

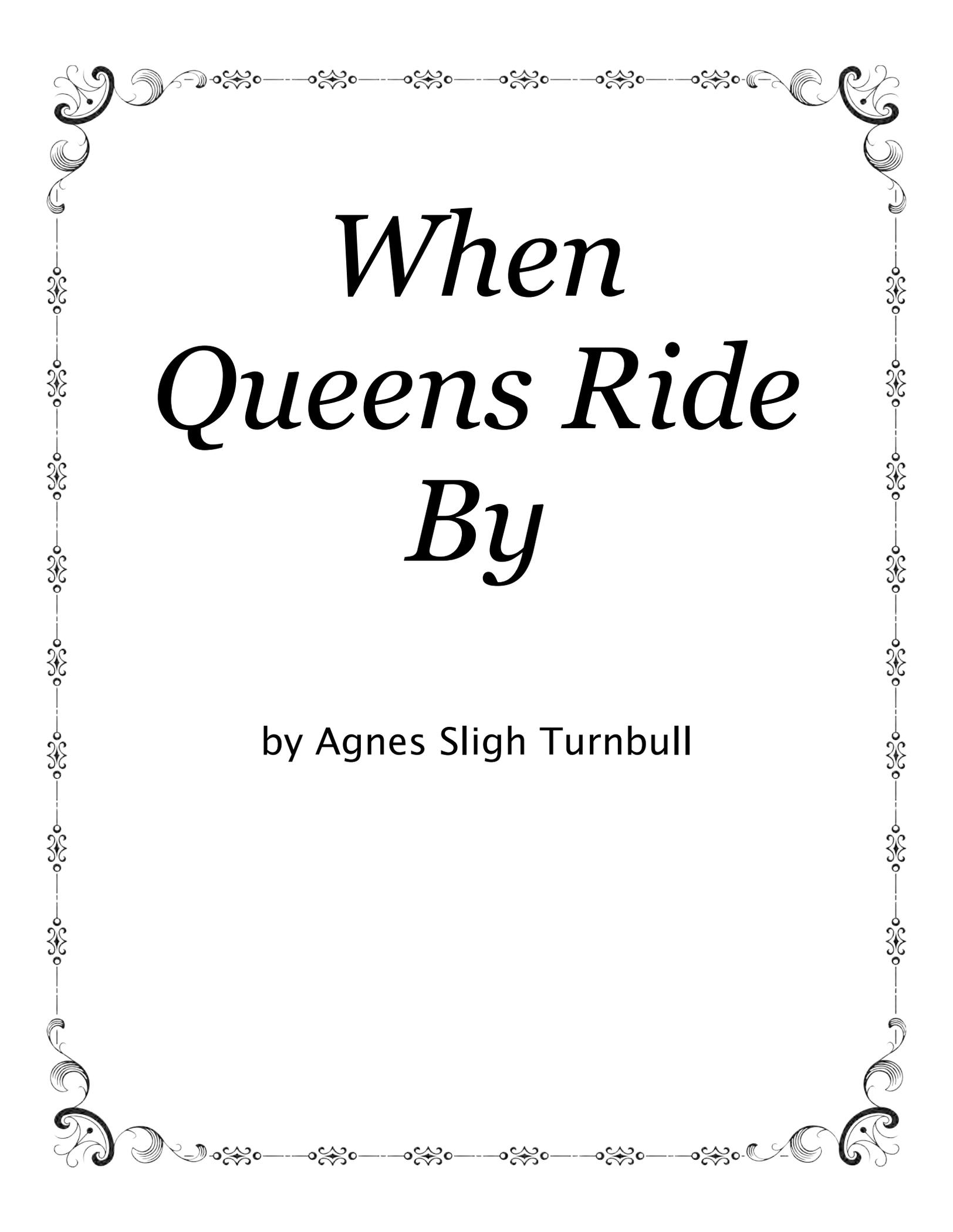


*When Queens
Ride By*

by Agnes Sligh Turnbull

Forward by Jill Cooper

LivingOnADime.com



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<http://www.livingonadime.com>

This is a wonderful, inspiring and important story that I really want to share with you. I first read this myself 30–some years ago and it has had more of an impact on my thoughts, feelings and attitudes toward being a wife, mother and homemaker than anything else in my life ever has.

Even though it was written in 1926, its basic principles can still be applied to today’s world. At first reading, it may not seem that way but I’m going to give you some things to watch for as you read it to see if you couldn’t apply them to your life today.

I get so exasperated when I hear people say “but things are so much harder and more stressful now than years ago.” That is so not true. People are the same and life is the same. That is why the Bible’s principles can still work as well today as they have for thousands of years. The basic human nature, the wants and needs are still there.

Here are some things to watch for and notice while you are reading the story. As you read, note how even though Jennie worked on the farm she had all the same things to deal with as if she were a modern woman who left to work her full time job each day.

