



HILLTOPS CLEAR

By Emilie 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 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, Chet, 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.—Milly Gooch broke her engagement to Calloway; he believes Rod was the cause and has since been Rod's enemy. After the accident to Chet, Rod calls on Milly to see if he can be of any help. Prue hardens herself still more against Rod when she sees in the newspaper a flashlight picture of him with Milly.

CHAPTER VII.—Rodney is forced to go to New York for timber cutters. David goes with him and helps select men from among the Rescue Mission hangers-on. After their departure for New York, the never-do-well Walter Gerard arrives, evidently wishing to borrow money from his half-brother, Rod.

CHAPTER VIII.—Walter Gerard becomes a daily, unwelcome, caller at Prue's home, where his daughter, Jean, is staying during Rod's absence. Rod sends Prue from the city by airplane. To keep the knowledge of the workers' arrival from Calloway, Prudence enters her timber tract with Calloway on the pretense of bargaining with him on the lumbering. He confines her in a cabin.

CHAPTER IX

Sudden, uncontrollable panic shook Prudence. In the tense silence she stared up into Calloway's inscrutable face.

"Thought you'd double-cross me, didn't you? There are several trails to this cabin."

At his harsh voice her mind and courage sprang to arms.

"My cabin, isn't it? I had no idea it was so—so luxurious."

She forced her eyes to move slowly, as if appraising from the antlers over the fireplace to the water bucket on the bench by the door, on to the wood pile near the hearth with an ax leaning against it. That ax—she looked away quickly. Calloway must not suspect that it had seemed like meeting an unexpected friend.

"Rather nice. I came here the other day with Jim Armstrong, but we didn't come in."

She was talking against time. Surely Jean must have reached the red brick house by this time. Must have told someone where she was.

"Better sit down," Calloway suggested with sickening suavity. He pushed forward a wooden chair.

"Thank you. I prefer to stand here." Prudence caught hold of the great shelf of rock, which served as a mantel, with a grip which turned her nails white.

"Suit yourself. When you beat it, I figured that any path you'd take would lead here. I took a short cut and started the fire. There were red coals; someone's been using the place. Sorry I can't provide a lamp. It's getting dark outside."

If Prudence had distrusted the man back on the trail, she hated him now, hated his mocking smile to which the flickering light gave a Satanic twist. She took a step forward.

"Then we had better start home at once. I'm wet and cold."

In one move he was between her and the door.

"Hold on! Why the rush? You've been fooling me, haven't you? Been trying to make me believe that I was to cut your timber, while all the time you had your tongue in my cheek. What's the game? I was ready to play fair. I've no quarrel with you. I'm a just man. But you've tricked me. Now you'll pay for it. I'll keep you here till you sign a contract for me to

on the trail, I'll know."

He backed to the door. With a quick swoop, Prudence flung brush on the coals. Smoke would give a clue to the rescuers. It caught fire and roared up chimney.

"Why you—" Dazed by her daring, the fugitive hesitated. In that instant Calloway sprang and caught him about



"Hands Up! Both of You!"

the shoulders. The revolver clattered to the floor. Prue seized it.

"Don't waste your strength, Calloway." Why couldn't she keep her voice steady? "I've got him covered. I'm not a crack shot, but I think I can drop him at this distance."

Calloway turned and took a step forward. "Stay where you are! Hands up! Both of you! If you move, the next s-scene in this screen thriller will be cut by the censor."

Gun in one hand, one hand clutching the back of the chair, Prudence covered the two men. She disciplined a wild impulse to shout with laughter, paying Milly Gooch's bills? Have you—

He lunged for the man in front. Caught him about the waist. Fumbling for holds, the two strained and panted. The fugitive was smaller, but fear of a return to prison gave him superhuman strength. He twisted and twisted about Calloway's legs until both went down with a crash. With the agility of a cat and the cry of an enraged animal, the victor was on his feet, whirled, and grabbed the gun from Gerard's hand. Crouching, he backed toward the fireplace. His eyes were flames. He aimed the revolver steadily.

"Beat it, you two guys—and beat it quick! I'll keep the pearls—and the girl."

Prudence retreated to the wood pile. She had thought her mind geared to surprises, but this quick turn stopped her heart. She couldn't back away further; the wood pile was like a wall behind her. Hadn't David said that nine times out of ten when one was backed against an insurmountable wall, a gate would open behind if you put up the fight of your life? Perhaps there was a gate in this wall—perhaps. A gate! Cautiously, breathlessly, she groped behind her.

