Booth Tarkington



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The Fighting Littles



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une morning sunshine brightening hotly on the lowered window shades of Mrs. Little's bedroom woke her from a dream that she was still beautiful Wilma Filmer, unmarried and being chased by a Russian choir. For some moments after her waking, which was at first only partial, she remained in fear of the choir; then, becoming slightly more intelligent, comprehended that she was afraid of something else but couldn't remember what it was. She didn't wish to remember, either. Apprehension lay upon her shapelessly; but she preferred not to investigate it and tried to get back to sleep again, no matter came what dreams. Recollections wouldn't let her. began to form themselves, and she was aware that she feared something old and something new. Something that had been happening for a long while frightened her and so did something recent—so recent that it had taken place during the past night. "Oh, my!" she said remembering everything, and decided not to get up until her husband had gone downtown to business, if he'd let her.

The something old that frightened her—the something that had been happening for a long time—was the change in what she thought of as her husband's disposition. During their engagement and for a long time after they were married nobody could have been more amiably tractable. He sought no pleasure without her, except to attend a Legion meeting now and then, or a banquet of his college

fraternity alumni; and, generous, he was delighted when she confessed to him that she'd spent a little more on a dress, a pair of slippers or a hat than she thought she ought. Sturdy and energetic in body and mind, he loved his country, his wife, baseball and pounding hard at his business. They were happy in the six-room house where they lived those first years, half way to downtown in their growing city; it wasn't until after the birth of the baby that he showed a first symptom of what later got to be the matter with him.

"Put her back in the crib instantly!" he said crisply to his wife, one day. "I don't intend to have my child picked up and held in that posture; it's not hygiene."

He'd read all the books, and his wife hadn't read any; books made her sleepy. So she gave way and put the baby back in the crib. Several times Ripley Little was like this; but evoked from the young wife more amusement than alarm. In fact, she was pleased by the scientific raising he insisted upon for their little girl.

Affection made him perhaps an overdutiful father, and he was only a little less so when the second child, a boy, was born three years and a few months later; but in general the amiability, often fondly husband's indulaent. young continued, and so did the cheerfulness of the small household. There couldn't easily have been a jollier family when the children were little. Christmases and birthdays were merry festivals, and in the summertime Ripley Little had a hundred devices for making gay—afternoons at the ball park, picnics in a dozen sylvan spots known to him since boyhood, evening dashes in the car for sundaes downtown at the fashionable confectioner's, spending debauches at Schücke's voluptuous toy store, movies, the circus—there was no end to the surprises he had for the children.

He loved to play with them and their toys, and, when they grew old enough for school, he went over their lessons with them, chucklingly solved their problems in arithmetic, freshened his memory to talk history with them, and obviously asked no better of life than to continue these pleasures. He didn't even play golf, declaring that he had too much fun at home with "the little Little family." In those days he loved to speak of his wife, his children and himself as "the little Little family", and he often repeated wistfully his great wish—that his children would never grow older.

He was a born businessman, and, profoundly inspired by the thought that he worked for his children's future, he strove mightily and successfully, was happy in his daily tasks, prospered rapidly. Goody, the little girl, was six years old and Filmer, the boy, just under three in 1929 when their father bought the fine new house, with the shrubberied big yard for them to play in, far out in a semi-suburban affluent neighborhood. The stock market collapse of that year didn't hurt Ripley Little much—he'd anticipated it—and he stood up to the declines of '31 and '32 manfully; it wasn't till after the banks had been closed in '33 that his confident cheerfulness was really impaired. His wife, never much aware of economics or of public affairs, perceived that he began to have a habit of looking uneasy and to be sometimes irritable in his speech. He was still jolly with the children but inclined to be stricter with them.

This strictness, or at least the attempt to enforce it, increased. He'd been brought up—or now believed he had—

to respect his elders, to cultivate quiet and rather formal manners, to reverence religious observances, to possess a feeling of responsibility and to be generally sensible. As his children grew old enough to be supposed to understand these things, he naturally expected their deportment to show that they did, and, more and more worried about his country and his business, he became more fretful when it didn't.

