

HILLTOPS CLEAR

By Emilie Loring



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 men 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.—A few days later 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.—They go to the circus, and while they are watching the parade, Chicot, an old clown, is accidentally killed. He was the grandfather of Milly Gooch, one of the circus riders. Rod became friendly with Milly when she and her parents spent a year on Prosperity Farm. Now her parents are dead. Calloway intimidates the available laborers in the district so that they cannot be hired to cut the timber for Rodney Gerard.

CHAPTER VI

His challenge to Calloway had been good theater, but could he back it up, Gerard asked himself, as a few moments later his car shot into the highway between the two great iron gates set in stone posts at High Ledges. He wanted to reach the show grounds before Milly went on for her act. Perhaps he couldn't help her, but if he didn't, she might turn to someone not so disinterested as he.

His thoughts turned back to the first time he had seen Milly Gooch. Her father and mother had hired the old, out-of-repair red brick house for almost nothing and had lived there one summer while out of a circus job. He, at High Ledges from prep school for vacation, had spent every available hour with the family listening to their stories of the Big Top.

After the Gooch family left the red brick house for the circus, Milly had come each year to visit the Puffers to get "fed up" and some red blood into her. Mother Puffer had told him. He had seen her rarely, but as she had grown into a stunning looking girl, her long, narrow eyes and her expert use of them had caught Len Calloway. Had it been just an exciting game with her? She had become engaged to him. Next he heard of her he had received a wire:

"ROD, MUST SEE YOU STOP SHOW IN YONKERS SATURDAY STOP DON'T FAIL ME—"
"MILLY GOOCH"

He could recall even his amazement at the summons. Why had she sent for him? In that far away summer Walter had been more of a friend than he; he had been fascinated by her mother. Of course he would go.

He remembered the defiance in her big dark eyes, the whiteness of her face under its make-up, as she had whispered:

"I—I've walked out on Len, Rod." He recalled that he had laughed at her—it was unbelievable that Calloway would release anything he once had held. She had retorted:

"Yeah, it isn't a joke. I—well, your brother Walter's been my boy friend. I just burn him up. I'm sick of riding, riding whether I'm feeling bum or not, and having Grandpop out of a job half the time. I'm going to be a lady and be taken care of and take care of him."

"Walter!" Gerard felt again the shock that had brought him up standing. "Walter! Walter has a wife."

He remembered her laugh. "Say, Big Boy, where have you come from? Been asleep since the Puritans landed?"

He had caught her hands tight in his. "Look here, Milly, you can't do that. Walter isn't worth it. Milly! Milly! Promise that you—you won't—until I see you again."

Quite plainly now he could see her shining eyes as they had met his.

"Listen, if you care what I do, I promise, Roddy."

He sent the car ahead in a burst of speed. A string of wagons was leaving the show grounds as he entered. That meant that the audience was in the big tent. Gerard stopped before the tent on the wall of which "MADEMOISELLE MILLEE" was stamped in black letters. As if she had been waiting for him, Milly Gooch stepped from be-

hind the curtain drawn across the front of it.

Never had he seen her look lovelier. Her dark hair was curled close to her head; the mascara on her lashes increased the brilliance of her narrow, slanting eyes; the crimson of her lips accentuated the ivory pallor of her skin. Her great dark eyes glittered with tears.

"You sure are a dependable guy, Roddy." She perched on the top of a pedestal. "Take that chair. Say, wasn't that a terrible deal Grandpop got this morning. And wasn't it like Len Calloway to put on his act at just that minute! That bozo's grown old."

"When did you talk with him last, Milly?"

"The day I gave him back his ring. Look out for him, he has it in for you, Roddy. Doesn't he know that it was Walter, not you, who made me break with him?"

"I came to see if I could help about your grandfather. Won't you need money?"

"Not from you. The management takes care of that. Who was the kid Grandpop saved?"

"Walter's little girl, Jean."

"Well, of all the breaks—Grandpop passing out for the kid of the man he hated." She laughed, laughed until the sound cracked in an hysterical sob.

"Milly! Milly! Stop! You won't be able to ride if you don't. Here, look up." He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. "Let me wipe your eyes. Now smile as if I were a Johnnie in the front row."

She looked up with an attempt which twisted his heart.

"That-a-girl! All set now?"

"All set, Roddy. May I have this?"

"Sure, but what the Dickens will you do with it? Haven't any pockets con-



"It's So Fine, I'll Tuck It in Here."

cealed in that ritzy costume, have you?"

