it with her slim feet twisted about the rungs of a chair and her yellow head bent over a book. Beside her sat another girl, with

red bobbed hair and dancing eyes. Under the clock a sign said SILENCE, in large black letters.

"Don't be a quitter, Grace." The red-haired girl's lips scarcely moved.

"But I've worked this library stuff till I'm scared." Grace Ann raised her book to a more concealing angle.

"But to-night's special, darling. You've got to manage some way. We can be back by eleven."

"Well"—Grace Ann puckered her small mouth thoughtfully—"I'll come down here and phone and tell 'em I'm going home with Lucy. Then they won't care if I'm late."

"All right. We'll meet the boys at the grand stand and go on down the river. We can have three or four dances at Bright's place, anyway."

Approaching footsteps echoed on the tile floor.

"Good night! It's daddy!" Grace Ann turned the pages of her book.

When her father stopped beside her chair, she looked up with a little start of surprise.

"Well, baby. Ready to stop for a while?"

"Yes, daddy." Grace Ann gathered up some papers, smiling at her father with childish candor.

He was thinking how pretty the two bent, girlish heads were, when Nan Morgan looked up at him, too. Her eyes were amused and unabashed; and there was something knowing about her look that made him uncomfortable. It hardened him a trifle, changing his benevolent expression to one judicial.

"Hurry up, baby."

Nan Morgan pushed back her chair noisily.

"I'm off, too, Grace Ann." Then she added, impertinently: "'By, Mr. Parker."

She did not wait for an answer; but walked out with swinging skirts, thin shoulders back, and head held high. There were two spots of angry color on her cheeks. On the front steps she met her father.

"Hello, kid." Sam Morgan stopped, somewhat uncertainly.

He was the editor of the town's struggling newspaper, almost never sober, with clothes mussed and ink-stained

hands. But his red-rimmed eyes seldom overlooked a bit of news. They rested now on Nan's face.

"S'matter? You look mad."

"Nothing," returned Nan briefly.

"What'cha look that way for? Having a fuss with some one?"

"No." She drew back a little as his breath bathed her face. "Oh, father!"

"Somebody hurt your feelin's," persisted Sam.

The door behind them swung open and the Parkers came down the steps.

"Hello." Sam Morgan tipped back on his heels significantly. "So this is it."

"Don't be a fool, father." Nan pulled her wrist away from his hand and walked down the street.

For a moment Morgan was on the verge of following her, then Grace Ann passed him. She drew aside a little as she went by and his eyes narrowed.

"What's the idea, Parker? Kinda uppity, ain't you? You and your girl?" He planted himself squarely in front of Edward Parker. "What'dja say to Nan to hurt her feelings?"

"I didn't say anything to her." Parker was indignant. "Look here, Morgan, you're not yourself."

"Not myself, huh? Dammit! That's no answer. No, siree! you can't get away with that. You whited sepulchre!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean whited sepulchre. Leading business man—rich—no use for poor devils—tryin' to be mayor and lord it over people. I'll stop that—I'll show you—"

"Wait a minute. Grace Ann, you walk on a bit. I want to talk to Mr. Morgan."

Grace Ann, scared but reluctant, obeyed. Her father waited until she had gone several yards before he continued in a lowered tone:

"See here, Morgan, this is no way to talk."

"No, I guess it ain't. No way to talk to the town boss and pillar of the church. But I know things, Parker—the deal you made with McFadden when the bank went bust. And there's other things folks in this town would like to know—when you run for mayor. Business administration—I'll tell the world."

"Wait now, Morgan. You're wrong."

Mr. Parker's voice was persuasive. "I can't explain things here, though. I'll tell you what you do. Come up to the office to-night, and we'll talk this out—just you and me—see. I've got a little business idea for you, too."

Morgan grinned and stuck a derisive thumb in Mr. Parker's chest.

"You bet I'll come. I'm a reasonable man, I am."

"All right. Eight o'clock."

"Sure. I'm a reasonable man."

Edward Parker turned away with a feeling of sick disgust. Morgan of all men! Smart, lying, drunken, willing to put anything in that dirty sheet of his. Not that he cared about being mayor; but it would hurt the folks to have anything said against him. Well, he could take care of Morgan, all right. Spend a little money for advertising. Anyway, it wouldn't be long before he'd drink himself to death. Nothing to worry about. Just something to handle the right way.

He saw Grace Ann's trim little figure walking sedately in the next block. Her curls were bobbing within their confining ribbon. Little pink and white and gold thing. Just a baby. He hurried until he caught up with her.