The convict's clawlike fingers tightened on the revolver. He scowled hideously at Gerard. "Hey, you! Cut out that cig stuff! Beat it, or I'll fire and—"

With all her force Prudence brought the dull side of the ax down on his arm. His sentence shattered into profanity. His gun clattered to the floor. Gerard seized it, thrust it against his back as he whirled on Prue.

"Hey! Cut that out!" "Beat it, or I'll fire!" Gerard's words, if not his voice, were a perfect imitation as he prodded the cursing, shambling man toward the door.

Calloway thundered "You're not letting him get away, Rod? Don't you know he's the escaped prisoner they're hunting?"

"He won't make his get-away with you at his heels. It's your job to deliver him to the sheriff after you've frisked Miss Schuyler's pearls off him. Get busy, Len."

How could Rodney be so cool, so smiling, Prudence wondered frantically. "He don't need get busy. Here they are." The captive pulled the lovely, lustrous string from under his ragged, dirty shirt. Prudence snatched it from the floor and clutched it tight against her breast.

"Come across with those jewels!" Gerard poked a reminder. "Lissen, don't get fresh with the gat. I've coughed up the pearls, ain't I—an' I don't know nothin' about no jewels."

"Let him go! Let him go! I don't care about the jewels. Please let him go." The break in Prue's voice maddened her.

The muscles of Gerard's jaw tightened. "On your way!" He held out the revolver. "Take it, Len. Don't let this bird stop till you have him safe behind bars."

Calloway gripped the gun. He said through clenched teeth: "You're taking chances. How do you know I won't shoot you?" Rodney Gerard regarded him through narrowed lids and smiled.

"Because you're such a just man, Len. Drop that ax, Prue, you won't need it again."

"Get going!" Calloway's fury was partially expended in the jab he gave the man at the other end of the revolver.

The door swung on its hinges.

Calloway's face! His mouth hung open as if surprise had permanently dislocated his jaw. The other—she shivered—never had she seen such eyes. Trapped. Desperate. Murderous. She had not known that anything human could look like that. David had known, though. Dave! Where was he? If only—

The cabin door! Opening! Slowly! Soundlessly! Something sinister in its caution. Had the escaped convict a pal? Her blood chilled. Who had come?

"Give me that gun!" Rodney Gerard had the revolver in his hand before Prudence realized who had dashed into the cabin. With a relieved sigh Calloway dropped his hands.

"Put 'em up again!" "Don't be a darn fool, Gerard. I—" "Put 'em up! There's blood on your forehead, Prue. Who hurt you?"

Prue's brain felt curiously light. Her voice seemed to trickle from a great empty space behind her eyes.

"Hurt me! No one. Believe it or not, I was about to add a colorful fact to the state of Maine war against crime, when you crashed in. They're an intriguing pair, aren't they? Reading from left to right, you have first a pearl thief, then a—just man—such a just man!"

"Steady, Prue. Don't shiver like that. I'll get your pearls."

"While you're getting those, you might make that man return the jewels he stole from my safe last night."

"Lissen, what does the Jane mean, jewels? Do you think if I had anything I could turn into money I'd be hangin' round here? Say, she's crazy."

Was the man acting amazement, or hadn't he taken the emerald? "Crazy or not, you'd come along with us. Get going!" Gerard gave the revolver a suggestive hitch. "Follow him, Calloway. Keep your hands up, both of you. Prue, come on."

He nodded. Len Calloway looked as if he were burning up, his face had a purplish tinge. He spoke between clenched teeth.

"I'll get going all right. But watch out, Gerard. I'm not through with you. Miss Schuyler's all for you, isn't she? Have you told her that you've been

Through the opening came the crackling of twigs under stumbling, heavy feet, rough voices. The sounds dwindled into forest silence.

"Is it safe to go now?" With unsteady fingers Prue tried to clasp the pearls about her throat.

"In just a minute. Let me do that. Bend your head, Gorgeous."

The husk in Gerard's voice, his fingers against the back of her neck set Prue shivering again.

"What's the matter?" He looked down at her skirt. "Your clothes are soaked. Your lips are blue. How did you get so wet? That's a mean bruise. What happened?"

"Lost my way. Fell into the b-brook."

He pulled off his coat. "Put your arms in. Don't argue. Do as you're told. It's not a perfect thirty-six, but it will help keep you warm."

"How did you know where I was?" "Jean got anxious about you. Turned back and met us. That child has a brain. She knew you shouldn't have gone with Calloway. Why, why did you do it?"

