Argosy, Feb 16, 1918

A Grass Orphan

by

Franklin P. Harry

YOUNG BENNINGS and the pick-up girl sat on the darkest bench he could find in the garishly lighted riverside park that went by the name of Beauty Beach.

Across from them, in a big, dusty, creaking pavilion, a "Jazz" band squealed and hammered, the dancers fringed by a swarm of rushing, soiled-white-aproned waiters. Glasses clinked and orders were shouted. Just between them and it a flippant crowd jostled; beyond the beshrubberied gateway at the right departing surface-cars alternately shrieked and purred.

The demure little pick-up was sipping timidly at a glass of strange-tasting lemonade but recently set before her, flavored by the adroit wink her companion had bestowed upon the dusky waiter when he had ordered.

How simple that had been! Bennings was immensely tickled with the ease with which he had made himself understood. Twenty-four hours out of the woods and already playing the big game like an old-hander!

"Don't you worry," he lied glibly, smiling up from his watch, "you've got lots of time. I won't let you overstay."

"Oh, please!" she murmured, her shy, disturbing gray eyes meeting his for a moment. "Grandfather will lock the door, and—"

"And what then?" smiled the boy encouragingly.

"Make me sit on the steps all night and send me back home to-morrow. Then I'd lose my only chance to study music."

"Couldn't you tell him your girl friend had a party and persuaded you to stay later? Shucks! Let's dance some more and do some of the amusements and have a real live time."

"No, he said eleven," she said sadly, her eyes hungry upon the crowd. "You don't know my grandfather!"

"If I don't," he said lightly, "I know two of my own, either of them a match for him. Think of it! Two!"

"Heavens!" she laughed, her glass half-finished and her eyes lighting up. A delicious color came creeping into her cheeks and, he noted, a certain amount of reassurance in her voice.

"Fact! And I live with both of them—alternately. They raised me from a little kid. Every six months I change homes. I suppose I'm a grass-orphan."

"A what?"

"Well, I'm not a real orphan, for my father and mother are both living, but they couldn't hit it off together. Each went home to pa, and I was switched about on a six-months basis.

"Ever since then I've 'taken after' mother's father, or father's father, according to who was keeping me at the time, for each took me and decided to bring me up true to pattern."

"The idea!" The girl laughed and jiggled the ice in her glass. "And then?" she asked.

"Well, from then on, naturally, every half-year my view-point was changed. Couldn't have been otherwise, for they are about as near alike as a Plymouth Rock rooster and a brindle bull pup. And each tried his darnedest to fit me to his mold."

"Of course you're joking." Her eyes danced at him. "But how did it turn out?"

"Great!" Bennings laughed, albeit a bit ruefully. "You've heard of dual personalities? Dr. Jekyll stuff, you know."

"Yes," she nodded encouragingly.

"Well, they made me one better. I've got three. Talk about being complex!

"A small part of the whole business is myself, but the most of me is grandfather. The Bennings strain is the strongest, or at least crops up the most. However, when I begin to realize it, the other usually horns in and sets things straight. He—"

"I never heard anything half so interesting. And was it your Grandfather Bennings that made you notice me and dance with me all the evening, when there were so many prettier girls about, and let me have such a good time?"

She said it shyly, yet with a certain amount of impudence that stirred his blood afresh. He regarded her closely. Behind her awkward schoolgirlishness, if he knew women, lay the real thing. He had felt it from the start. Once he had broken down that little barrier of prudishness with which she had surrounded herself, he was sure he would find a good little sport.

"No," he said decidedly, "that was me! But Grandfather Bennings was strong with women, that's a fact. Used to be one of those gay dogs that thought they were hitting the high mark by drinking out of their lady's slipper. Claims he's still got an eye for a pretty girl."

He moved over a trifle, intoxicated by her faint perfume.

"But *I* saw you," he said.

