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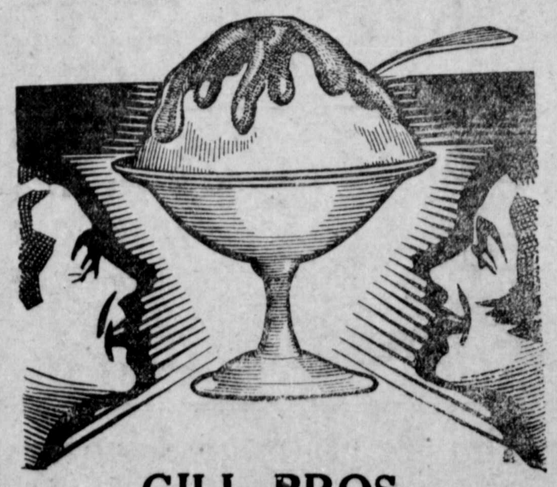
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## The Peach Specialist

By RUBY DOUGLAS

TOM CRAFT of the famous Craft Orchard farm sat back in his chair and pulled at his pipe.

"Yes, mother," he said to his wife who sat opposite him, "I have asked Frank Hazen, my old school friend, to come out and spend the summer. He is a government fruit expert, a specialist in peaches, and I'd like to know what ails that new orchard out there. He has not been so well and the knock-off and rest will do him good."

This was such a long speech for her husband to make all at one time that Mrs. Craft looked at him over the rim of her glasses to see if he were quite right.

"Where'll we put him?" she asked, after a minute.

The old house was small and the Crafts had invited a niece to use the front parlor and little adjoining room used for a tearoom for motorists.

Tom pulled at his pipe. "Why couldn't Julie move upstairs and let Frank have her back room?" he asked.

"I—well, I wouldn't like to ask her to do that after the way she has fixed things up for herself."

"Tut—tut—Julie'd understand. I'll ask her myself."

And suiting action to words, he called Julie in from her own little quarters where she was arranging a menu for a luncheon party of motorists on the following day.

In her cretonne apron, Julie Henderson probably came nearer to being pretty than she ever did in anything else.

"What now, uncle?" she asked.

"Your uncle is going to ask you to give up your little room to a big hulk of a man, Julie," began Mrs. Craft.

Julie looked from one to the other. "But—of course," she said lamely. She was beginning to make expenses and was more than interested in her business venture.

"Oh—not the tea room, child," said Craft, hastily. "No—no—the little room off."

Julie breathed freely again. "But I'd give them both up, gladly, uncle. You and Aunt Jennie have been good to let me have them as long as you have."

Mrs. Craft's eyes filled with tears. Julie was always so unselfish. She would have hidden her deepest desires from either of them if she thought an expression would worry them. As her uncle explained who Mr. Hazen was, Julie's face brightened.

"I think it is perfectly lovely, Uncle Tom, and I'll fix up the room to suit a man. Now it would give him a nightmare—it is so feminine."

"You'd make a home out of a hydroplane," said her uncle when he was called to inspect the room his guest was to occupy.

Frank Hazen arrived and was duly welcomed. He was a quiet, rawboned fellow not much interested in anything but his work.

The four had a country supper prepared by Julie and her aunt and afterward they sat on the back porch and talked until the moon came up.

As the days went on, Julie learned to see beneath the weary veneer that years of tripping about from farm to farm and from problem to problem in fruit blights had painted over Frank Hazen's personality.

Night after night he sat with her on the porch, the honeysuckle vines just letting the moon peep through when it chose.

Julie's tea house business flourished and Hazen had found the trouble in the new orchard. The summer waned.

As it grew time for motorists not to need a country tea house Julie spoke of going back to the city, where she earned a meager living doing odds and ends for a woman's exchange.

Hazen knew that he had rested. He knew that his usefulness as a peach expert was over for the season.

But neither one wanted to leave the homelike atmosphere of the old Craft orchard.

"It's too bad we can't all stay here," remarked Tom Craft one night when they had been discussing the separation.

In the twilight, Frank Hazen looked across at Julie. He saw her sigh. It gave him hope of a dream coming true.

"Perhaps—if you and your wife would slip off to bed early Julie and I might—might find a way out of having to be separated," he said, boldly.

"Why—" gasped Julie.

Mrs. Craft arose. "Come, Tom," she said, "I sort o' felt that we were not needed. Good night, dear."