"It's so fine, I'll tuck it in here." She thrust it under her low-cut bodice.

"What will you do this winter, Milly?"

"Hollywood. Two big shots from a traveling talkie studio saw me ride a month ago. And what do you think? Mother Puffer and old 'whatta mean' Si came to see me this afternoon! She wants I should spend Christmas with them. What say, Roddy?"

"If you visit the Puffers you may run into Len Calloway."

"What if I do? I'll give him a little whipl for old times' sake. You don't think I'm afraid of that big noise, do you? I've traveled some since I sent you that S O S."

"And traveled straight, Milly?"

She met his eyes squarely. "Sure thing. Didn't I promise? I'm off men, they're just a game, anyway."

"Time for your act, Milly."

As the maid spoke behind them, a groom in rose-color velvet with silver trimming led a milk-white horse bridled with rhinestones to the tent.

Milly caught Rodney's hands and looked up at him. "I'll be good. I promised you, didn't I? There's only one person who could tempt me not to be, and he—he doesn't know I'm on earth. He—"

"A hiss. A flash cut off the word. "What was that?"

"Don't be so jumpy, Roddy. If you traveled with this show you'd get used to that sound. Flashlight. Publicity, of course. Some reporter writing up the show wants a picture." A whistle blew. "That's for me. I'd better get going. Bye-bye, Roddy. Don't—don't send me any more money—ever—I won't need it—now that I've gone Hollywood. Perhaps you'll be at High Ledges at Christmas—if Miss Schuyler stays."

What had she meant by that, Gerard wondered, as his eyes followed her in

her rose-color tulle and glistening satin across the yard. Was his feeling for Prue so evident?

One foot on the step of his car, Gerard stopped and stared. Had a red roadster shot out of the parking place just ahead, or was Len Calloway so much on his mind that he had imagined it?

Prudence pulled at the wire netting at one side of the poultry yard. "Darn!" she gritted between her teeth, as the elusive thing wriggled away from her. "Mr. Si, I'm not so good as I thought. Give me a hand, will you?"

Puffer seized the netting, and pulled. "Grand! Hold it a minute till I get this bird in; two more and it's done. These pesky hens got out yesterday and scratched in my garden border. There! I'd like to see them get through that!"

"The pesky hens ain't the only things that escaped yesterday. Hear 'bout the convict who dug himself out of prison?"

"Jane Mack heard the announcement on the radio and told me. She's all excited about it. He isn't likely to come to this small town, is he?"

"Gorry-me, he'd be running his head into a noose if he did." Puffer shook the wire netting. "That's a good job you've done. And you've done another good job. Your brother is so much better."

Prudence sprang to her feet. Her eyes shone, her face was radiant.

"Then you've noticed it, too, Mr. Si? It isn't just my imagination?"

"Sure, I've noticed it. So's Mother. Whatta mean is, his color is better, his voice is stronger, an' he moves quicker. Comin' to live in the country is just settin' David on his feet. Rod's noticed it, too."

"Oh, he has! I haven't seen Mr. Gerard lately so I didn't know. Prudence avoided Puffer's eyes as she remembered the many times of late that she had fled to the barn loft so that she would not see Rodney Gerard when he called.

"Gorry-me, you haven't seen him? Seen Jim Armstrong?"

"No. Dave has, but—but I was out when he called."

"Well, of course, Rod was away to the city most three weeks trying to get some firms to sign up for the timber you and him are goin' to cut. Since he come back he's been terrible busy cruising the woods. Rod isn't used to havin' difficulty gettin' what he wants; things have always come easy for him. This lumber business 'pears to be gettin' on his nerves. Jim was tellin' me this morning that Rod snapped at every one who come near him yesterday. Perhaps it's that newspaper picture of him and Milly Gooch holdin' hands in front of her tent at the circus that come out in the local paper the day after the show was here that got him mad. Well, if here he isn't now! What you gum-shoelin' round like that for, Roddy?"

Prudence was furious at her own start of surprise. Had Rodney Gerard seen it? He did look troubled. There were lines between his nose and mouth she never had seen before; he had lost some of his bronze. His eyes seemed deeper and darker and bluer in contrast.

"Well, will I pass? Perhaps you weren't sizing me up, perhaps you were just wondering how it happened that I had caught you, Prue of Prosperity farm."

"Don't bite, Rod." Si Puffer flung himself into the breach. "Now that you've got company, Miss Prue, I'll go an' chop some wood."