"That's nice," she sighed, "though you won't find me a bit interesting. I've never had a chance to go anywhere or see anything. I slipped away to come here. It's my first time. Mary met that boy she knew right after we got here, and I just stood about, growing lonesomer and lonesomer." That amused Bennings. "I wouldn't tag after them," she added stoutly, "I can't bear to be a third party."

She pouted deliciously. He watched her until her features relaxed. He was wondering how long it would take to kiss a pout like that away.

"I lost fifteen minutes screwing up courage to come over and speak to you," he confessed. "You're the first girl I ever talked to without an introduction. But that was because I knew every girl in my home town from the time I was born, almost, and this is my first time to get away alone.

"I read and heard a lot; now I'm here to see for myself. I got in last night late. 1 spent all day to-day changing my hick clothes for something else. Had to start right, you know."

It was evident that he was satisfied with the change. The little pick-up followed him with flattering interest.

"Then, after dinner to-night, I got on a street-car and asked the conductor where I could find the liveliest place about town. Somewhere with a bit of pep to it and a chance to see something different. He mentioned Beauty Beach—and there you have it."

"But no one would ever believe it! I mean," she explained admiringly, " that you look like

you've been used to this all your life your clothes, and your way, and the things you say."

"That's because people are pretty much the same everywhere," he explained patiently, vastly pleased. "This is just like Boville on a Saturday night, only speedier. Here the dial-hand points fifty, there about twenty-six, flat.

"I feel at home, because I knew what to expect. I guess" —confidently— "when it's all summed up, there's not so many new wrinkles that I'm not already hep to."

The pick-up girl's hand, crushing her handkerchief, had fallen upon the seat between them, and Bennings casually dropped his so that his wrist touched her fingers. They trembled, stilled, but were not withdrawn.

Her name was Dorothy, he felt sure. Nothing else would suit. He had named her Dorothy in that first satisfied glimpse he had caught of her, standing wistfully at the edge of the dancing-floor, so startlingly unlike the other girls about her.

Whatever it might turn out to be, Dorothy, he felt certain, she should always be to him.

There was an indefinable, appealing something about her simple, blue linen dress with its wide side-pockets, its youthful white cuffs and its flat, white collar: about her small, white, rubber-soled oxfords that were practically heel-less and which made her look smaller; about her white panama, encircled by a demure, cool-blue band like her dress, from under which he caught attractive glimpses of her dark hair. He was almost certain that she had rolled it up to-night for the first time.

Just a foolish kid, a flapper, a squab, he thought, making believe it was grown up. A regular infant, in this—incubator! That also made him smile. For Beauty Beach seemed all the conductor had claimed for it, and gave promise of being even more.

His eyes saw more than hers, else they could not have kept their innocent gray, and his ears heard and translated things undoubtedly Hindustani to hers.

She saw what she came to see—lights, color, and a good-natured crowd. The surface of things sufficed. Those, and the fact that she had run away to achieve it, seemed to have wrapped her in the folds of a great adventure.

He glanced slant-eyed at her, his hand closing over her fingers, and noted the soft curve of her cheek that was warmer looking now, the fine sweep of her long lashes, the dusky pearl of her throat that the open V of her collar exposed.

She was exquisite! He marveled at his luck.

He had not made his choice in a hurry. Jewish girls, Slavs, Polish, Bohemians: girls unmistakably Irish, and others that might have claimed any other nationality, yet all of the same kind—red-lipped, swagger, bold-eyed, smiling—had filed by him as he lounged and smoked on the dancing-pavilion steps.

They called to him, mutely, after a fashion, yet in the oldest language in the world, and, though he readily understood, he had waited and bided his time. And, in that, the strain of Grandfather Bennings showed strongly.

He saw her.

She did not call, but she was there at the beach, which was all-sufficient. He was no fool. Though timidly, she readily accepted his advances. That was an hour and a half ago.

She was not nearly so timid now. She had learned to laugh, a trifle excitedly the last fifteen minutes, to drop some of her quaint reserve; to dance much closer to him.