"Jim wished he could be out of the way when the g-gang arrived. I tried to help, and now you c-crab."

"I'm not crabbing. Don't you know that I almost lost my mind when Jean told me where you'd gone? Don't you know that I went through hell getting to you? Don't you know that it's torture for me to see you shiver and have my hands tied by that infernal promise I made? If I were to touch you—"

The caressing break in his voice, the faint tremor of his lips set the blood burning to Prue's hair.

"Oh, come on! Let's get out of here!" He pulled a flashlight from his coat pocket.

"Let's hurry! Hurry! I'm frozen!" "Go on."

He followed as she entered the trail. Every swish of her wet skirts about her knees sent a million little icy shivers coasting along her veins. Gerard faced her down the trail. The hand that touched her was like ice. Contrition swept her.

"You're freezing! Take your coat. I don't need it, r-really I don't."

"Stop talking. Go on! If you don't, I will carry you, and you are not a fairy, girl."

He was cold, but of course he wouldn't acknowledge it. Had he heard what Calloway had said about Milly and money—Ooch, how cold her legs and feet were—like sticks of ice! There! She had put the right one forward. Now the left—right—left—right—Had Rodney paid the circus girl's bills? Left—right—"Keep on feet!"—left—right—march time—the words were like a merry-go-round. She couldn't stop them. The clearing at last. Copper-red light on the trees. A fire! No, the sunset! A sky of rainbow splendor. The color warmed her, all except her feet. Right—left—they had frozen—

Someone caught her as she stumbled. Someone picked her up in his arms.

"How warm—how heavenly—Left—right—Please—please—Jim—Jim—stop those words going round and round—"

Someone smothered something between his teeth. Someone pulled off the coat, bundled her into something woolly and soft, something that smelled of tobacco, lifted her into a car. She was warmer. Those horrid words had stopped whirling. Why should she have thought for an instant that she was with Jim Armstrong? She looked at the man at the wheel.

"Thank, goodness, you have put on your coat! It would be you—the man-of-the-moment," she said unsteadily.

He looked straight down into her eyes. Straight and deep.

"But all the time you thought I was Jim."

Prudence closed her lids tight. That pesky, "Left!" "Right!" started in her head again. She had better keep them open. Rodney Gerard needn't growl at her. Suppose she were to remind him of Milly Gooch and—lucky she had found that out in time!

Gerard drew the robe closer about her.

"Warmer Gorgeous?"

If he spoke to her again in that unsteady voice, she would cry her heart out on his shoulder, then where would she be?

"Warmer—but—a roaring fire and a cup of hot tea will seem like heaven. Jim will—"

"Jim! Jim! You think of him every minute. Why don't you marry him?" Prudence shut her eyes. She had been about to say that Jim would think him lost. He had handed her a weapon of defense. She rushed to her own destruction.

"I have had that idea myself—in fact it is quite settled."

The words seemed to twang in the air long after they were spoken, to vibrate like a violin string which had been roughly struck. What a lie! What an outrageous lie! She had stripped off honor and truth in a determination to protect herself from future heartache. What would Jim Armstrong say if he knew? He mustn't know. After what seemed hours of time and miles of road, she begged in what she recognized as absurd anticlimax.

"Please don't mention what I told you to anyone—even David. We—we don't want it known—at present. I—I—well, you made me angry and—and I just flung it at you."

"Don't worry. I shan't broadcast the good news. You are hoarse. Still chilly?"

"I'm warmer, but thank heaven, we are almost home! There's the red brick house!"

"David and I had planned for you to dine at High Ledges tonight—he

wanted to tell you of our experiences—but if you've taken cold—"

"I never take cold. As soon as I get off these wet clothes I'll be all right." How could she face Jim Armstrong, she wondered.

He lifted her out of the roadster and pulled off the robe. "You're shivering. There isn't a light in the house. Where is Jane Mack?"

"Having t-tea with Mrs. S-Si, probably."

"You're shivering again. Come on! I'm going in with you!"

"No! No! Go home! I don't need anyone."

"See you! Come on!" He laid a compelling arm about her shoulders and drew her along the path. The knob of the front door turned under his hand. He followed her into the living room which was faintly lighted by blinking coals on the hearth.

"Sit in that wing chair. Don't try to talk."

He flung pine cones from the big copper kettle beside the fireplace on the embers. They blazed. Carefully he laid birch kindling; when that caught he piled on large logs and lighted the lamp.

Prudence protested hoarsely: "Please don't do anything more. I can take care of myself."