He moved away with surprising quickness.

"Mr. Si!" Prudence started after him, but Gerard caught her arm and held it.

"You're not going until you tell me why you have been dodging me."

"I dodging! How absurd!"

"Is it? Drop that hammer. It makes you look bloodthirsty." As she still clutched the tool, he loosened her fingers until it dropped to the ground.

"That's better. I want to talk to you before Armstrong and Jean get here. Have you seen that infernal picture?"

"Picture?" Prue echoed the word with breezy indifference.

"Don't bluff. You know perfectly well that I'm referring to that fool snapshot of Milly Gooch and me at the circus."

"Oh, that! Really, I'm not interested."

"Look here, you've got to be interested. I'm willing to bet my roadster that Calloway had a hand in that. It would be like his methods—"

"Don't abuse Len Calloway. It would be disloyal for me to listen because—Prudence hoped that her eyes and voice were as maddeningly provocative as she intended them to be—because, you see, I've decided to have him cut my timber."

"What?"

Never had she seen eyes blaze as Rodney Gerard's blazed in his white face. She remembered what Si had said about his mood the last week. She shouldn't have tried to torment him—but—hadn't that hateful picture hurt her, too? He caught her by the shoulders.

"You didn't mean that, Prue, about letting Calloway cut for you."

"Of course I meant it. The more I think of it the more I go bullish on the idea. I'm beginning to like Len very much. He's so forceful, so—"

"Forceful!" For a pulsing instant Rodney Gerard hesitated, then he caught her in his arms. "Forceful!" He crushed his mouth, hard, ardent, upon hers. "If that's what you like—Gorgeous—" He kissed her again. Prudence wrenched herself free. Every pulse in her body was throbbing unbearably. How had he dared! Was

that the way he kissed the circus rider? She dragged her voice back.

"Don't ever speak to me again! Ever! Do you think I'll let you cut my timber now? Suppose Len Calloway does cheat me in money, at least I shall be safe with him."

"Prue! You can't do it! You knew what you were doing when you looked at me like that. You're no child. Be a sport. You deliberately smashed my control, and now you make me pay for letting myself go. Well, I'll take my medicine, I will keep away until you want me, I'll never kiss you again until you ask me to, if—"

"I ask you? That's the funniest thing I ever heard."

"All right, it's the funniest thing you ever heard. But the promise stands. I—"

"Hi! Rod!"

The hall came from the garden. Prudence dashed toward the gate and collided with a big, spectacled man with heart warming eyes. He smiled.

"Miss Schuyler, isn't it? I would recognize you anywhere from Jean's description. I'm Jim Armstrong, and I am happy to report that you have a nice little bunch of money in your wood lot."

Prudence extended an eager hand. "Have I really! I'm so glad you've come. Now I can learn a lot about trees. Will you take me on as a pupil?"

From the corner of her eye Prue noted with satisfaction the set of Rodney Gerard's jaw. She would show him that he couldn't kiss her after he had been holding Milly Gooch's hands.

Jim Armstrong laughed. "Sure I'll take you along if Rod says the word. He's my boss. I'm a whole of a teacher. Rod said you had a plan of your wood lot. The Hundreds, Miss Schuyler. May I see it?"

"Of course. It's in my shop. I'll bring it to the living room."

Prudence was conscious of Gerard watching her as a few moments later she cleared a place on her brother's desk and spread out the blueprint. Jean danced in from the kitchen, her hands full of cookies.

She crossed the room to speak to David Schuyler seated in the wing chair. As Armstrong joined them, Rodney Gerard detained Prudence at the desk.

"Wait a minute! Look here, Prue, you didn't mean what you said about letting Calloway cut that timber. You mustn't do it."

The sternness of his voice sent tingles through her veins, but she kept her lids provokingly lowered.

"I can transact my own business, thank you. When I need help I shall appeal to Mr. Armstrong. He impresses me as being such a reliable, self-controlled person."

"And I'm not. I get you. All right, let me cut your timber and you will have no fault to find with me again—ever—I'll be the original ice man."

He turned on his heel.

As the outer door closed on Armstrong and Gerard, Prudence crossed to the fireplace and head on her hands resting on the mantel looked unseeingly down at the red coals.

"Is Armstrong an old friend, Prue?" her brother asked.

His tone brought the color to her face. "No. I've never seen him before, today. Why?"

"You seemed to twinkle, twinkle with excitement when you spoke to him."