Especially was he sharp sometimes with his daughter; for the young Goody, resembling her mother, who was still a noticeably pretty woman, seemed to be growing up lightheaded, particularly when she came to be fourteen and fifteen and sixteen. As these ages coincided with unpleasant perturbations brought upon Ripley Little by both private and public affairs, he was the more frequently temperish, while Goody, proportionately high-spirited as she grew prettier and prettier, replied in kind. To Mrs. Little her own position daily seemed to be the unfortunate one of an umpire present upon a field of continuous contest—an umpire often appealed to but without the power to enforce her decisions or, indeed, many opportunities to announce them.

She was a peace-loving woman; but not an able one. She'd never known how to cope with what she called "the servant problem", and her vigorous husband had done most of the housekeeping before Cousin Olita came to live with the family. Cousin Olita, born Filmer (not Little) was peace-loving too; but she had a gift, her only one, for making household service smooth. In her youth Cousin Olita had been thought quite a showpiece in a large curvy way, though nobody young would have believed this of her now,

and she was still as pleasant looking as she was overbuxom, frizzly-blonded and good-natured. Flat broke at forty-five, she'd flopped upon the Littles, who kept her because somebody had to; but her sunniness and her talent with servants and for marketing were at least partly worth the added expense. Mrs. Little thought that they all might be having a pretty nice time together—she and Ripley and Goody and young Filmer and Cousin Olita—if her husband could ever just forget the New Deal and stop fighting with Goody, anyhow now and then.

He didn't seem able to do either, though he had a wild week of excitement and triumph in the early summer of 1940 when the Republicans nominated Mr. Wendell L. Willkie for President. Ripley Little went so passionately into the campaign that his troubles with the seventeen-year-old Goody were minor until after the election in November, which prostrated him. Recovering partially, he renewed his struggle to form his daughter upon old precepts and was so vehement in the matter that Mrs. Little feared there'd never be peace in the house again.

She reproached herself for her total failure as a reconciliator. Not perceiving that she was merely a buffer in a war between two generations and two nervous nervous systems, she was sure that there was *some* road to harmony if she could only find it. Advised by a friend, she privately consulted a psychiatrist who, himself confused by her account of her troubles, got her all mixed up and frightened. She began by trying hard to tell him about her husband's peculiar system of profanity, how what he said sounded terribly like swearing yet really wasn't.

The truth of the matter, simpler than she realized, was only that Ripley Little sometimes yielded to the ancient urge of many good men to be profane yet not irreverent and to blaspheme without sin. Archaic forms, such as Od's wounds, Od's fish, 'Sblood, Gadzooks, would have been ridiculous in the modern mouth, and the later Jiminy criminy, Jiminy crickets, Gee, Gosh, Golly, Jeepers creepers, or the New England My Godfrey, My Odfrey, and By Orry, these and their like would have been pale upon the tongue of a man so forcible. Ripley Little's style in all of his acts was the natural, so his style in swearing sprang naturally to his lips, although, as his wife said, it sounded dismayingly like the real thing. Mrs. Little's powers of narration, however, were feeble and she didn't make herself entirely clear.

"You see, he says something like jobjam, for instance," she told the psychiatrist. "Sometimes I think he's saying what it sounds like, or even worse; but I don't think it ever is, really, if you see what I mean. He was brought up religiously and likes to set an example whenever he can. When we were first married I never really did hear him say anything like that—not until these last few years. I'd think I'd hear him muttering these things to himself, and then sometimes it would come out right loudly—jobjam and those other things, you see—especially when he's talking about our young Goody's friends, or her beginning lipstick or anything, or wearing shorts, you see. For quite a while I used to think it was profane; but if I listened closely, then I didn't think so because I could hear it was just jobjam or job jam the helm——"

"What?" The doctor leaned forward attentively. "What did you say?"