- She couldn’t keep up with the laundry and housework
- She had to leave the kids “to their own devices” (like videos games or coming home to an empty house)
- She didn’t bother with her appearance. (Is that like wearing sweats all the time?)
- She spent time eating on the run. She didn’t have time to prepare proper meals or often didn’t feel like it.
- She felt like she had no time or relationship with her spouse.
- Jennie and her husband had a large mortgage and were at the point of losing their home.

- She constantly had feelings of self pity—making comments like, “You don’t know my situation, I have no choice”.
- She thought, “This is too hard of work for a woman,” but was convinced that if she left the job to her husband they would starve and he needed her help. She was sure that they couldn’t do it on one income.
- She had the desire for more and wanted to keep up with the Joneses.

Keep your eyes open for these things and others as you read it.
I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

–Jill

When Queens Ride By

by Agnes Sligh Turnbull, 1926

Jennie Musgrave woke at the shrill rasp of the alarm clock as she always woke—with the shuddering start and a heavy realization that the brief respite of the night's oblivion was over. She had only time to glance through the dull light at the cluttered, dusty room, before John's voice was saying sleepily as he said every morning, "All right, let's go. It doesn't seem as if we'd been in bed at all!"

Jennie dressed quickly in the clothes, none too clean, that, exhausted, she had flung from her the night before. She hurried down the back stairs, her coarse shoes clattering thickly upon the bare boards. She kindled the fire in the range and then made a hasty pretense at washing in the basin in the sink.

John strode through the kitchen and on out to the barn. There were six cows to be milked and the great cans of milk to be taken to the station for the morning train.

Jennie put coffee and bacon on the stove, and then, catching up a pail from the porch, went after John. A golden red disk broke the misty blue of the morning above the cow pasture. A sweet, fragrant breath blew from the orchard. But Jennie neither saw nor felt the beauty about her.

She glanced at the sun and thought, It's going to be a hot day. She glanced at the orchard, and her brows knit. There it hung. All that fruit. Bushels of it going to waste. Maybe she could get time that day to make some more apple butter. But the tomatoes wouldn't wait. She must pick them and get them to town today, or that would be a dead loss. After all her work, well, it would only be in a piece with everything else if it did happen so. She and John had bad luck, and they might as well make up their minds to it.

She finished her part of the milking and hurried back again to the overcooked bacon and strong coffee. The children were down, clamorous, dirty, always underfoot. Jim, the eldest, was in his first term of school. She glanced at his spotted waist. He should have a clean one. But she couldn't help it. She couldn't get the washing done last week, and when she was to get a day for it this week she didn't know, with all the picking and the trips to town to make!

Breakfast was hurried and unpalatable, a sort of grudging concession to the demands of the body. Then John left in the milk wagon for the station, and Jennie packed little Jim's lunch basket with bread and apple butter and pie, left the two little children to their own devices in the backyard, and started toward the barn. There was no time to do anything in the house. The chickens and turkeys had to be attended to, and then she must get to the tomato patch before the sun got too hot. Behind her was the orchard with its rows and rows of laden apple trees. Maybe this afternoon—maybe tomorrow morning. There were the potatoes, too, to be lifted. Too hard work for a woman. But what were you going to do? Starve? John worked till dark in the fields.

She pushed her hair back with a quick, boyish sweep of her arm and went on scattering the grain to the fowls. She remembered their eager plans when they were married, when they took over the old farm—laden with its heavy mortgage—that had been John's father's. John had been so straight of back then and so jolly. Only seven years, yet now he was stooped a little, and his brows were always drawn, as though to hide a look of ashamed failure. They had planned to have a model farm someday: blooded stock, a tractor, a new barn. And then such a home they were to make of the old stone house! Jennie's hopes had flared higher even than John's. A rug for the parlor, an overstuffed set like the one in the mail—order catalogue, linoleum for the kitchen, electric lights!

They were young and, oh, so strong! There was nothing they could not do if they only worked hard enough.

But that great faith had dwindled as the first year passed. John worked later and later in the evenings. Jennie took more and more of the heavy tasks upon her own shoulders. She often thought with some pride that no woman in the countryside ever helped her husband as she did. Even with the haying and riding the reaper. Hard, coarsening work, but she was glad to do it for John's sake.

The sad riddle of it all was that at the end of each year they were no further on. The only difference from the year before was another window shutter hanging from one hinge and another crippled wagon in the barnyard which John never had time to mend. They puzzled over it in a vague distress. And meanwhile life degenerated into a straining, hopeless struggle. Sometimes lately John had seemed a little listless, as though nothing mattered. A little bitter when he spoke of Henry Davis.

Henry held the mortgage and had expected a payment on the principle this year. He had come once and looked about with something very like a sneer on his face. If he should decide someday to foreclose—that would be the final blow. They never would get up after that. If John couldn't hold the old farm, he could never try to buy a new one. It would mean being renters all their lives. Poor renters at that!

