Home to Stay

By IRENE GLENN

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THE old stage driver recognized her the moment she alighted from the train at the country station—the slim, brown, graceful girl he had good reason to remember—and with regret.

As she came forward, she smiled a friendly greeting that betrayed a dimple in each rosy cheek. "Hello, Mr. Lawrence, I wonder if you will drive me to the village? I have come on a happy errand, and I am in a hurry to get there," she said gaily.

He nodded. "I 'member you, Miss Olive, all right—don't often ferget folks who come this way. Yes, I'll take you up or anywheres you want to go," he answered, suspicious immediately as to what her errand might be.

Soon he had her baggage safely stored in his old car, and they were off up the long winding road.

He could see that she was bubbling over with some inner happiness as she chatted beside him. His thoughts went back, however, to the preceding year when she had come to visit the young fellow, John Buford, whom he and the whole valley loved, who had returned from the World war battered and broken, but with his old courage and his old kindness and fineness of heart and mind unimpaired. This girl beside him who had won his heart and finally turned him down, and then had left him to go on her year's wandering in Europe. The whole valley had known about the love affair, and with its old-fashioned generosity had taken her to its heart until—and rumor had it that she had said she couldn't settle down to farm life even with John—she had gone, and the truth came out.

"She ought to be punished, and she will be," the old man thought to himself. He turned to her: "Jest where do you want to go, Miss Olive?"

"Where?" she asked, her brown eyes flashing with happiness. "Why, to John's place, of course! Can't you guess why I have come back? I've come back to tell him that I am going to stay and never go again. It's going to be a surprise! I really tried to forget him—didn't write—but I couldn't forget; so I am going to tell him!"

"I'll take you up thar," he said briefly.

The rheumatic car rattled along over the familiar road, through the long forest aisles, along the brook, up over the wooded ridge, and into the valley.

The girl was a little silent now as if into her thoughts had come memories not altogether pleasant or thoughts of unhappy things that might have happened. The mood passed, however, and she turned to him.

"I am sure he—he loves me enough to want me now," she said softly half to herself. "Perhaps I wasn't kind enough to him a year ago, but then—it was different."

The old man nodded. "We're a-gittin' thar," he said shortly as he whirled the car off the main road down a long inviting side-road.

"Yes, I remember this road," the girl said quietly.

They swung into the open through the trees, and before them lay a wide, rambling old house, hospitable still in its air of brooding homeyness, but the weeds were high in the yard and the grass had covered the paths; and on the porch was a white sign with the words—"for sale."

She gave a little cry of consternation and stared at the sign. Then she whirled breathlessly upon him.

"What does this mean, Mr. Lawrence? What has happened? Why did you bring me here? Is John—Oh, it can't be? It can't be!" She looked at him with brown eyes full of terrible fear.

He looked at her with cold eyes. "John was in bad shape from his war wounds when you was here—an' then to lose you. I didn't blame you so much—yet I did—you shouldn't hev come an' then left him in the lurch," he said bluntly. "You gals with yer playin' with a man—and John was a man we all liked since he was a kid."

"'Was'—you say 'was'!"—she cried, and then with a shivering tremor she crumpled against him. "He's dead—Oh, it can't be!"

He whirled the car again and at a rapid pace sent it rolling back. At the main road, he turned to the right, and, keeping the same rapid pace, went on.

The girl at his shoulder was sobbing quietly, and the iron in his heart began to soften. "Guess she really means it," he told himself.

Under the tires woodland and meadow passed and the road veering sharply led along a winding drive and into the front of a white painted cheery place that was an up-to-date farmer's home. He stopped the car.

He put his hand on her shoulder. "Little girl, I kinda hated you for last year, so I thought I'd give you a lesson. I feel mean about it now, 'cause I kin see you really love the boy. This is John's new place and—"

A tall, bronzed figure appeared near the house, stared, and then with a shout came running up. The girl whirled with an inarticulate cry, and in the next moment was swung from her seat and gathered into strong arms.

"Oh, John!" and "Olive!" were all that the meeting lips could say after the manner of the hearts of men when too full for speech; and, unheard and unseen, Mr. Lawrence turned his car homeward, feeling a little guilty but content in his knowledge that this time the brown girl would stay for good.

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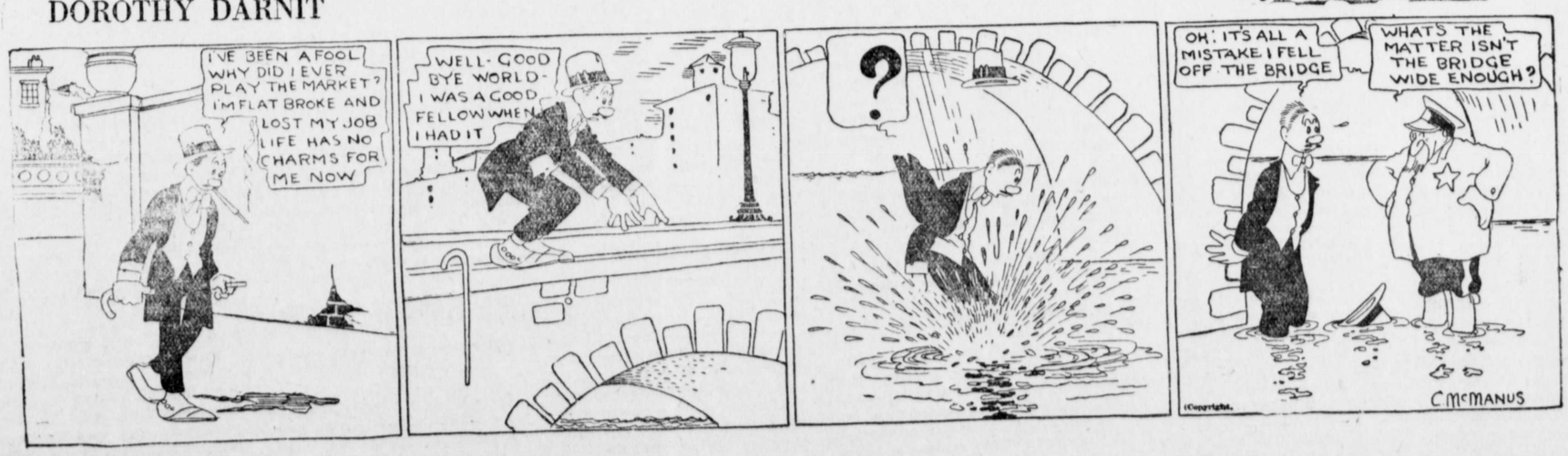
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