"Why, job jam the helm," Mrs. Little replied, reddening. "Sometimes I'd get to thinking he said these things so much that I ought to speak to him about it and tell him it was bad for him. You see?"

"Yes, perfectly," the psychiatrist replied. "After you first thought you heard your husband using these strange expressions, you thought you heard them oftener. I see. Now let's get back a little. Perhaps you might find it interesting to give me just a little talk about your childhood, and we'll see if you can remember if anything ever shocked and upset you when you were very young."

Bewildered, Mrs. Little tried to comply; then interrupted herself to explain that her husband really did say "job jam" for worse. It wasn't an illusion of hers, she said repeatedly, and what she wanted advice about was how to become the kind of woman that could keep peace in her family; but the psychiatrist, smiling kindly, kept trying to lead her back to her memories of her childhood. She felt that they weren't getting much of anywhere together, and when she left she was so worried about her own mental condition that she decided not to come again lest she be more so.

Going to lengths, she read several magazine articles on helpful wifely and motherly procedures. She even confusedly plodded through part of a book, *The Family*, and, hearing of an instructive play called *Life with Father* in which a wife and mother got away with a good deal in spite of a dominating husband and father, she went to see it; but she came forth hopeless, knowing herself not up to the lady therein depicted.

In regard to her present family life, Mrs. Little found only one comfort: she gave up the idea that she could ever hope to stand between her husband and their daughter, though she'd always keep trying; but at least she hadn't often to try to stand between Ripley Little and their young son, Filmer. That promising boy had reached the age of fourteen, almost fifteen now, without getting Ripley Little seriously upset more than seven or eight times.

The mother realized that maybe this was because Filmer, in his home life, was carefully secretive about himself—except in perhaps too frequent references to the praise he had from his teachers—but at any rate it was a comfort, for the time being. She knew of course that Filmer's adolescence might break out on him and get him into real trouble with his father, the way Goody's had; but, so far, this wasn't happening, thank heaven, and her husband sometimes even praised Filmer's sensible conduct as a contrast to Goody's irresponsibility. Filmer was growing up to be a good quiet little man, the father had gone so far as to say; Filmer knew how to take care of himself and how to treat older people with consideration; Filmer was too bright to look upon life as uproar and motion merely.

"Uproar!" Mrs. Little thought of the uproar that had roused her in the early dark hours of that morning, and again she gasped "Oh, my!" to her pillow.

The sunshine grew stronger upon her window shades; she heard Cousin Olita tap upon Filmer's door to rouse him for the day; then firm footsteps, a man's, sounded along the

corridor, descended the stairway and were heard from the hall below. Straight beneath her, in the dining-room, a moment later, there was a thump as of a chair roughly used. Ripley Little was sitting down to his breakfast.

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N THE BUTLER'S PANTRY Gentry Poindexter, colored, tall, Zulu-ish and all in white, spoke with relish to his wife, the Littles' housemaid. "Boss sutny madded up this day, Almatina. You go' hear him cuss like you ain't never hear him yet."

Almatina, preparing a breakfast tray to be taken upstairs, shook her head. "You the dumb-earedest man I ever listen to, Gentry. How many times do I got to tell you it's like Miss Olita says and Mr. Little's cussin' ain't cussin' at all. It sound like it; but it ain't."

"So?" the colored man said. "You and Miss Olita can tell me it ain't cussin' every day for seven months and Christmas; but if you right, then I ain't got no more ability to listen good than a ant's got money to buy him wrastlin' pants." He giggled whisperingly, placed a silver coffee-pot upon a Sheffield tray and stepped toward the door. "Settin' at table ri' now, holdin' up the newspaper 'tween him and Miss Olita so he ain't got to look at her. Ain't makin' a sound; but he go' be buzz-boomin' soon! Somebody go' start him; but it ain't go' be me. Ain't go' be Gentry tell him whut happen las' night. No, ma'am!"