She went to the tomato field. It had been her own idea to do some tracking along with the regular farm crops. But, like everything else, it had failed of her expectations. As she put the scarlet tomatoes, just a little overripe, into the basket, she glanced with a hard tightening of her lips toward a break in the trees a half mile away where a dark, listening bit of road caught the sun. Across its polished surface twinkled an endless procession of shining, swift—moving objects. The State Highway.

Jennie hated it. In the first place, it was so tauntingly near and yet so hopelessly far from them. If it only ran by their door, as it did past Henry Davis's for instance, it would solve the whole problem of marketing the fruits and vegetables. Then they could set the baskets on the lawn, and people could stop for them. But as it was, nobody all summer long had paid the least attention to the sign John had put up at the end of the lane. And no wonder. Why should travelers drive their cars over the stony country byway, when a little farther along they would find the same fruit spread temptingly for them at the very roadside?

But there was another reason she hated that bit of sleek road showing between the trees. She hated it because it hurt her with its suggestions of all that passed her by in that endless procession twinkling in the sunshine. There they kept going, day after day, those happy, carefree women, riding in handsome limousines or in gay little roadsters. Some in plainer cars, too, but even those were, like the others, women who could have rest, pleasure, comfort for the asking. They were whirled along hour by hour to new pleasures, while she was weighted to the drudgery of the farm like one of the great rocks in the pasture field.

And—most bitter thought of all—they had pretty homes to go back to when the happy journey was over. That seemed to be the strange and cruel law about homes. The finer they were, the easier it was to leave them. Now with her—if she had the rug for the parlor and the stuffed furniture and linoleum for the kitchen, she shouldn't mind anything so much then; she had nothing, nothing but hard slaving

and bad luck. And the highway taunted her with it. Flung its impossible pleasures mockingly in her face as she bent over the vines or dragged the heavy baskets along the rows.

The sun grew hotter. Jennie put more strength into her task. She knew, at last, by the scorching heat overhead that it was nearing noon. She must have a bit of lunch ready for John when he came in. There wasn't time to prepare much. Just reheat the coffee and set down some bread and pie.

She started towards the house, giving a long yodeling call for the children as she went. They appeared from the orchard, tumbled and torn from experiments with the wire fence. Her heart smothered her at the sight of them. Among the other dreams that the years had crushed out were those of little rosy boys and girls in clean suits and fresh ruffled dresses. As it was, the children had just grown like farm weeds.

This was the part of all the drudgery that hurt most. That she had not time to care for her children, sew for them, teach them things that other children knew. Sometimes it seemed as if she had no real love for them at all. She was too terribly tired as a rule to have any feeling. The only times she used energy to talk to them was when she had to reprove them for some dangerous misdeed. That was all wrong. It seemed wicked; but how could she help it? With the work draining the very life out of her, strong as she was.

John came in heavily, and they ate in silence except for the children's chatter. John hardly looked up from his plate. He gulped down great drafts of the warmed-over coffee and then pushed his chair back hurriedly.

"I'm goin' to try to finish the harrowin' in the south field," he said. "I'm at the tomatoes," Jennie answered. "I've got them' most all picked and ready for takin'."

That was all. Work was again upon them.

It was two o'clock by the sun, and Jennie had loaded the last heavy basket of tomatoes on the milk wagon in which she must drive to town, when she heard shrill voices sounding along the path. The children were flying in excitement toward her.

"Mum! Mum! Mum!" they called as they came panting up to her with big, surprised eyes. "Mum, there's a lady up there. At the kitchen door. All dressed up. A pretty lady. She wants to see you."

Jennie gazed down at them disbelievingly. A lady, a pretty lady at her kitchen door? All dressed up! What that could mean! Was it possible someone had at last braved the stony lane to buy fruit? Maybe bushels of it!

"Did she come in a car?" Jennie asked quickly.

"No, she just walked in. She's awful pretty. She smiled at us."

Jennie's hopes dropped. Of course. She might have known. Some agent likely, selling books. She followed the children wearily back along the path and in at the rear door of the kitchen. Across from it another door opened into the side yard. Here stood the stranger.

The two women looked at each other across the kitchen, across the table with the remains of two meals upon it, the strewn chairs, the littered stove—across the whole scene of unlovely disorder. They looked at each other in startled surprise, as inhabitants of Earth and Mars might look if they were suddenly brought face-to-face.

Jennie saw a woman in a gray tweed coat that seemed to be part of her straight, slim body. A small gray hat with a rose quill was drawn low over the brownish hair. Her blue eyes were clear and smiling. She was beautiful! And yet she was not young. She was in her forties, surely. But an aura of eager youth clung to her, a clean and exquisite freshness.

The stranger in her turn looked across at a young woman, haggard and weary. Her yellowish hair hung in straggling wisps. Her eyes looked hard and hunted. Her cheeks were thin and sallow. Her calico dress was shapeless and begrimed from her work.

So they looked at each other for one long, appraising second. Then the woman in gray smiled.

"How do you do?" she began. "We ran our car into the shade of your lane to have our lunch and rest for a while. And I walked on up to buy a few apples, if you have them."

