



# HILLTOPS CLEAR

By Emile Loring

W.N.U. SERVICE

### THE STORY

CHAPTER I.—Prudence Schuyler comes from New York to Prosperity Farm, inherited from her uncle, to make a new life for herself and her brother, David, whose health has been broken by tragedy.

CHAPTER II.—The second day on her farm Prue adventures into the barn loft after eggs. She slips on the hay and falls to the ground—would have been badly hurt had not strong young arms been there to catch her. The arms are those of Rodney Gerard, rich young man, who lives at High Ledges on the neighboring farm. There is at once a mutual attraction between the two. Rod decides to stay at his home throughout the fall and winter, looking after the timber. But Prudence decides to maintain a cool attitude toward him. She suspects him since her sister's husband ran away with her brother's wife.

CHAPTER III.—Len Calloway, a rival of Rod Gerard, tries to buy the timber off Prue's land, but she dislikes his conceited attitude and contracts with Rod to dispose of the trees. On the evening Prue is expecting David from New York she is visited by Mrs. Walter Gerard and her thirteen-year-old daughter, Jean. They are hateful, curious persons and leave Prue rankled.

### CHAPTER IV

Prudence comes in contact with them again when she accompanies Rod to his place. A clown comes, advertising a circus in a nearby town. Prue promises to accompany Rod and Jean to the circus.

### CHAPTER V

Jean Gerard regarded the desk in the gun room at High Ledges with pursed lips and angry eyes.

"Gee, but you make me mad!" She addressed the piece of furniture as if it were maliciously responsible for her frustration. She wriggled a hairpin in the lock of the top drawer. Then with teeth set, she grasped the handles, jerked with all her strength. The drawer came out with a suddenness which sent her sprawling and scattered three letters from the desk onto the floor.

Ruefully she rubbed the back of her head. She knelt beside the drawer and eagerly examined its contents. There were several photographs of a pretty girl. One showed her in bouffant tulle on the back of a horse. Jean's eyes dilated.

"Circus rider!" she crooned, "Goody, I'll see one like her tomorrow." She turned the photograph over. On the back was scrawled:

"Miraculous escape. From calico and Calloway to liberty and love— Fondly, Milly."

"She's a cutie all right. I—" Jean gulped as a shadow fell across the photograph.

"Where's your uncle?" The photograph fell from her hand and lay with piquant, smiling face upward as Jean stared at the scowling man who loomed over her.

"I—I—don't know. Shall I try to find him, Mr. Calloway?"

Len Calloway removed his glance from the pictures and letters on the floor long enough to glare at her.

"Tell him I want to talk with him. Scram!"

Frightened at the graysness of his face, Jean fled. She scurried through the different rooms. Called. No answer. She had better go back and tell Mr. Calloway.

How he detested her wink, Rodney thought, as he watched her leave the room. Jean slipped her arm through her uncle's.

"She's mad!" she observed in a strident whisper.

"Cut that out, K. K. Never criticize your mother. You make good or you'll be packed off to New York on the first train. Get me?"

"I will, Uncle Rod. Cross-my-throat-an'-hope-to-die. What time will we start for the circus? I'll be ready. I won't go to sleep for a minute tonight."

"I'll bet you won't. I'm not so old that I've forgotten the nights before your father and I went to the circus. Go to bed. Get going."

He watched her as she ran to the door.

"You sure have taken on responsibility," he reminded himself.

The next morning Rodney, with Jean snuggled in the roadster beside him, stopped before the red brick house. Prudence was waiting at the gate; her vivid lips were curved in a radiant smile.

"Good morning, Jean. I'm thrilled! My heart is so light it's bouncing along on balloon tires. Will there be room for me on the front seat, Mr. Gerard?"

"Cut out that 'Mr.'—Gorgeous. Rod—to you. Of course there's room in front. Hop in."