Thereupon Gentry Poindexter opened the pantry door with his knee, passed into the dining-room and refilled the coffee-cup at the elbow of the stocky-bodied, middle-aged man who sat at the head of the mahogany Georgian table and irascibly stared at a morning newspaper. Cousin Olita

bore him company, so to speak; but hushedly. She looked up from her place half way down the table, and spoke in a low voice.

"You might just leave the coffee-pot, Gentry. Mr. Little may like——"

"What?" Little looked over the top of his paper challengingly. "What may I like?"

"Nothing," Cousin Olita said hurriedly. "I only told Gentry to leave the coffee-pot because you may like——"

"Like?" Ripley Little said again. "I'd like to know what's left for me to like. I'm jammed if I see what's left for anybody to like when every time a man looks at a newspaper for nine years he either sees where Hitler's done something worse than he did yesterday or else reads something that means he'll have to hire three lawyers to tell him how to write down everything he does in what little business he's got left with what little money he's got left in a way that won't get him into the penitentiary." He thrust the paper from him. "It seems slightly peculiar to me that you claim to have slept through all the rumpus in this house after midnight last night. I find that hard to credit, Olita, hard to credit." He looked sternly at the colored man. "Gentry, that noise certainly penetrated to your quarters. What was it?"

A film of blankness overspread Gentry Poindexter's face; his eyes became opaque and his whole person expressed nonreceptivity. "Me," he said, "I ain't turn off layin' on my face from ten las' night to six o'clock after daylight."

"What? You mean to tell me you slept through all that?"

"When I sleep," Gentry said, "I sleep. No, suh. Whutever 'twas, Gentry ain't hear it."

Little frowned at him. "You didn't hear the siren?"

"Hear whut, Mr. Little?"

"I'm asking you. You didn't hear a police car sirening all over this neighborhood last night?"

"Police? I got nothin' to do with them people."

"It sounded all the way from down the street, getting louder and louder," Ripley Little said. "It didn't stop its noise until it got in front of this house; and right after that a car turned into our driveway and job jam if it didn't sound to me mighty like as if it was the car that had been doing the sirening! Then somebody drove a herd of cattle into the house, turned the phonograph on, and the cows tried to dance. You heard nothing?"

"I ain't hear no cow dance, no, suh, Mr. Little. All night long I sleepin' sweet on my face and ain't hear——"

He was interrupted by the youth, Filmer, who came into the dining-room at that moment and took his place at the table. "Then you must 'a' been dead, not asleep," Filmer said. "I never heard such a disgraceful noise in this house in all my whole days. Bring me my cereal, Gentry."

"Oh, then somebody did hear something, after all!" Ripley Little looked upon his son with a frowning slight approval, as Gentry departed. "I'm glad to be corroborated. Gentry and your Cousin Olita talk as if I'm suffering from auditory delusions, Filmer. They'd both take their oath that the neighborhood and this house were so peaceful throughout the night that they slept like lambs and heard no disturbance whatever. Can you tell me what caused it?"

"Easy," Filmer replied. "I could win quiz contests all day on questions like that. It was Goody and Ham Ellers—I know I heard *his* voice—and the rest of her screwy crowd. I didn't wake up till they were dancing right under my room; but they were creating such an outrage I wondered, Father, you didn't go down and stop 'em."

"So did I!" his father said testily. "So do I now! A thousand times I wonder why I permit this family to be subjected to such outbreaks in the dead of the night." He looked crossly at Gentry Poindexter, who was placing Filmer's cereal upon the table. "You can get ready to drive me downtown, Gentry."

"Downtown?" Gentry asked in a surprised voice. "Downtown, Mr. Little?"

Little, rising from his chair, stared at him. "What's the matter with you? Where else do I go except downtown, at this hour? Isn't it your custom to drive me downtown in my car after breakfast?"

"Yes, suh; but I was jes' thinkin' about that."

"You were? Just thinking about it, were you?"