Jennie stood staring at the stranger. There was an unconscious hostility in her eyes. This was one of the women from the highway.

One of those envied ones who passed twinkling through the summer sunshine from pleasure to pleasure while Jennie slaved on.

But the pretty lady's smile was disarming. Jennie started toward a chair and pulled off the old coat and apron that lay on it.

"Won't you sit down?" she said politely. "I'll go and get the apples. I'll have to pick them off the tree. Would you prefer rambos?"

"I don't know what they are, but they sound delicious. You must choose them for me. But mayn't I come with you? I should love to help pick them."

Jennie considered. She felt baffled by the friendliness of the other woman's face and utterly unable to meet it. But she did not know how to refuse.

"Why I s'pose so. If you can get through the dirt."

She led the way over the back porch with its crowded baskets and pails and coal buckets, along the unkept path toward the orchard. She had never been so acutely conscious of the disorder about her. Now a hot shame brought a lump to her throat. In her preoccupied haste before, she had actually not noticed that tub of overturned milk cans and rubbish heap! She saw it all now swiftly through the other woman's eyes. And then that new perspective was checked by a bitter defiance. Why should she care how things looked to this woman? She would be gone, speeding down the highway in a few minutes as though she had never been there.

She reached the orchard and began to drag a long ladder from the fence to the rambo tree.

The other woman cried out in distress. "Oh, but you can't do that! You mustn't. It's too heavy for you, or even for both of us. Please just let me pick a few from the ground."

Jennie looked in amazement at the stranger's concern. It was so long since she had seen anything like it.

"Heavy?" she repeated. "This ladder? I wish I didn't ever lift anything heavier than this. After hoistin' bushel baskets of tomatoes onto a wagon, this feels light to me."

The stranger caught her arm. "But—but do you think it's right? Why, that's a man's work."

Jennie's eyes blazed. Something furious and long-pent broke out from within her. "Right! Who are you to be askin' me whether I'm right or not?" What would have become of us if I didn't do a man's work? It takes us both, slaving away, an' then we get nowhere. A person like you don't know what work is! You don't know—"

Jennie's voice was the high shrill of hysteria; but the stranger's low tones somehow broke through. "Listen," she said soothingly. "Please listen to me. I'm sorry I annoyed you by saying that, but now, since we are talking, why can't we sit down here and rest a minute? It's so cool and lovely here under the trees, and if you were to tell me all about it—because I'm only a stranger—perhaps it would help. It does sometimes, you know. A little rest would—"

"Rest! Me sit down to rest, an' the wagon loaded to go to town? It'll hurry me now to get back before dark."

And then something strange happened. The other women put her cool, soft hand on Jennie's grimy arm. There was a compelling tenderness in her eyes. "Just take the time you would have spent picking apples. I would so much rather. And perhaps somehow I could help you. I wish I could. Won't you tell me why you have to work so hard?"

Jennie sank down on the smooth green grass. Her hunted, unwilling eyes had yielded to some power in the clear, serene eyes of the stranger. A sort of exhaustion came over her. A trembling reaction from the straining effort of weeks.

"There ain't much to tell," she said half sullenly, "only that we ain't gettin' ahead. We're clean discouraged, both of us. Henry Davis is talking about foreclosin' on us if we don't pay some principle. The time of the mortgage is out this year, an' mebbe he won't renew it. He's got plenty himself, but them's the hardest kind." She paused; then her eyes flared. "An' it ain't that I haven't done my part. Look at me. I'm barely thirty, an' I might be fifty. I'm so weather-beaten. That's the way I've worked!"

"And you think that has helped your husband?"

"Helped him?" Jennie's voice was sharp. "Why shouldn't it help him?"

The stranger was looking away through the green stretches of orchard. She laced her slim hands together about her knees. She

spoke slowly. "Men are such queer things, husbands especially. Sometimes we blunder when we are trying hardest to serve them. For instance, they want us to be economical, and yet they want us in pretty clothes. They need our work, and yet they want us to keep our youth and our beauty. And sometimes they don't know themselves which they really want most. So we have to choose. That's what makes it so hard".

She paused. Jennie was watching her with dull curiosity as though she were speaking a foreign tongue.

Then the stranger went on:

I had to choose once, long ago; just after we were married, my husband decided to have his own business, so he started a very tiny one. He couldn't afford a helper, and he wanted me to stay in the office while he did the outside selling. And I refused, even though it hurt him. Oh, it was hard! But I knew how it would be if I did as he wished. We would both have come back each night. Tired out, to a dark, cheerless house and a picked-up dinner. And a year if that might have taken something away from us—something precious. I couldn't risk it, so I refused and stuck to it.