"Got a heater in the house? Is your room warm?"

"My own room upstairs? Only when I have a fire in the stove."

"Then I'll get your dry clothes, you can't stay in those wet things, and you are not going up to that cold room to change. Stick out your foot."

He dropped to one knee and unlaced the boot she automatically held out. For an instant she was dumb from surprise, but only for an instant.

"Rodney Gerard, don't dare go to my room."

"Did you say 'dare'? I'm going under the Trading with the Enemy act. It's being used this year."

He carefully removed the other boot, placed the pair side by side on the hearth, and crossed the room.

Huddled in the wing chair, she regarded him as he returned. Green crepe pajamas hung over one arm, her flannel house coat striped in blue and green over the other. How had he known what to bring?

"Here you are! Get out of those wet things and into these."

He drew a chair in front of the

fire and laid the garments over its back. Prudence regarded him with a superior smile, as superior as a smile could be with chattering teeth behind it.

"Just naturally helpful, aren't you? I haven't the slightest intention of ch-changing. I'll stay here until M-Macky gets back."

"You have another guess coming to you. You'll change to dry clothes while I'm in the kitchen making a cup of hot tea. Now get this. If you haven't when I come back, I'll peel off those wet things myself." He paused on the threshold. "Make it snappy. It doesn't take long to boil water."

Prudence wrinkled her nose at his back. The act of defiance precipitated a body-wrenching sneeze. Let him try to make her change. Just let him try.

She glanced furtively at the pajamas and coat over the chair. They looked blissfully warm, and she was frozen. Why not put them on? Why freeze for the pleasure of defying Rodney Gerard?

What was that sound? Was he coming already? With shaking hands she pulled off the green cardigan. Of course, the lordly male would think he had frightened her into obedience. She knotted the cord of the green and blue house coat. He hadn't. It wasn't that she was too proud to fight—was her reaction to that thought a chuckle or a shiver—she was too cold to fight. Silly not to have put these toasty warm things on at once.

He was coming! She caught up the wet clothing and jammed it into the wood box. Back in the wing chair she thrust her bare toes, still white from cold, into sandals and sat on them.

When Gerard entered he glanced quickly at the chair in front of the fire. He drew forward a Chinese teapoy and set down the tray in his hand.

"There you are!" He poured tea, strong enough to curl the straightest lashes up tight, and passed her the cup.

"Drink it while it's hot." She took a hasty swallow.

"It's boiling! You—haven't a c-copper-lined mouth up your sleeve, have you? You're such an efficient p-person."

"Did it burn?"

"Oh no, it froze and frosted all the way down."

"Don't try to be funny. Drink it. At least, you're not shivering now. What the dickens have you done to this room?"

"Paper and paint. I wanted it fresh for David when he returned." She started to her feet. "Dave! How could I have forgotten? He must be wild with anxiety about me."

"Sit down! Finish that tea! I phoned him from upstairs. Told him that you were okay and that you would be at High Ledges for dinner. I—" A door banged. "Who's that? Sit still!"

Before he could reach the hall, Jane Mack appeared on the threshold.

"Miss Prue! Miss Prue! They've caught the escaped prisoner! Now perhaps you'll get your jewels." She took a step into the room and pulled down her spectacles. "What's the matter, child? What happened to her, Mr. Rodney?"

Prue reassured quickly: "Nothing happened, Macky, except that I went to look at my timber and got wet. Mr. Gerard made some tea and—here we are."

Jane Mack put her hand against Prue's cheek. "You look feverish. Sure you haven't taken cold?"

"Of course not. I never have a cold. What did you hear about the convict, Macky? Tell us, quick."

Gerard lifted the heavy coat from Jane's thin shoulders—Prue wondered if that attention ever had been shown her before—and drew forward a chair.

"Sit here, Miss Mack. How did you hear about the capture?"

"The news was broadcast about ten minutes ago. The convict was brought to the county jail by a leading citizen—didn't tell his name over the radio—who caught him in the woods, dared death from the desperado's revolver, and captured him single-handed."

Jane Mack's theatrical "dared death" unleashed Prue's shivers.

"Single-handed!" she echoed. The leading citizen was Calloway, of course. Evidently he had forgotten to mention Rodney Gerard's timely entrance at the cabin, had forgotten her mastery stroke with the ax.

"Single-handed!" she repeated, and looked at Rodney Gerard. He shook his head as his eyes met hers. She turned to Jane Mack.

"So the leading citizen caught him single-handed. Ain't human nature grand!"

(Continued Next Week.)

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