"Yes, suh; I was thinkin' kind o' like this." The colored man, avoiding his employer's eye, discovered a crumb upon the polished surface of the table, removed it conscientiously with a napkin. "Mr. Little, ain't I always says we intitle to be a three-car family, not one them cheap twos? Look at this fine big house, all that nice grass and flower bushes and them trees we got, nice driveway out to the street. By rights we a three-car family, Mr. Little. We——"

"What's the matter with you?" Little inquired again. "Are you going to bring my car around or aren't you?"

"Yes, suh. I was jes' thinkin'——" Gentry carefully removed another crumb from the table, seeming intent upon this duty. "We pure and honestly need more'n jes' one car, Mr. Little, for me to drive you downtown in and go after you in, and only one other for all the scramblin' round Miz Little and Miss Goody does in it, 'specially Miss Goody. No, suh, yes'd'y noon Miss Goody had to leave that other car in Crappio's garage and it won't be out today; Crappio can't say when. That other car been complainin' since 'way las' winter. Them old models hard to get in good condition once they break down. So we ain't go' be able use that one now, Mr. Little."

"I'm not talking about the other car," Little said. "I'm talking about my own car. Are you trying to tell me you've let it get out of commission? It was absolutely all right when you brought me home in it at five o'clock yesterday afternoon. Have you had it out since?"

"Me? No, no, suh! But yes'd'y evenin' drivin' you home I kind o' notice we ain't rollin' so good. Seem like sump'n fixin' to bust; she ain't say whut. Indurin' the night it look like she done it. Yes, suh, sump'n bust; this morning she won't roll."

"What! Do you mean to tell me that just standing in my garage that car—"

"She won't roll, Mr. Little. She out. Madison Boulevard bus line got nice bus, though; yes, suh. Scuse me, suh."

Gentry, carrying two crumbs in a napkin upon his tray, kneed himself back into the butler's pantry, and Ripley Little, still standing, looked intolerantly at Cousin Olita, whose gaze was upon her coffee-cup. "Olita, do you think

you can see to it that Crappio gets a repair man here in time to have my car put in condition to be sent downtown for me at lunchtime?" he asked.

"I—I'll try, Cousin Ripley." Cousin Olita drank from her cup, seeming interested in its upper rim as she did so. "I'll do my best; but you know how repair men always are, Cousin Ripley. Of course the Madison Boulevard bus is very pleasant indeed; I like that bus, myself, Cousin Ripley. One always sees people one knows in the Madison Boulevard busses, really nice people, too; so that a bus ride on a Madison Boulevard bus often means really quite a nice sociable time and——"

"That's why I hate it," Little said as he opened the diningroom door and walked out into the wide front hallway.

Sounds from the other side of the white-paneled front door, thirty feet before him, brought him to a halt; and his forehead immediately became corrugated with displeasing suspicions. Footsteps clumped on the floor of the portico outside that door; young voices were heard confusedly and there was a fumbling at the polished big brass latch. Then the door opened, revealing four interestingly damaged male persons, in age between seventeen and twenty-one. Two of them had their right arms in slings; the third, with the aid of a crutch, humored an injured foot; and the fourth had a bandaged chin. At sight of the master of the house all of them paused; then the one with the bandaged chin advanced a few steps, looking serious.

"Listen, Mr. Little, please," this one said. "Where's Plunks?"

"Listen yourself, but not please," Little returned. "I don't wish to intrude upon your private business or manners, Hamilton Ellers; but don't you usually ring the bell before entering people's houses?"

"We thought you'd be gone, sir," young Mr. Ellers explained unthinkingly.

"Ah! Too bad!" Ripley Little said. "Too bad; but I'm not. What's the matter with all of you? Been in a night spot riot? Never mind, don't inform me; I'm not interested. It's a bit early to receive callers. Kindly permit me to suggest that you return to your homes—or to your surgeons."