"And then how I worked in my house—a flat it was then. I had so little outside of our wedding gifts; but at least I could make it a clean, shining, happy place. I tried to give our little dinners the grace of a feast. And as the months went on, I knew I had done right. My husband would come home dead-tired and discouraged, ready to give up the whole thing. But after he had eaten and sat down in our bright little living room, and I had read to him or told him all the funny things I could invent about my day, I could see him change. By bedtime he had his courage back, and by morning he was at last ready to go out and fight again. And at last he won, and he won his success alone, as a man loves to do.

Still Jennie did not speak. She only regarded her guest with a half-resentful understanding.

The woman in gray looked off again between the trees. Her voice was very sweet. A humorous little smile played about her lips.

"There was a queen once," she went on, "who reigned in troublous days. And every time the country was on the brink of war and the people ready to fly into a panic, she would put on her showiest dress and take her court with her and go hunting. And when the people would see her riding by, apparently so gay and happy, they

were sure all was well with the Government. So she tided over many a danger. And I've tried to be like her.

"Whenever a big crisis comes in my husband's business—and we've had several—or when he's discouraged, I put on my prettiest dress and get the best dinner I know how or give a party! And somehow it seems to work. That's the woman's part, you know. To play the queen—"

A faint honk-honk came from the lane. The stranger started to her feet. "That's my husband. I must go. Please don't bother about the apples. I'll just take these from under the tree. We only wanted two or three, really. And give these to the children." She slipped two coins into Jennie's hand.

Jennie had risen, too, and was trying from a confusion of startled thoughts to select one for speech. Instead she only answered the other woman's bright good-bye with a stammering repetition and a broken apology about the apples.

She watched the stranger's erect, lithe figure hurrying away across the path that led directly to the lane. Then she turned her back to the house, wondering dazedly if she had only dreamed that the other woman had been there. But no, there were emotions rising hotly within her that were new. They had had no place an hour before. They had risen at the words of the stranger and at the sight of her smooth, soft hair, the fresh color in her cheeks, the happy shine of her eyes.

A great wave of longing swept over Jennie, a desire that was lost in choking despair. It was as though she had heard a strain of music for which she had waited all her life and then felt it swept away into silence before she had grasped its beauty. For a few brief minutes she, Jennie Musgrave, had sat beside one of the women of the highway and caught a breath of her life—that life which forever twinkled in the past in bright procession, like the happenings of a fairy tale. Then she was gone, and Jennie was left as she had been, bound to the soil like one of the rocks of the field.

The bitterness that stormed her heart now was different from the old dull disheartenment. For it was coupled with new knowledge. The words of the stranger seemed more vivid to her than when she had sat listening in the orchard. But they came back to her with the pain of agony.

"All very well for her to talk so smooth to me about man's work and woman's work! An' what she did for her husband's big success. Easy enough for her to sit talking about queens! What would she do if she was here on this farm like me? What would a woman like her do?"

Jennie had reached the kitchen door and stood there looking at the hopeless melee about her. Her words sounded strange and hollow in the silence of the house. "Easy for her!" she burst out. She never had the work pilin' up over her like I have. She never felt it at her throat like a wolf, the same as John an' me does. Talk about choosin'! I haven't got no choice. I just got to keep goin'—just keep goin', like I always have—"

She stopped suddenly. There in the middle of the kitchen floor, where the other woman had passed over, lay a tiny square of white. Jennie crossed to it quickly and picked it up. A faint delicious fragrance like the dream of a flower came from it. Jennie inhaled it eagerly. It was not like any odor she had ever known. It made her think of sweet, strange things. Things she had never thought about before. Of gardens in the early summer dusk, of wide fair rooms with the moonlight shining in them. It made her somehow think with vague wistfulness of all that.

She looked carefully at the tiny square. The handkerchief was of fine, fairy like smoothness. In the corner a dainty blue butterfly spread his wings. Jennie drew in another long breath. The fragrance filled her senses again. Her first greedy draft had not exhausted it. It would stay for a while, at least.

She laid the bit of white down cautiously on the edge of the table and went to the sink, where she washed her hands carefully. Then she returned and picked up the handkerchief again with something like reverence. She sat down, still holding it, staring at it. This bit of linen was to her an articulated voice. She understood its language. It spoke to her of white, freshly washed clothes blowing in the sunshine, of an iron moving smoothly, leisurely, to the accompaniment of a song over snowy folds; it spoke to her of quiet, orderly rooms and ticking clocks and a mending basket under the evening lamp; it spoke to her of all the peaceful routine of a well managed household, the kind she had once dreamed of having.

But more than this, the exquisite daintiness of it, the sweet, alluring perfume spoke to her of something else which her heart understood, even though her speech could have found no words for

it. She could feel gropingly the delicacy, the grace, the beauty that made up the other woman's life in all its relations.

She, Jennie, had none of that. Everything about their lives, hers and John's, was coarsened, soiled somehow by the dragging, endless labor or the days.

Jennie leaned forward, her arms stretched tautly before her upon her knees, her hands clasped tightly over the fragrant bit of white. Suppose she were to try doing as the stranger had said. Suppose that she spent her time on the house and let the outside work go. What then? What would John say? Would they be much farther behind than they were now? Could they be? And suppose, by some strange chance, the other woman had been right! That a man could be helped more by doing of these other things she had neglected?