Jean bounced in her seat. "Hurry up, Miss Prue. Let's go, Uncle Rod." The main street of the town was already lined with crowds when they reached it; it boiled with children, echoed with the cries of fakirs, blazed with mammoth black and red posters.

Gerard parked the roadster on a side street. Jean's feet barely touched the ground as between Prudence and her uncle she was swept along in the hurrying crowd. She stopped short in front of a poster showing an equestrienne in rose-color tulle skirts and a brief bodice, with the caption:

### MADMOISELLE MILEE

"Why, there's my cutie—" Gerard looked at her sharply as she bit off the next word.

"What do you mean, K. K.? You—" "Buy the kid a balloon! Buy the kid a balloon! Say, listen! What's a circus to a kid without a balloon?"

The hatless man with an unkempt mane of black hair and a flock of colored balloons straining at their leashes, blocked the way. Jean's eyes were like dancing stars.

"May I have one, Uncle Rod?" "Sure. Choose the color. Have one, Prue?"

"Of course. I want that fat green one which looks as if it were about to burst from its own impotence."

What fun she was! How friendly she had been on the drive over. Had she buried the hatchet she seemed always to have up her sleeve for him? She was so alive mentally and physically. Life never could get one by the throat if one had a girl like her with whom to travel through the years, Rodney thought.

"It's coming! The parade's coming!" Prudence gripped Gerard's arm. "Hear that bugle, Jean?"

Rodney pushed Jean in front of him. Crushed his arm against his side to keep Prue's hand there. Far down the street was a restless sea of waving plumes, shining helmets, brilliant flags. Music billowed forward. Snare. Drums. Cornets. Clarinets. He said to Prudence:

"The thrill of the Big Top. It's got me. I'm as excited as any kid in the crowd."

The girl's brilliant eyes met his. "It's got me, too. I'm shaking with excitement. Here they come! I wonder if we'll see Chicot?"

Music nearer now. A band in brilliant red coats, tall shakos on their heads, passed playing, "Stars and Stripes Forever." Countless feet tapping the rhythm. Countless throats humming the tune.

Everywhere the glitter of rhinestones among sequins. Everyone gay.

Everyone smiling. The parade was hitting on all cylinders.

"El-e-phants are coming! Hold your horses!"

An enormous elephant led the herd, the scarlet coated man on his head seemed like a midget, the keepers strutting at his side mere pigmies.

Gerard felt Jean's fingers tighten in his, heard her quick breath of relief as the unwieldy beast passed. Prudence caught her free hand and smiled. Had she sensed the child's fear?

A monkey-faced clown commenced to beat up a gigantic police-clown. Jean wailed:

"Chicot isn't there. He said he'd wink at me." Her eyes were deep wells of disappointment. Gerard squeezed the thin fingers sympathetically.

"Take it easy, K. K. He'll come. There he is now! See him? See him?" He caught her under the arms and lifted her for an instant. "He's on that funny little bicycle. See him?"

She nodded excited assent. He set her on her feet. "See how the big fat-faced clown on the motorcycle behind him keeps butting into his hind wheel? Chicot has a balloon. A red balloon like yours, K. K. He'll see you in a minute."

Prudence laughed up at him. "Chicot must have a magic charm for attracting hearts. Jean is positively tearing fur over him, and I warmed to him at once."

"If he has touched your shellacked heart, I'll offer him a fortune for his—" "You are missing the comedy," Prue reminded crisply.

As Chicot came abreast of Jean, his balloon popped. With heart-rending sobs he shook the bit of rubber toward the girl.

"Well of all people! If here isn't the new lumber firm of Schuyler and Gerard eating popcorn and watching the elephants!"

Calloway's taunting voice at his shoulder sent the blood in Rodney Gerard's body rushing to his ears in blinding, black anger. His furious eyes met the mocking eyes on a level with his.

"Shut up, Calloway! You—" "Take mine, Chicot! Take mine!" Jean's excited voice cut into her uncle's. She darted forward, Rodney

grabbed for her. Missed. The motorcycle clown, looking back in a parting wisecrack, shot forward at full speed. The crowd shrieked. Chicot caught the girl. Flung her back with all his force. The panic-stricken cyclist crashed into him.