"Well——" Hamilton Ellers, abashed but only slightly so, touched his bandaged chin; then passed his hand over his irregular but not uncomely other features. "Well, sir, we'd really like to see Plunks if——"

"That's not my daughter's name." Little advanced discouragingly. "I don't enjoy hearing it applied to her. I realize that my objection means nothing to you; nevertheless, I still retain title to this property. Kindly retire—or unkindly if you prefer. I'm indifferent which, just so you retire. I bid you good-day—permanently if possible. Do I make my meaning at all clear?"

"Well, sir, if Plunks—I mean Goody——"

"I don't?" Ripley Little continued his advance.

"Ye—es, sir." Hamilton Ellers, at least law-abiding, clumped out to rejoin his friends in the portico, closing the door behind him; and Ripley Little, breathing noisily, passed into the living-room and from a window saw the four moving crippledly toward the front gate and the street. They spoke busily together as they went, but seemed downcast.

"'Plunks'," Ripley Little said, staring through the glass. "That's nice. 'Plunks'!"

"I don't blame you, Father," his fourteen-year-old son said sympathetically from the open double doorway behind him. "I don't blame you for getting mad and talking to yourself."

"Talking to myself?" Little turned. "I wasn't doing anything of the kind."

"Weren't you, Father?" Filmer said. "Well, anyhow, I think you did the right thing. Goody heard you, too. She was leaning over the banisters and she'd have come down and interfered except I think she thought it'd just make it more embarrassing. She's still up there, listening, and it ought to teach her something useful because she certainly heard "

"I certainly did!" a sweet voice called vindictively from the stairway, and the prettiest girl for miles around—darkeyed, brown-haired and stirringly graceful—sped down the steps and came rushing into the room.

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modernist pajamas were not unbecoming; but her facial extreme beauty was marred by a swollen underlip and a discoloration under her right eye; two strips of adhesive plaster, moreover, were crossed upon her right cheek. "Did I hear it!" she cried. "Now I know how you speak to my most intimate friends when I'm not there to protect them! You may be my father; but——"

"That will do! We'll go into this in a moment." Little turned from her to his son. "Filmer, have you finished your breakfast?"

"No, sir. I was just getting into it when I thought I'd better come out in the hall and see what——"

"Very well," Little said. "I don't pretend that I'm not glad to have one intelligent and obedient child left, Filmer; but I think now you'd better go back into the dining-room and close the door and finish your breakfast."

"Yes, sir." Filmer, reluctant but flattered, proved that he was obedient, and, after the dining-room door had been heard to close, Ripley Little addressed his daughter, trying to use a quiet and reasonable voice. She stood before him defiant, breathing fast.

"Now let's have it," he said. "What's the matter with your face?"

"Nothing's the matter with it! Nothing to speak of. I merely——"

"Merely!" her father echoed. "Merely? You call that merely? I'm beginning to have strange ideas. Those gilded hoodlums that just tried to break in here at breakfast-time were practically in ruins, and I'm beginning to believe that a police car actually did drive up to our front door last night. I

"They're not!" the daughter interrupted hotly. "What right have you to call my most intimate friends hoodlums?"

"They are!" The father's temper, already wrecked within, began to operate his voice. "Bandaged gilded young hoodlums, and I'm not going to have them breaking in here day and night, calling a daughter of mine 'Plunks' and——"

"What's the matter with 'Plunks'?" she asked bitterly. "Is it my fault you named me 'Gudrida'? Mother told me she didn't have a thing to do with it; you were bound to christen me 'Gudrida'. I hate being called 'Goody' or 'Drida' and there aren't any lovelier boys in this whole world than Ham Ellers and Bull Thetford and Ruggo Smart and Hot Toddy. You

"Look at your face!" Ripley Little said, all reasonableness gone. "Just look at it, I ask you! How'd you get it?"

"That's exactly what I'm trying to tell you. If you'll ever stop raving long enough to let me——"

"All right. I've stopped. So go ahead. If anybody's doing any raving in this room it certainly isn't I. It's difficult to restrain myself sometimes; but——"

"I thought you said you'd stopped." Then, as her father only looked at her over a heaving chest, Goody spoke as rapidly as she possibly could. "It all amounts to nothing at all except the boys had to come early today on account of having to see me right away about something very important."