She sat very still, distressed, uncertain. Out in the barnyard waited the wagon of tomatoes, overripe now for market. No, she could do nothing today, at least, but go on as usual. Then her hands opened a little; the perfume within them came up to her, bringing again that thrill of sweet, indescribable things.

She started up, half-terrified at her own resolve. "I'm goin' to try it now. Mebbe I'm crazy, but I'm goin' to do it anyhow!"

It was a long time since Jennie had performed such a meticulous toilet. It was years since she had brushed her hair. A hasty combing had been its best treatment. She put on her one clean dress, the dark voile reserved for trips to town. She even changed from her shapeless, heavy shoes to her best ones. Then, as she looked at herself in the dusty mirror, she saw that she was changed. Something, at least, of the hard haggardness was gone from her face, and her hair framed it with smooth softness. Tomorrow she would wash it. It used to be almost yellow.

She went to the kitchen. With something of the burning zeal of a fanatic, she attacked the confusion before her. By half past four the room was clean: the floor swept, the stove shining, dishes and pans washed and put in their places. From the tumbled depths of a drawer Jennie had extracted a white tablecloth that had been bought in the early days, for company only. With a spirit of daring recklessness she spread it on the table. She polished the chimney of the big oil lamp and then set the fixture, clean and shining, in the center of the white cloth.

Now the supper! And she must hurry. She planned to have it at six o' clock and ring the big bell for John fifteen minutes before, as she used to just after they were married.

She decided upon fried ham and browned potatoes and applesauce with hot biscuits. She hadn't made them for so long, but her fingers fell into their old deftness. Why, cooking was just play if you had time to do it right! Then she thought of the tomatoes and gave a little shudder. She thought of the long hours of backbreaking work she had put into them and called herself a little fool to have been swayed by the words of a stranger and the scent of a handkerchief, to neglect her rightful work and bring more loss upon John and herself. But she went on, making the biscuits, turning the ham, setting the table.

It was half past five; the first pan of flaky brown mounds had been withdrawn from the oven, the children's faces and hands had been washed and their excited questions satisfied, when the sound of a car came from the bend. Jennie knew that car. It belonged to Henry Davis. He could be coming for only one thing.

The blow they had dreaded, fending off by blind disbelief in the ultimate disaster, was about to fall. Henry was coming to tell them he was going to foreclose. It would almost kill John. This was his father's old farm. John had taken it over, mortgage and all, so hopefully, so sure he could succeed where his father had failed. If he had to leave now there would be a double disgrace to bear. And where could they go? Farms weren't so plentiful.

Henry had driven up to the side gate. He fumbled with some papers in his inner pocket as he started up the walk. A wild terror filled Jennie's heart. She wanted desperately to avoid meeting Henry Davis's keen, hard face, to flee somewhere, anywhere before she heard the words that doomed them.

Then as she stood shaken, wondering how she could live through what the next hours would bring, she saw in a flash the beautiful stranger as she had sat in the orchard, looking off between the trees and smiling to herself. "There was once a queen."

Jennie heard the words again distinctly just as Henry Davis's steps sounded sharply nearer on the walk outside. There was only a confused picture of a queen wearing the stranger's lovely, highbred face, riding gaily to the hunt through forests and towns while her kingdom was tottering. Riding gallantly on, in spite of her fears.

Jennie's heart was pounding and her hands were suddenly cold. But something unreal and yet irresistible was sweeping her with it. "There was once a queen."

She opened the screen door before Henry Davis had time to knock. She extended her hand cordially. She was smiling. "Well, how d' you do, Mr. Davis. Come right in. I'm real glad to see you. Been quite a while since you was over."

Henry looked surprised and very much embarrassed. "Why, no, now, I won't go in. I just stopped to see John on a little matter of business. I'll just—"

"You'll just come right in. John will be in from milkin' in a few minutes an' you can talk while you eat, both of you. I've supper just ready. Now step right in, Mr. Davis!"

As Jennie moved aside, a warm, fragrant breath of fried ham and biscuits seemed to waft itself to Henry Davis's nostrils. There was a visible softening of his features. "Why, no, I didn't reckon on anything like this. I 'lowed I'd just speak to John and then be gettin' on."

"They'll see you at home when you get there," Jennie put in quickly. "You never tasted my hot biscuits with butter an' quince honey, or you wouldn't take so much coachin'!"

Henry Davis came in and sat in the big, clean, warm kitchen. His eyes took in every detail of the orderly room: the clean cloth, the shining lamp, the neat sink, the glowing stove. Jennie saw him relax comfortably in his chair. Then above the aromas of the food about her, she detected the strange sweetness of the bit of white linen she had tucked away in the bosom of her dress. It rose to her as a haunting sense of her power as a woman.