Aeons after, it seemed to Rodney Gerard, the physician, bending over Jean's limp figure on the black hair-cloth sofa in a nearby house, straightened.

"She's coming out of it all right. Prolonged faint from shock. Better get her home as soon as she can sit up."

Prudence whispered: "Don't look so agonized, Rodney. See, her eyelids are quivering."

"I'm all shot to pieces over this. I—I didn't know how much I cared for the Kurios—" Gerard choked on the words.

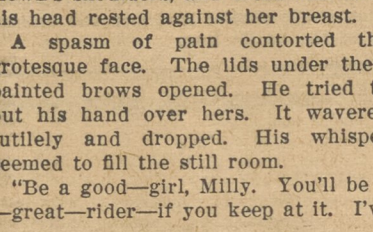
Across the room on the floor where they had dropped him lay the clown. Rodney Gerard bent over the twisted body, laid his hand on the dirt-streaked shoulder.

"You saved her, Chicot. Can you hear? You—" "Let me in! Where's Grandpop? Let me in!"

A girl, in the cotton velvets and plumed hat of a circus rider on parade, burst into the room. Patches of rouge stood out like fever spots on her colorless face. Her black eyes were distended with fright. With a shriek she flung herself to her knees beside Chicot, put her arms under the old clown's shoulders, and lifted him until his head rested against her breast.

A spasm of pain contorted the grotesque face. The lids under their painted brows opened. He tried to put his hand over hers. It wavered futilely and dropped. His whisper seemed to fill the still room.

"Be a good—girl, Milly. You'll be a great—rider—if you keep at it. I've



kept you—with me—you're safer—now. I—must—get up. Time—for—my act—"

The last faint word fluttered in a sigh. Chalky lids drooped over dull eyes. The crumpled figure settled lower in the girl's arms.

"Grandpop! Grandpop! Don't leave me! I can't bear it to have you hurt! First I hurt you and now—"

The physician gently loosened the girl's arms and eased the body of the old clown to the floor. Rodney Gerard laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Nothing can hurt him again, Milly. You—"

"So, I've run Milly Gooch to earth at last! Mademoiselle Milee! And with you, Gerard! She would be!"

With a smothered imprecation, Rodney wheeled to face Len Calloway who leaned against the side of the door. With difficulty he kept his voice low.

"Don't you see what has happened? If you can't keep your dirty mouth shut, get out."

The sound Calloway made was more a snarl than a laugh, though an expression of sardonic mirth doubtless had been his intention.

"I'm going."

He turned to Prudence who, white and still, knelt beside the couch on which Jean was stirring restlessly.

"Any ten-year-old child would get wise to what's been going on between those two, Miss Schuyler."

Rodney Gerard shut his teeth hard into his lip. Prue could deduce anything from Calloway's voice and implication. What would she think?

Milly Gooch caught his hand and with a choking sob laid her cheek against it.

"What shall I do, Roddy? Grandpop's gone and I have only you now."

Half of her appeal to him was genuine grief, half was staged to irritate Len Calloway who was glaring at her from the threshold, Gerard decided.

With a suggestive laugh Calloway departed. The physician touched Gerard's shoulder.

"You'd better get that youngster home—quick."

"I will."

Rodney bent over the girl crouched beside the crumpled body of the clown. He freed the hand she still clutched. "I'll see you tonight, Milly. Pull yourself together." He laid his hand on the bowed head before he turned away.

"Come, Jean. I'll carry you, dear."

The town behind them, Gerard sent the roadster forward along the smooth road between its gay borders of fall shrubs. Once he looked at Prudence. She had her face against Jean's hair; the child's long lashes lay like fringes on her pale cheeks. He said gruffly.

"What a mix-up! A town burns up.