She dropped to the floor cushion beside his chair. "Humorous, aren't you? Perhaps I did rather overdo the welcome-to-our-city act, Dave, but—"

"But it was done for Gerard's benefit, wasn't it? Like him a lot, don't you?"

"Like him! No. He leaves me cold."

"What have you against him?"

"You said yourself that you were confoundedly sorry that he—he knew that circus clown, Dave."

"If I had any suspicion of him then I haven't now. I think him one of the finest, cleanest, straightest, most likeable men I ever met, and you will admit that I have had some experience."

"That's what we thought about Julie's husband before they were married."

"I never thought that. He was irresistible and charming—but he had a bad eye. I tried to make Julie understand, but she wouldn't listen. I never have bared my heart to you before, Prue; never will again. I am doing it now to beg you to listen to your instinct when it sounds its warning tocsin."

"I shall never love any man but you, Dave darling. I shall remain Prue of Prosperity farm and make your life a burden by camping on your trail."

"Go slow. No armor ever has been forged which is invulnerable to love. If you haven't really loved, you haven't really lived. As for having you camped on my trail, I wouldn't have pulled through if it hadn't been for you—and I have pulled through. I feel like a new man. I have a brand new outlook. I know now that I got the signals mixed, I surrendered to heartbreak and weakness when I should have accepted them as a challenge."

"Dave! Dave! How marvelous! There's the knocker. Who has come, I wonder. You've had visitors enough this morning, so I'll close the living room door. A peddler probably."

Prudence opened the front door. Len Calloway confronted her.

Without speaking he passed her and entered the shop. His assurance crisped her voice.

"What do you want?"

"Same old request. I want the contract to cut your timber."

"Same old answer." Prudence mimicked his diction to an inflection. "I have made arrangements with Gerard to cut it."

"Gerard again. Do you still think he is serious about this woodsman stuff? He—well, you saw that circus rider who calls herself Mademoiselle Millee, the day the old clown passed out. Her right name is Milly Gooch. She was engaged to me. Threw me over for Gerard and he—"

"That's a lie like some of the other statements you have made, Calloway." Her tone lashed his color to dark red, hardened his eyes.

"Oh, it is! See this?"

He held out an envelope. Involuntarily she read the address. Mr. Rodney Gerard.

"Get that? Now listen." He pulled out a card. "And get this:

"Dear Roddy—
"Thanks for the check. Don't mail it again. Bring it as usual. I've kept my promise. Nobody knows."
Milly."

"I found that on the floor near Gerard's desk. Now will you let me handle your timber?"

Furious with herself that she had stood like a lump of putty and listened to the note, an unbearable realization that it confirmed her suspicions of Rodney Gerard's philandering roughened the voice in which Prudence scoffed:

"You must be the original if-at-first-you-don't-succeed-try-again lad. But this time you have thrown sand in the machinery. It won't work. Rodney Gerard and I will get that timber out."

Calloway's eyes burned red.

"You and Rodney Gerard! That's a joke. Try to get men to cut. Just try, that's all. I suppose you are trusting to your partner for that?"

Prudence swallowed a nervous chuckle. "You have guessed it. I am trusting to my partner to engage the men to cut. Good morning."

He looked like a man who was still dazed from a body blow as he departed. Once his lips moved, but Prue banged the door behind him before he could speak.

She leaned against it. Had Calloway found that note of Milly Gooch's in Rodney Gerard's room? "Don't mail it again." Apparently there had been other checks. Why hadn't she asked the man why he had been snooping at High Ledges? Not that she cared who wrote to Rodney Gerard or what he did with his money. Mrs. Walt had been right. Her butterfly brother did flit from flower to flower. He had thought that she—Prudence Schuyler—would allow—

A sob of fury shook her. She brushed her hand savagely across her lips.

CHAPTER VII

With sighs of relaxation Gerard and Armstrong, in the tweeds in which they had come from a long day in the woods, settled into deep chairs before the fire in the library at High Ledges and lighted their pipes.

"I'll say I started something when I set out to thin my woods!" Gerard said. "I thought that all that was necessary was to chop down a few trees and there we were. Now it seems that I have embarked on a life work. Puffer was to report on the labor question this afternoon. There he is now! That's Si's voice when he is excited. It doesn't sound good to me. Come in, Si."

Puffer stood in the doorway. He chuckled.

"Howdy, Jim! Don't have to ask how you two are, Rod. Kinder beat out, ain't ye?"