She smiled at Henry Davis. Smiled as she would never have thought of doing a day ago. Then she would have spoken to him with a drawn face full of subservient fear. Now, though the fear clutched her heart, her lips smiled sweetly, moved by that unreality that seemed to possess her. "There was once a queen."

"An' how are things goin' with you, Mr. Davis?" she asked with a blithe upward reflection.

Henry Davis was very human. He had never noticed before that Jennie's hair was so thick and pretty and that she had such pleasant ways. Neither had he dreamed that she was such a good cook as the sight and smell of the supper things would indicate. He was very comfortable there in the big sweet-smelling kitchen.

He smiled back. It was an interesting experiment on Henry's part, for his smiles were rare. "Oh, so-so. How are they with you?"

Jennie had been taught to speak the truth; but at this moment there dawned in her mind a vague understanding that the high loyalties of life are, after all, relative and not absolute.

She smiled again as she skillfully flipped a great slice of golden brown ham over in the frying pan. "Why, just fine, Mr. Davis. We're gettin' on just fine, John an' me. It's been hard sleddin' but I sort of think the worst is over. I think we're goin' to come out way ahead now. We'll just be proud to pay off that mortgage so fast, come another year, that you'll be surprised!"

It was said. Jennie marveled that the words had not choked her, had not somehow smitten her dead as she spoke them. But their effect on Henry Davis was amazingly good.

"That so?" he asked in surprise. "Well now, that's fine. I always wanted to see John make a success of the old place, but somehow—well, you know it didn't look as if—that is, there's been some talk around that maybe John wasn't just gettin' along any too—you know. A man has to sort of watch his investments. Well, now, I'm glad things are pickin' up a little."

Jennie felt as though a tight hand at her throat had relaxed. She spoke brightly of the fall weather and the crops as she finished setting the dishes on the table and rang the big bell for John. There was delicate work yet to be done when he came in.

Little Jim had to be sent to hasten him before he finally appeared. He was a big man, John Musgrave, big and slow moving and serious. He had known nothing all his life but hard physical toil. Heaviness had pitted his great body against all the adverse forces of nature. There was a time when he had felt that strength such as his was all any man needed to bring him fortune. Now he was not so sure. The brightness of that faith was dimmed by experience.

John came to the kitchen door with his eyebrows drawn. Little Jim had told Jim that Henry Davis was there. He came into the room as an accused man faces the jury of his peers, faces the men who, though the same flesh and blood as he, are yet somehow curiously in a position to save or to destroy him.

John came in, and then he stopped, staring blankly at the scene before him. At Jennie moving about the bright table, chatting happily with Henry Davis! At Henry himself, his sharp features softened by an air of great satisfaction. At the sixth plate on the white cloth. Henry staying for supper!

But the silent deeps of John's nature served him well. He made no comment. Merely shook hands with Henry Davis and then washed his face at the sink.

Jennie arranged the savory dishes, and they sat down to supper. It was an entirely new experience to John to sit at the head of his own table and serve a generously heaped plate to Henry Davis. It sent through him a sharp thrill of sufficiency, of equality. He realized that before he had been cringing in his soul at the very sight of this man.

Henry consumed eight biscuits richly covered with quince honey, along with the heavier part of his dinner. Jennie counted them. She recalled hearing that the Davises did not set a very bountiful table; it was common talk that Mrs. Davis was even more "miserly" than her husband. But, however that was, Henry now seemed to grow more and more genial and expansive as he ate. So did John. By the time the pie was set before them, they were laughing over a joke Henry had heard at Grange meeting.

Jennie was bright, watchful, careful. If the talk lagged, she made a quick remark. She moved softly between table and stove, refilling the dishes. She saw to it that a hot biscuit was at Henry Davis's elbow just when he was ready for it. All the while there was rising within her a strong zest for life that she would have deemed impossible only that morning. This meal, at least, was a perfect success, and achievements of any sort whatever had been few.

Henry Davis left soon after supper. He brought the conversation around awkwardly to his errand as they rose from the table. Jennie was ready.

"I told him, John, that the worst was over now, an' we're getting' on fine!" She laughed. "I told him we'd be swampin' him pretty soon with our payments. Ain't that right John?"

John's mind was not analytical. At that moment he was comfortable. He has been host at a delicious supper with his ancient adversary, whose sharp face marvelously softened. Jennie's eyes were shining with a new and amazing confidence. It was a natural moment for unreasoning optimism.

"Why that's right, Mr. Davis. I believe we can start clearin' this off now pretty soon. If you could just see your way clear to renew the note mebbe. . . ."

It was done. The papers were back in Davis's pocket. They had bid him a cordial good-bye from the door.

"Next time you come, I will have biscuits for you Mr. Davis." Jennie had called daringly after him.

"Now you don't forget that Mrs. Musgrave! They certainly ain't hard to eat."

He was gone. Jennie cleared the table and set the shining lamp in the center of the oilcloth covering. She began to wash the dishes. John was fumbling through the papers on a hanging shelf. He finally sat down with an old tablet and pencil. He spoke meditatively. "I believe I'll do a little figurin' since I've got time tonight. It just struck me that mebbe if I used my head a little more I'd get on faster."