A circus is thrown off schedule. A clown sent scouting. He took a chance on your garden—he'd try anything once—and then—a man who hates me lays his hand on my shoulder—and this for Jean—and tragedy for Chicot. Chicot's daughter, her husband, and child lived in the red brick house when Milly Gooch was a little girl. He visited them. That was what he meant yesterday when he said that he had lived in this region.

"I suspected you had seen him before."

"And because of what Len Calloway implied, you have me tried and sentenced, I'll bet."

She did not answer, only pressed her cheek closer against Jean's hair. He kept both hands tight on the wheel. Why had he let her invade his life? Why had he allowed her to make him madly happy or so infernally miserable by a look? Rapture and agony. He knew what the words meant now.

"I'll drop you at your gate," he proposed curtly.

"No. I will go on to High Ledges. I won't leave Jean until I see her with her mother."

Jean opened her eyes and lifted her head from Prudence's shoulder.

"I'm not going home until Mother has gone. There's nothing the matter with me except that I feel kind of dizzy; it helps steady things to keep my eyes closed. You won't mind if I stay with Miss Prue for a while, will you, Uncle Rod?"

"You should be with your mother, dear."

"I'm not going to be with my mother, so that's that."

"Getting back to normal fast, aren't you, K. K.?"

"Course I am, Uncle Rod. Let me stay with Miss Prue today, that's a peach. I'll wait on Mr. David. I love him."

She began to cry.

"Let her stop with me," Prudence pleaded.

"No. She's going back to High Ledges and I hope I land her there before her mother gets away. I had persuaded her to leave Jean with me; it is only fair that she should know what happened, what a flop I am as a guardian."

Except for an occasional query as to Jean's comfort, Gerard said nothing more during the long ride home.

They reached the red brick house. Gerard looked down at Jean.

"Pull yourself together, K. K. If you and I are to be on our own, we've got to go forward like soldiers, not whimper when we have to do things we don't like. Get me?"

Jean straightened, wiped her eyes, gave him a watery smile.

"Sure I get you, Uncle Rod. I feel fine now, really I do." She slipped a hand under his arm. "Perhaps, perhaps Mother has gone already," she whispered hopefully.

In his mind Gerard echoed the hope as they approached the house of stone and oak which his grandfather had built. He stopped the roadster at the front steps.

Judkins appeared as if by magic. Gerard sprang from the car, lifted Jean out.

"Where's Mrs. Walter, Judkins?"

"She went soon after you left, sir. She decided to motor to the city."

"Ask your sister to take a look at Miss Jean, will you? I want to phone."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Armstrong arrived soon after you left."

"Armstrong! So soon! Where is he?"

"He went for a walk. Mrs. Walter was just going, and things were in kind of a stir, so he—" He coughed discreetly behind his hand.

"So he stepped out. I get you. Go up and lie down, Jean, and if you are good and feel fine, you may dine with us. You'll like Jim Armstrong, K. K., he's a great old boy."

"I won't move from the couch all day, if only I may have dinner with you just as if I were grown up, Uncle Rod. Do you suppose Mr. Jim will fall in love with Miss Prue—too?"

Gerard felt his face warm with color.

"That last wisecrack has shown me that you are back to normal, K. K., quite back to normal. Now listen, one more like that and you'll spend the winter in the bosom of your family—in New York city."

After dinner Jean sat on a low stool beside the fire. Elbow on her knee, chin in one hand, her eyes were on Jim Armstrong, spectacled, sinewy, with an out-of-door bigness.

"It's corking to have you here, Jim. You haven't changed, unless you've grown heavier," Gerard commented.

"It's grand to be here, Rod. I won't say that you haven't changed in the last two years though. Where's that lazy drawl which drew the female of the species after you in squads?"

"I chuckled that when I decided to become a lumber king. I'm in business now, as I wrote you. At least I'm making a stab at it. At present I've struck a snag. There's a guy here named Len Calloway, also in the lumber business, who threatens to boycott any man who works for me."