When they were alone Frank stepped over to Julie's chair. "Was that a very crude way, dear? I am not very fancy, but—I love you. Could we not make this little family permanent? I can see that I am needed here on this big fruit prospect and—you could run your tea house—and me, as well, couldn't you?"

Julie said a great many things that did not have to do with the running of a tea house and at breakfast time there was no talk of a separation but of a rearrangement of the old house after the wedding.

"I told you the peaches out here needed attention," laughed Tom Craft.

"And—witness the blush on it now," replied Frank, squeezing Julie's hand beneath the cloth.

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## The Hour of Danger

By DUFORD JENNE

(Copyright.)

AS BARRON waited near his rural free delivery mail box at the end of the lane, he mused on the odd turn of events that had happened during the week. He had taken the old house back among the hills in order to work out in peace some of the problems in the book he was writing.

It was a lonely place but suited him. Then he had made the discovery that his mail man was a brown-faced, rosy-cheeked girl who had ridden into his heart.

The steady sound of hoofs broke into his reverie. He looked down the road. She was coming.

As she rode up, extended his package, he caught one of the reins.

"You mustn't delay the United States mail, Mr. Evans," she said, smiling.

"Why the mister?" he asked. "Here I am, way up in a wilderness, and I need a little friendship. And here you are, riding these lonely hills."

"But I am not afraid, Mis—I mean Barron." A bit of color glowed under her brown cheeks.

The suggestion of her independence of him made a little gulf between them, but she seemed to sense it, for she made a little bridge back to him.

"But it is nice to have you stop and talk to me—and think of me," she said, and her eyes were gentle upon him.

She caught up the reins as if a bit in fear of the mood that was upon them.

"Really, I must not stop to gossip. Good-by!" She cantered away, waving back.

He watched her out of sight down the wooded road. Dreaming of her, he went back to work. She had about ten miles of lonely riding. Over the ridge was a cluster of farms, and he supposed he was foolish to fear for her safety. But he loved her, and that fact was enough to make him worry.

The next time she came he caught her hands.

"Hester," he said, "a bunch of rough-looking customers went by, and I don't like to think—"

She leaned toward him from the saddle.

"It is nice to have you think of me," she said gently, "but I am perfectly safe. I rode right by them. You are city-bred, you know, and I am hill-bred—but I like you just the same!" and off she went.

The next afternoon he heard the hoofs down the road, but around the curve came, not the graceful brown figure, but a riderless horse that he blocked off on the narrow road and held. The mail pouches were gone and the bridle had been torn as if it had been ripped by force.

He stood stock still, then went into action. He led the horse to the cottage, tied the broken rein, slipped a blue automatic in his pocket, telephoned over the ridge to a farmhouse, and galloped down the road. He scanned the road as he went, and, finally, the almost impossible hope in his heart that she had fallen off was ended. The spot where he stopped showed footprints of a struggle. He rode on—to tell any listening ears that a rider had gone by—dismounted and hurried back.

He found where a light car had been hidden. He trailed it down the road half hopelessly, but found where it turned into an abandoned road.

In one of his many strolls he had previously explored this road and he knew that it led back to an abandoned farm building. He slipped along swiftly, nervous with a great fear for the safety of the brown girl he loved. Robbery was the motive of those who had attacked her, he thought, but in the security of the lonely region, he feared to think what else might happen to her.

The road opened from the thick young woods into a clearing and the old house was at the upper end. He crept around through the woods, going cautiously. He heard the mutter of voices.

The voices grew louder. Inch by inch he crept to the back window, and slowly peered over the edge of the sill.

Two men, rough of garb, rougher of face, were busy tearing open the last of a pile of mail and packages. Beyond them he saw Hester, ankles and hands tied, a blue bandana handkerchief wadded into her mouth. She saw him, and through the gag a sound came. The men looked at her—then turned.

They stared at the automatic. "Back into that corner!" he ordered. They obeyed, hands up.

He drew himself slowly through the window, went to her, with one hand released her while with the other he covered the two men.

The roar of a car being driven up the old road broke the silence. Barron smiled. His telephone had brought aid and the men had spotted the handkerchief he had tied at the road's entrance. Four men piled in through the open door, took one look, and searched the cowering men.

Barron lifted Hester until she rested against his shoulder. She was trembling.

"I guess I am afraid now," she whispered.

"You won't be after this, for I'm going to keep you with me—if you're willing!"

Her lips told him, without speech, that she was "willing."

### Patience Is a Virtue

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