"'Important'? Of all creatures living on this distracted earth the four least likely to have anything important in their heads——"

"Go it!" Goody said. "I thought you claimed you'd stopped and wanted to listen. I'm glad, though, you don't think it's important about your car because——"

"My car!" Little started. "My car?"

"You weren't using it, nobody was; the other one was in Crappio's and we didn't have any," Goody explained, with an air of strained patience. It was as if she strove to reach the mind of a backward child. "Mother and Cousin Olita both practically the same as said we could because Ruggo's sister had sneaked his car out on him, poor Ham's got smashed by that truck last week, and Bull and Hot haven't got any. So we definitely didn't have any other way to get to the Rosy Showboat. We——"

"It's coming," her father said. "Now I'm beginning to get it. Rosy Showboat! You had to get to the Rosy Showboat. Of course! The whole jobjam world would have been upset and Hitler'd have been sitting right in the White House if you and Ham Ellers and Bull Thetford and Ruggo Smart and Hot Toddy hadn't got to the Rosy Showboat. So you deliberately took my car—and later there was a police car——"

"Police car? Ridiculous!" Goody interrupted. "It wasn't anything of the kind. I suppose you heard the siren and——"

"Heard it? Who in this whole town didn't hear it? It came screeching up the street and then the phonograph started and a herd of buffaloes——"

"Oh, I knew what a fuss you'd make if it woke you up," Goody said. "What's the use? Entirely on account of your forever going into a frenzy over my staying out a few minutes late, I insisted on coming straight home from the hospital where they took us first, and the boys naturally came with me in the ambulance—an ambulance isn't a police car, is it?—and before we went out to the icebox the nice intern that came along with us may have been a little high and he was the one that turned on the phonograph, and the dancing didn't last over half a minute because I knew if it woke you up you'd be like this in the morning and

"Ambulance," Ripley Little said indistinctly. "Hospital first, then ambulance. What happened to your face and my car?"

"That's what the boys wanted to see me about this morning," Goody said. "The man in the other car was definitely beside himself. He claimed he could prove that Ruggo was driving with his head swiveled round to speak to Ham Ellers and Bull and me on the back seat when it happened."

"When what happened?" Little's voice was more indistinct. "When what happened?"

"Why, when the man's car *hit* us," Goody replied, as if to the most foolish of all his questions. "What else *could* I mean? So naturally the boys were anxious to find out the first thing this morning if I'd found out if you had any collision insurance on your car because maybe——"

"Job jam!" Ripley Little said. "Jam! Job jam the helm! Jam the——"

"Oh, all right!" Goody seemed at the end of her patience. "All right if you have to take it that way. Why can't you be sensible? We all did everything we possibly could. Even while they were fixing us up at the hospital and we still didn't know whether we were alive or dead, we telephoned Crappio to send the wrecking-crew for your car. I'm sorry if you're inconvenienced, Father; but I think for you to speak to just about my dearest friends in the insulting and outrageous way you used when they came here as they did this morning just to try to be helpful and——"

She would have continued; but her father clapped his hands together, making a sound that assisted his facial expression to stop her. "Compared to what I was seven or eight years ago," he said, "I'm a poor man; but I still command funds enough to hire guards if necessary to prevent any of those four car-smashers from setting foot on my premises again day or night. Out of the whole of this community for your constant associates you select the freshest, uselessest, recklessest—"

"I do not!" Goody protested. "They are not, and anyway they select me. Definitely! They definitely——"

"Will you stop!" Little shouted. "Whenever I attempt to exert the slightest authority you try to 'definitely' me deaf. Definitely, definitely, definitely! I'm so sick of that job jammed word I——"

"Why all the noise?" his daughter inquired. "I'm simply trying to tell you I'm sorry for what happened to your car and discover if you have any collision insurance; but why try while you're definitely beside yourself? If you have any further reason for detaining me from my breakfast, kindly

state it. It's getting cold on a tray upstairs and I'd definitely like to return to it."