He began to plan ahead when she should discover how late it actually was. To her constant inquiries he had shifted the time until he was more than a half-hour behind his watch. A half an hour more! Another "lemonade" or two!

Into the little charmed silence that had fallen between them a strange voice—voices—suddenly spoke. Two men had sauntered up behind them. Taken unawares, the very thing

happened that Bennings had feared, and he was too slow-witted to switch her attention.

"Well, let's beat it." suggested one. "I'm on a new job, and I've got to get up early in the morning."

"G'won, it's not late yet. Why, the chickens haven't begun to roost."

There sounded the decisive snap of a watch-case.

"It's half-past ten. It'll take me an hour to get home and hit the hay. If you're not coming—good night!"

"Half-past ten!"

The little pick-up sprang to her feet, her eyes wide, a quick hand at her throat.

"Is it?" she cried. "Oh! Look quickly!"

"Y-es." he stammered, glancing at his own watch, "but don't get excited. What's it matter? I'll see that you get home safely."

He caught her hand to pull her back upon the seat.

"It's nearly an hour's ride." she said dully, her hand to her eyes with a queer gesture: "and I had—I *had* to be home by eleven. I thought you just said it wasn't quite ten."

She dropped weakly on the bench beside him, crumpled, piteous, staring hopelessly at the ground.

"There! There!" Bennings said cheerfully, sliding an arm along the back of the bench and beginning to pat her shoulder. If not the speech, at least the persuasiveness of an older generation crept to his tongue.

"Don't you worry, kid. Life's too short. You just leave it to me. I'll see you through!"

"You couldn't do anything," she moaned, "but make it worst. He said he would lock the door, and he will. Don't you realize what that means? We live in an old part of the town, among the foreigners, and there is not one I could go to at this hour of the night. To-morrow-"

"To-morrow's way off," he reminded her vaguely. "You've never had a real good time—and neither have I. The mischief's done—let's make the best of it. We owe it to ourselves. Let's dance some more, and hew a bite to eat. I'll find you a better place to stay than your front door-step.

"We've never had a chance—you or I—let's make this a *big night!* Something we can remember. You might never have such an opportunity again, if he really sends you home. You've got the makings of a rare little scout in you. Come on."

The elder Bennings could not have put it better.

She made a dab or two at her eyes and stared wistfully at the thinning crowd. Again her lips framed that adorable pout, and again he studied them in delightful speculation. Step by step he followed her thoughts.

He liked that tilt of her chin. It meant, he imagined, that she could play a losing game without going to pieces. Once she decided, he could rest easy, for there would be no further fuss or hysterics.

Unconsciously a queer admiration and respect for her had arisen within him, born of the battle she was fighting; a vague, almost chivalrous something that he would have scouted at had he but have realized it. It was something decidedly no "Bennings."

Suddenly she stood before him, one hand thrust in her pocket, the other held friendly out to him, a little swagger lurching her shoulders, her speech choked.

"No, I'll be going," she said firmly, when her voice cleared. "I'll take my medicine, but my conscience will be clear. You've— you've been just awfully kind."

It slew the Grandfather Bennings in him with one blow. Like a cork, that small portion of him that was really himself came to the surface. Probably it wouldn't have had she not tried to smile bravely, with her moist gray eyes, and her chin wavering!

A moment before every one of his senses

clamored; now he stood like a boob, his own eyes blinky and his throat growing thick.

"See here, now, you can't go off like that!" he growled. "Of course not. I'll bust something but what I'll get you to town in time."

"Oh, if you only could!" She pounced on his arm eagerly; a pathetically hopeful note in her voice.

He whirled down through the crowd and the beshrubberied entrance.

"A taxi!"

She pointed joyfully. He followed her gaze.

"Right-o!"

They sprinted half a block along the car-tracks. A listless, half-asleep driver sat in the lonely machine.

"Take you up, but I can't wait up there," he said briskly to Bennings's inquiry. "Got to be back here in less than an hour."

He swung the door open, his bored, sophisticated eyes confidently reading them.