"Well, honey, did you get scared?"

"Sort of, daddy. I was afraid he'd hurt you."

"Not him. Men talk a lot when they're drunk. Not nice for little girls." He tucked her cool fingers in the crook of his arm. "Guess we better hurry a bit. It's getting late and mother will be worried."

"Is it? I was so busy I didn't know."

"That's good. I wouldn't like you getting chummy with the Morgan girl. People say she runs pretty wild."

"But I can't help her coming to the library, daddy."

"Of course not. I wasn't blaming you a bit. Always be nice when you see her; but—well, you understand."

"Yes, daddy."

"That's a good child." Mr. Parker patted her hand awkwardly. After a moment he added: "Maybe we better not say anything to mother about Mr. Morgan. Might worry her, you know, hearing he'd been drunk and sort of disagreeable."

Grace Ann nodded gravely. They were

nearing home now. The big, white house with green blinds stood a little apart from other houses. The lawn was bigger, the grass greener, and its great maples more thickly leaved. The windows and doors were open, hospitable; and Mrs. Parker waited at the gate to greet them.

"Well, mother." It was the beginning of a formula. So was Mrs. Parker's "Well, daddy," and Grace Ann's kiss. Then they moved slowly up the walk with Mr. Parker in the middle making a joke about his two girls.

Outwardly Mrs. Parker was smiling and placid; but inside she seemed made of jelly. If he knew, how could Edward say, "Well, mother," that way. They must never know. She wanted to pray, but it was hard to do it and keep on talking.

There was more of the formula at the supper-table.

"Well, mother, did you tell the ladies what was what?"

"It was the Ladies' Aid, Edward, and they all know what is what." She smiled across the table with pretended reproof. Wonderful that her voice did not shake; that she could smile. She served the asparagus with a steady hand. 'Help me, God,' she was thinking. 'Help me. Help me.'

"Just the same they're always making you president—Ladies' Aid—Woman's Club—everything in town it seems to me." Mr. Parker tried to put Morgan, with his sneers and threats, out of his mind; but the oddest things reminded him of them—the innocent curve of Grace Ann's chin, the way his wife's hair folded about her face. That dirty cur, trying to tell Louella and Grace Ann their daddy was a crook! Well, he'd stop that, all right!

Back and forth they talked, their words slipping easily through the grooves of habit. Between them sat Grace Ann, feeling their presence like something protecting and sheltering, but something that bound, too. They couldn't see how excited she was. If they knew what she was going to do they would be shocked and hurt. Their faces would change and they wouldn't look at her, smiling and proud, like they did now. She couldn't



Drawn by Harold Denison.

"What's the idea, Parker? Kinda uppity, ain't you? You and your girl?"—Page 717.

bear to have them change! As she thought of how dreadful it would be, she almost renounced her plan. She would stay with them every minute, forget everything in the comfort of being just Grace Ann.

"I think Grace Ann's working too hard, mother." Mr. Parker had guessed the origin of the cake, and now he smiled expansively upon his family. "You better pick her up at the library and take her to a movie. I've some business to attend to; but I might join you later."

"No, daddy. I can't go, possibly." Revolt stiffened Grace Ann. Crazy to think she could give things up. Nan would be waiting—and the boys—and the river slipping under the moonlight, lapping against the boat. Then dancing, and the ride home with long silences. Nothing could keep her! Nothing! "When I get through at the library I got to go to Lucy's and do some work."

"All right, baby. School won't last much longer now." Mrs. Parker's heart was in her throat. She would be alone for an hour. She could see the "Hummer" leave, and be sure—

Some way she got them out of the house, saw them down the steps, down the walk, and then the shade-trees hid them. She waited till eight o'clock before she herself hurried out into the summer dusk.

Across the park she went, past the grand stand, past benches filled with young people. She was only half conscious of them, meaningless voices, figures made of shadow. What had they to do with her?

It was near train time when she reached the station. Baggage was hurried forward, groups of men and women talked under the arc-lights, stray ones wandered up and down impatiently. She couldn't see Monty! The train came roaring in, long lines of lighted windows, noises, peering faces. There he was, in his brown suit and derby, a suitcase in either hand. He was climbing aboard. The train was starting.

"Oh, thank you, God," she half whispered. "Thank you!"

Jubilantly, tirelessly now, she started toward home. On the way she passed within ten feet of Grace Ann.