"What has stirred this Calloway up?"

"I beat him to it in persuading Miss Schuyler to engage me to cut the timber in a tract she owns."

"Who is Miss Schuyler? She doesn't belong by any chance to that family—"

Gerard glanced at Jean whose ears were fairly standing out in eagerness to hear.

"She is a sister of David Schuyler. Know him? He was a New York lawyer."

"I've heard of him. Poor—" "Miss Schuyler inherited a tract of woodland, along with a house and other land. She came here to farm—"

ner brother's health had broken down. Immediately the aforementioned Calloway—"

"Hate him pretty much, don't you, Rod?"

"It isn't a chuckling matter, Jim. Si Puffer, who worked for the new owner's uncle and is a sort of handy man for her, told her not to let Len cut for her. I decided that I would cut for her and myself—that's when I sent for you. Calloway was furious as—well, we've had trouble over another matter."

"Is Miss Schuyler—young?" Armstrong quizzed, as he lighted his pipe.

"Yes, and so pretty," Jean chirped eagerly. "Mother Puffer says that her eyes are like brown pansies and that her voice would coax the birds off the bushes. When she laughs her eyes are all gold spangles."

"K. K., you've been so quiet I had forgotten you were here. It's time you went upstairs. Toddle along now like a good girl."

"All right, Uncle Rod." She kissed him, and with a little curtsy said good-night to Armstrong. The two men rose and waited until she had left the room. Then the forester dropped a question.

"Has this man Calloway by any chance a sentimental interest in your neighbor?"

"He'd better not have."

"Why the growl?"

Rodney Gerard rose impetuously and stood back to the fire. "Here are my cards face up on the table. I'm mad about Prudence Schuyler. I will marry her if I have to move the world to do it. Get that straight?"

"I'll say I get it straight. I can read a 'No Trespassing' sign when I see one, believe me. Does the lady with the spangled eyes realize that she is posted, Rod?"

"It's no joke to me, Jim. I guess the old song's right, 'Love has a meaning all its own'—to different people. Mine is the one-woman brand. The first time I met Prue—I can't explain it to you, you will think I've gone goofy—I felt as if—as if the universe had been made over and I was reborn—with an ambition to grab the world by the tail and a determination to make the girl love me."

"Raring to go off the deep end, aren't you? Um. Pretty serious jam you're in, Roddy."

"It darn well is."

Armstrong laid his hand on Gerard's shoulder. His eyes were warm with affection.

"Buck up! I don't know how any girl could resist you. You generally get what you want. To return to our muttons. Contracts made to sell your lumber?"

"Not a contract. I have been so, what Si Puffer calls het up, with this fight with Calloway that I hadn't thought where I would dispose of it."

"You'd better get busy on that end. I'll give you a list of going concerns; then you'd better hustle after business. Do we start our investigation of the timber tracts tomorrow?"

"Yes." Gerard glanced at the clock. "You'll excuse me, Jim. If I break away? Something important I've got to take care of tonight. Si Puffer is engaging men to go along with us tomorrow to cut."

Puffer appeared in the doorway.

"Here he is now! Come in, Si. This is my old friend Jim Armstrong who has come to tell us what trees to take out."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Jim. Gorry-me, Rod, I'm plumb discouraged. Don't know's we're goin' to need a forester."

"Why not? What has happened?"

"Now don't fly off the handle like that just because I hint we're in for trouble. Whatta mean is, I've been all over the village tryin' to hire men to cut for us tomorrow. They all had some fool excuse. I cornered one of 'em an' jest squeezed it out of him that Len Calloway had let it be known that none of them would get more work from him—ever—if they hired out to you. He's got 'em scared. He pointed out that you might start out big, Rod, but you wouldn't stick; that this was just a fad of yours, an' where would they be when you quit?"

"I'll quit!" Gerard's blue eyes were black. "Go back and tell those men that there isn't room in this town for Len Calloway and me and that I am staying."

(Continued Next Week.)

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