"Where?" There was just the faintest flicker of an eyelid as he addressed Bennings. The little pick-up had lost no time in climbing in. "Highlandtown's the nearest place," he added in a lowered tone.

In his sudden lofty mood the insinuation came as an insult to Bennings. Earlier in the evening he would have gratefully welcomed the tip. He dared not risk the folly of offending the fellow.

"Bond and Ann Streets," he snapped coldly, and added, with fine contempt: "An extra five of you make it before eleven!" Then he slammed the door vicious1y after him.

The car leaped ahead so violently that it sprawled him awkwardly across the seat.

"You'll never be sorry for this!" a tremulous voice breathed in his ear. A sound followed it not unlike a stifled sob.

"Don't cry!" He put out his arm, found her near him in the darkness, and drew her yet closer. "Poor kid," he said huskily.

Her shoulders heaved, her hand was very close to his, he was alive to the faint odor of violets and, with every lurch of the car, to the fact that the brim of her hat was most cruelly sharp when it smote his eyes.

For minutes they bumped over dark, rough streets; they swung around corners that flung her tighter in his clasp; they sped out, at last, upon a velvety, smooth, narrow street, and she put aside his arm gently, sat up, and gracefully straightened her hat.

"Here," she said, glancing out as the taxi halted. "Five minutes' grace," she whispered. "The clock—up there!" He had climbed out and swung her down. "Don't come, please—and, oh! thank you so much!"

He felt the quick pressure of her fingers and she darted away, across the street and down the darker one that intersected.

He stared after her stupidly. The shadows had swallowed her up before he realized that she was gone. Gone, and he had made no arrangement to see her again; did not know where she lived; her name! Was it Dorothy? But she was gone. A sort of panic seized him.

"Hey! Come across! Come across! Chase the skirt after you've delivered!"

Bennings had started after her. The chauffeur leaped from his machine and advanced upon him with outstretched hand and lowering countenance.

"Four dollars, please!" The polite word at the end was so skillfully manipulated that it became maddening. And, matching it: "Five extra, for the time I made."

Bennings willed to meet it by flinging him a ten-spot, and forthwith his hand sought his inner pocket. He felt, and felt again, bewildered.

The contemptuous one read the signs.

"And your watch and stickpin, too?" he sneered in honeyed accents.

" Yes." Bennings had to admit weakly, after a hasty examination. "Gone—cleaned out! Trimmed!"

He continued the hunt mechanically.

"Here!" From a trouser-pocket, through sheer luck and carelessness, he brought forth a couple of bills and a handful of loose change. It was doubly humiliating to piece it out, quarter by quarter, but he finally found that he had the desired amount.

"I could have put you next," the chauffeur jeered, sliding it into his pocket. "but you seemed to know it all. Guess you'll be wise to Jitney Jess the next time you see her. Third time, to my knowledge, that she's pulled off that stunt. Dresses the part all right, don't she? But to think that she missed your pants-pocket!"

Bennings stood petrified.

Surprised, hurt, his little rose-colored dream all torn and bedraggled, the grass-orphan, just himself, held the stage for possibly the longest period he could remember. The taxi-driver seemed to be enjoying it immensely.

"What did you think the beach was—a kindergarten?" he tormented. "You little hick sports ought to bring a nurse with you."

Suddenly a dapper little whirlwind, a sartorial typhoon sprang into life and bore down upon him. It was the antidote for Grandfather Bennings. The unbelievable small-town dude seemed to have two rocks for fists and a force behind them like a catapult in action.

Before the chauffeur could gather himself together, the cool and now smiling youngster had jabbed him in the wind, had nearly split his lip, and had felt out and caught him a peach of a clip on the point of his jaw. The asphalt rose up behind him. Actually whistling, the maelstrom walked over him and then proceeded quickly down the street.

And the latter was not pretense—the whistling—for Bennings's mind was as clear as a bell, his feelings as unruffled as a forest-pool, for the great counter irritant had arrived.

That, may it please you, was his other grandfather—name Timothy O'Toole!