Grace Ann walked with a boy, her hand on his arm; and as they moved, their young shoulders touched and their talk and laughter broke. When they reached a lonely corner his arms went about her, roughly, hungrily. Through the thin summer darkness she could see his face, changed, alive. Something in her answered him, something frightened, retreating, but never withdrawing. A moment later they sauntered down to the river-bank.

At home Mrs. Parker waited for Edward. It was after ten before he came; he, too, had walked jubilantly, with the taste of victory on his lips. Only when he reached her did he realize that he was tired.

"We'll go right to bed," said Mrs. Parker firmly. "Working all day and all evening is too much."

Mr. Parker agreed, and as he lay stretched beside his wife he smiled in the darkness. It was just a question of handling it right, as he had thought. He slept heavily, and only half awakened when Grace Ann came in.

No one saw her tiptoe down the hall, her hands over her flushed cheeks, her eyes shining, starlike.

"It's just Grace Ann going to bed," said Mrs. Parker.

"That's good." His voice was indistinct with sleep. "Always like to have her in early."

Breakfast next morning was like every other breakfast. Grace Ann was fresh for school and Mr. Parker read aloud from the out-of-town paper. From behind the percolator Mrs. Parker smiled at the two of them happily. Sometimes she stopped to sniff the fragrance of honeysuckle which drifted in through the open window. It was like a benediction.

"Get your work done last night, baby?" Mr. Parker put down the paper.

"Yes, daddy." Grace Ann bent over her plate. Last night! Had it really happened? The wonder of it, and the terrifying sweetness! It seemed unreal now, like a dream. They would never know, these two beside her; and they couldn't ever understand. She was sorry for them, suddenly.

"What say we all go to a movie tonight?" Mr. Parker beamed on them

both. "Or would you rather do something else?"

"I'd like to stay home." Grace Ann's voice was soft. "I'd like to just stay home with you and mother."

The Parkers smiled at each other, knowingly.

Grace Ann jumped up. She kissed her mother, sweetly, for the pity she had felt.

"Right on the bald spot, daddy."

In the doorway she whirled. "Too-de-loo dears, and also pip-pip."

A flutter of skirts and she was gone.

"Blessed baby." Mr. Parker cleared

his throat as he followed his wife to the porch. "Going to have your coffee here?"

"Yes. It's so nice and cool."

Mr. Parker bent and kissed her.

"Come home as early as you can, dear."

"Of course." On the top step he turned. "Say, it was pretty nice, her wanting to just stay home with us."

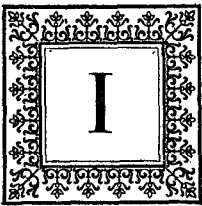
Mrs. Parker nodded and her eyes filled with sudden tears. She wiped them away to watch Edward down the walk.

At the gate he waved and she waved back. Then with a sigh of utter content she picked up her coffee.

My United States

IOWA

BY F. J. STIMSON



I was in a soft and open meadow just behind the river hills in Iowa—a country hardly twenty years earlier won from the Indians—and yet it seemed to me, a child of six, immeasurably old. The level Western sunbeams slanted through a forest to the old board house, unpainted, weather-stained—to fall on the few acres of home-grown grass, where the water came from the mossy wooden pipe, let in the hillside. The low hills encircled it, and it was quiet. MacKnight, my father told me, had long since gone away, and the farm was abandoned. High hollyhocks were in the doorway, but the wild things were already creeping in. I drank of the water, and dreamed, as a child can dream—more easily than a man, for life is still so dreamy—of who was MacKnight, and why had he gone, and had he come before the Indians. I did not know the word, romantic, but I felt the thing. The window was already gone, the roof partly fallen in, and no wreck of tower or ivied window gave me, in later days, on Rhine or Tiber, a deeper

sense of immemorial age. I remember that I hated to leave, but the night was falling.

We had twenty miles to go, with the span of black horses, through grass-grown track in forest, then along the still Maquoketa River, so different from a New England clear brown water, black and silent between its high muddy banks, beneath the giant tree-trunks that fell across it dying of old age. No one ever cut them, and so we forded the river and came through a glen between the bluffs to the outer liberties of the city, where the Indians were camped—they were Sioux—and so to the Main Street, where a regiment of soldiers were marching to the "slew" to get the ferry—they were a Minnesota regiment, my father told me, splendid men, "going to save the Union"—for the war between the States was on.

I had not yet known a time when there was not war, or talk of war, my father and my uncle Ben having conducted a vigorous conversation upon it at Detroit that very last month as we were coming home to Iowa from our summer East. The talk began at supper and continued through most of the night, as I judged from sounds below, and might conceivably have ended