Gerard pulled himself stiffly to his feet and drew an inviting chair nearer the fire. "All right, old-timer, shoot."

"No use beatin' 'bout the bush. I've been to every village within a hundred miles an' I can't get a man to work for ye, Rod. They're afraid of Calloway. I guess we're up against it, all right."

"We can't be up against it, Si. That timber must be cut. I'll find some huskies somewhere who haven't sold out body and soul to Len Calloway. Do we need skilled lumbermen, Jim?"

"No. Skilled labor would save time and money, but with you and Puffer and me to boss a crew we could get the wood out."

Patch, the butler, appeared at the door.

"Miss and Mr. Schuyler."

Gerard doubted his ears. Prue here! He heard Jean's ecstatic, "Oh goody!" as he crossed the room to welcome the girl and her brother. His lips tightened at the hostility in her eyes as they met his. It was abundantly evident that he was still in disgrace for his passionate outburst of yesterday. With difficulty he kept his voice steady.

"This is a clear case of thought transference. How did you know that we need your advice and your brother's at this very moment, Prue? Come over by the fire, Dave."

Schuyler laughed. "How you all conspire to spoil me! We are not so neighborly as we seem. We were driven here for shelter."

Prudence smiled radiantly at Armstrong, and explained:

"Dave and I have been to the village to barter eggs and poultry for groceries. Just as we reached this drive, Success belled her name and passed out. I didn't dare let Dave sit in the cold car—it is beginning to snow—while I probed for internal disturbances; he flatly refused to leave me in the dark road—he had the escaped convict on his mind—so here we are. Now that he is warm and comfy, perhaps you will come out with me, Jim, and help diagnose the engine trouble."

Gerard spoke to the man who had been laying wood on the fire.

"Patch, tell Judkins to look over Miss Schuyler's car. When he has it in shape, let me know."

He turned to Prudence. "Your arrival is uncannily opportune, partner. Jim, Si, and I have struck a snag."

"All is not serene on the logging front?" Prudence asked anxiously.

"Calloway again? I hope you haven't permanently incurred that man's enmity because you are helping us."

"That's only a little gas spilled on the fire, Dave. Len is drunk with the idea of his importance in this community."

Hands clasped on her knees, Prudence leaned forward. "It makes me see fiery pinwheels in frenzied revolution when I think of Calloway's power. He will find that I won't stand being dictated to."

Gerard's relief left him limp for an instant. Yesterday she had been strong for Len. Had she been putting up a bluff to defy the man who had kissed her, or had Calloway chopped off his own head by a stupid move? Whatever the explanation, the fact remained that she was still relying upon the original plan for getting out her timber.

"Jim, suppose no one here will work for us? What shall we do?"

Gerard's recent satisfaction burned up in anger. She was deliberately ignoring him. He cut in:

"We'll have to hire men from outside the state. I'm going to New York tomorrow to try my luck there."

"New York!" David Schuyler repeated thoughtfully. "What sort of men do you need for the work in the woods, Rodney?"

"Husky lads. Jim will do the head work and Si and I will drive the crew," Gerard answered.

"We need men who can swing an ax and cut as we direct," Armstrong elaborated.

"You said you were going to New York to look for them. I have been thinking—"

"If you have a suggestion, for Pete's sake, don't hold out on us, Dave!"

"It may not be worth the breath to state it, Rodney. I was wondering if some of the men at the Rescue mission might not fit in. They're a rough lot, but there are about twenty of them who are devoted to me. If they came, I could keep them straight while they worked, I think, but where would they live? The villagers wouldn't take them in; I wouldn't ask it."

Gerard did a sum in lightning calculation. "They could live in the big cattle barn down by the pond. I'll have bunks built, wood stoves would heat it, and get a cook from New York to feed them. Whoops! I believe you've solved the problem! I'll pay any wages you say—providing, of course, my partner approves the plan."

Prudence shook her head. "The plan is all right, but you must make allowance for the fact that Dave believes that his boys like 'all God's chillen got wings' when they are exposed to the right spiritual conditions."

Her brother's fine eyes were allight with enthusiasm.

"You're wrong, Prue, they have more sporting spirit than you think. Most of them never have had a chance. Suppose we set three or four permanently on their feet and incidentally get the timber out. Wouldn't that be worth while? What say, Gerard?"

"I think it's keen. Give me a letter to the head of the Rescue mission and I will go to New York tomorrow."

"I'll go with you."

"David!"

"Don't spike our plan, Prue