"Well now, you might," said Jennie. It would not be John's way to comment just yet on their sudden deliverance. She polished two big Rambo apples and placed them on a saucer beside him.

He looked pleased. "Now that's what I like." He grinned. Then making a clumsy clutch at her arm, he added, "Say, you look sort of pretty tonight."

Jennie made a brisk coquettish business of freeing herself. "Go along with you!" she returned, smiling and started in again upon the dishes. But a hot wave of color had swept up in her shallow cheeks.

John had looked more grateful over her setting those two apples beside him now, than he had the day last fall when she lifted all the potatoes herself! Men were strange, as the woman in gray had said.

Maybe even John had been needing something else more than he needed the hard, backbreaking work she had been doing.

She tidied up the kitchen and put the children to bed. It seemed strange to be through now, ready to sit down. All summer they had worked outdoors till bedtime. Last night she had been slaving over apple butter until she stopped, exhausted, and John had been working in the barn with the lantern. Tonight seemed so peaceful, so quiet. John still sat at the table, figuring while he munched his apples. His brows were not drawn now. There was a new, purposeful light upon his face.

Jennie walked to the doorway and stood looking off through the darkness and through the break in the trees at the end of the lane. Bright and golden lights kept glittering across it, breaking dimly through the woods, flashing out strongly for a moment, then disappearing behind the hill. Those were the lights of the happy cars that never stopped in their swift search for far and magic places. Those were the lights of the highway which she had hated. But she did not hate it now. For today it had come to her at last and left with her some of its mysterious pleasure.

Jennie wished, as she stood there, that she could somehow tell the beautiful stranger in the gray coat that her words had been true, that she, Jennie, insofar as she was able, was to be like her and fulfill her woman's part.

For while she was not figuring as John was doing, yet her mind had been planning, sketching in details, strengthening itself against the chains of old habits, resolving on new ones; seeing with sudden clearness where they had been blundered, where they had made mistakes that farsighted, orderly management could have avoided. But how could John have sat down to figure in comfort before, in the kind of kitchen she had been keeping?

Jennie bit her lip. Even if some of the tomatoes spoiled, if all of them spoiled, there would be a snowy washing on her line tomorrow; there would be ironing the next day in her clean kitchen. She could sing as she worked. She used to when she was a girl. Even if the apples rotted on the trees, there were certain things she knew now that she must do, regardless of what John might say. It would pay better in the end, for she had read the real needs of his soul from his eyes that evening. Yes, wives had to choose for their husbands sometimes.

A thin haunting breath of sweetness rose from the bosom of her dress where the scrap of white linen lay. Jennie smiled into the dark. And tomorrow she would take time to wash her hair. It used to be yellow—and she wished she could see the stranger once more, just long enough to tell her she understood.

As matter of fact, at that very moment, many miles along the sleek highway, a woman in a gray coat, with a soft gray hat and a rose quill, leaned suddenly close to her husband as he shot the high-powered car through the night. Suddenly he glanced down at her and slackened the speed.

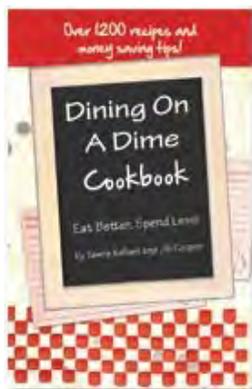
"Tired?" he asked. "You haven't spoken for miles. Shall we stop at this next town?"

The woman shook her head. "I'm all right, and I love to drive at night. It's only—you know—that poor woman at the farm. I can't get over her wretched face and house and everything. It—it was hopeless!"

The man smiled down at her tenderly. "Well, I'm sorry, too, if it was all as bad as your description; but you mustn't worry. Good gracious, darling, you're not weeping over it, I hope!"

"No, truly, just a few little tears. I know it's silly, but I did so want to help her, and I know now that what I said must have sounded perfectly insane. She wouldn't know what I was talking about. She just looked up with that blank, tired face. And it all seemed so impossible. No, I'm not going to cry. Of course I'm not—but—lend me your handkerchief, will you dear? I've lost mine somehow!"

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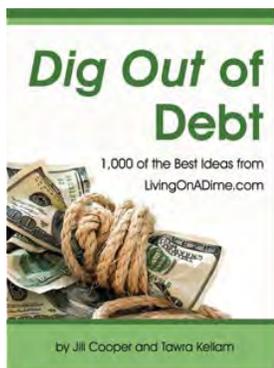
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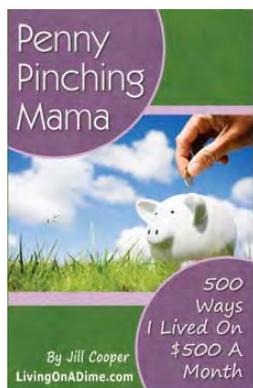


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