"Go up and eat it!" the furious father said. "While you're consuming it, swallow this down, too: not one of those swing-crazed speed vandals ever sets a crippled foot on my property again. Definitely!"

"Indeed?" Goody, who had decisively moved toward the door, swung about haughtily. "What's your objection to them?"

"What's my——"

"Certainly! What's your objection to them?"

"Well, I'm dobdabbed!" Little said. Then, conscious that desperation availed him nothing, he once more tried to be reasonable. Compelling himself, he made his voice appealing, as if from man to man. "See here, Goody, let's just try to look at this thing sensibly. If you've got to go places the whole jab time as it seems we can't stop you from doing, why can't you anyhow pick out somebody more intelligent, or at least safer, to go with? There certainly are some young people in this town with anyhow a little common sense and good manners and human caution. Why can't you find at least one young man or boy that has some steadiness and sense and modesty and industry and——"

"Who?" Goody asked, and, stepping toward him, permitted herself to utter a slight peal of jeering laughter. "You have somebody in mind, Father? Whom do you suggest?"

"Why—why, anybody except those," he said. "I wasn't thinking of anyone in particular. I only mean somebody superior to those——"

"Well, mention one," Goody returned. "You say there's such a lot. Can't you mention just one? Who?"

"Why—why——" Little goadedly searched through a limited gallery of ill-remembered young faces and in haste selected one with an earnest expression and spectacles. "Why, young Norman Peel, for instance."

"Norman Peel? Did you say Norman Peel, Father?"

"Certainly I did. Norman Peel. Why not Norman Peel? He's —he's——"

"He's what?" Goody repeated her injurious laughter. "You don't know any more about Norman Peel than a whale does about cats. Are your orders that I'm to be Norman Peel's sole escort from now on?"

"I merely mentioned him," Little responded, struggling with his voice. "I mentioned Norman Peel as merely one example of the better sort of young men of this community."

"You agree with Norman, then," Goody said. "Have you ever seen much of him, Father?"

"I see him from time to time, certainly. He's shown energy enough to go into business and I've heard his employers speak of him as industrious. In a way I've had my eye on him for some time and——"

"Oh, you have your eye on him, have you, Father? As a son-in-law?"

"As a young businessman I'd be glad to see in my own employ," Little said, and, sorely aware that Goody had him far off the subject of her defacements, his injured car and those responsible for both, he added sternly, "As a young man I'd be glad to see in my house because he doesn't come bursting into it held together with splints and calling

my bandaged daughter 'Plunks'! As a young man who doesn't send me from my home on foot after maltreating my daughter's face, inflicting losses on insurance companies and——"

"Oh, then, you *have* got the insurance!" Goody cried. "Thank heaven the boys won't feel they have to ask their fathers to——"

"That's all that concerns you, is it?" Little said fiercely. "That's all you——"

"I said I was sorry, didn't I? How many times do I have to ___"

"'Sorry' pays all the bills, puts my car at the door for me and fixes your face all up again! Young people nowadays burn your house down, then just say 'Sorry!' and——"

"Sorry!" Goody interrupted. "My breakfast's waiting." She returned spiritedly to the doorway, stopped and looked over her shoulder. "What do you know about 'young people nowadays'? How could you know anything about 'em when you're always in such a state? Maybe it isn't tactful to mention it; but in my own quiet circle you're rather well known as the terrible-tempered Mr. Little."

"I?" he cried unwarily. "That's absolute slander. How often does anybody ever hear me speak in anger? Twice a year at the most. I——"

"Twice is right," Goody said. "Six months each time."

Upon that, she took advantage of his inability to respond promptly, and departed; but half way up the stairs she paused to call downward, "Norman Peel? Houp-la!" Then she resumed her swift ascent.