A Long−Distance Call From Jim

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And how it shook up Centerville

TO ELLA NORA ANDREWS, calm, unruffled, serenely humming a gay little tune, gathering her school things together — her "Teacher's Manual of Primary Methods," a box of water−colors, and a big bunch of scarlet−flamed sumac — came the sound of the telephone.

Ella Nora, in her crisp blue linen school suit, shifted her working paraphernalia and took down the receiver. Fate is a veritable chameleon for changing shape and color. This morning she had entered the fat, puffy person of asthmatic Mrs. Thomas Tuttle, and was saying:

"That you, Ella? Have you heard the news? Jim Sheldon is coming here the last of the week. He'll be here on Number Eight, Friday afternoon. And get ready now for the climax — he's bringing his bride. Wha' say? Yes, his wife. He telephoned Pa from Chicago — imagine anybody telephoning clear from Chicago, Ella! He's waited long enough to get married, I must say. He's thirty−six, if he's a day. I know, because my Eddie's just two months older. Well, we must do something for them, and we'll have to get busy right away. Wha' say? All right; I'll ask Addie Smith and Minnie Adams and Mis' Meeker — she's forever thinking of things to eat — " And on and on went the rasping, wheezing voice of Fate, while, through the window, Ella watched the red and yellow and orange zinnias in the back yard fade and run together into a smudge of prismatic coloring.

Ella hung up the receiver and leaned against the window. There was a pounding in her throat, and she couldn't seem to concentrate her thoughts. The zinnias had brightened somewhat, but were still dancing diabolically with the cosmos behind them. From the chaotic jumble of her mind the naked, leering truth picked itself out: It had happened at last — Jim was married. By which statement one gathers, and rightfully, that Ella had in some indefinable way been prepared for the news she had just heard.

In truth, Ella had been preparing for it for years. She was thirty−one now, and from her twentieth year she had been working consistently on an elaborate defense system that surrounded her heart.

Patiently she had dug the trench of an apparent and complete absorption in her school work. She had piled around it countless sand bags of mere−friendliness toward Jim, put up an intricate entanglement of the barb wire of her sharp wit, and over it all painted the deceiving screen of her evident joy−in−her−freedom. But down under all this complicated protective system was The−Thing−in−Her−Heart, palpitating, vital, strong, held a prisoner for years by the stern edict of her mind, doing penance for having been unwise enough to go wandering out into No Man's Land of Dreams.

ELLA waited while the zinnias separated themselves from their background. It had happened. Of course! Hadn't she expected it? Predicted it? James Warren Sheldon, on the staff of an Eastern newspaper, war correspondent, nationally known this past year, was no more a part of land−locked Centerville now than the moon or the North Sea. It had been three years since he had last come breezing into town — tall, lean, brown, virile. Not a day of that short vacation had they missed being together — Ella caught her breath. So this was what Tennyson meant,

was it, when he said a sorrow's crown of sorrow was remembering happier days?

The first school−bellhe North Sea. It had been three years since he had last come breezing into town — tall, lean, brown, virile. Not a day of that short vacation had they missed being together — Ella caught her breath. So this was what Tennyson meant, was it, when he said a sorrow's crown of sorrow was remembering happier days?

The first school−bell rang. When Duty takes Misery by the shoulder and says gruffly, "Oh, cut it! Come on!" so much the better for Misery.

Ella went quickly down the narrow brick walk, leaf strewn now with the red and gold of the Mid−West maple trees, and turned toward the schoolhouse where she had taught for, it seemed to her now, a half−century. Down the street a little girl disentangled her pipe−stem legs from the picket−fence and slipped a moist hand into Ella's.

"Miss−Andrews, where do all the grasshoppers go?"

"I don't know, dear."

Back in the past was Ella's mind, down Childhood Road. She was only eight when Jim Sheldon, a big thirteen−year−old boy, newly orphaned, had come to live across the alley with his aunt and uncle and their little baby, Grace. For years Jim had meant nothing to her but a dreadful scourge, to be borne with as much Christian fortitude as the boils of Job. One of his delicate marks of attention had been a way of dropping unexpectedly out of trees with a weird shriek just at dusk. Ella smiled involuntarily, and the little girl, seeing it, hugged her teacher's hand to her cheek:

"Miss−sAndrews, can you make white cookies out of brown dough?"

"No, dear."

Then there had followed Jim's high−school years, in which he had meant nothing to her, and she had been as unnoticed by Jim as the stilts or velocipede he had discarded. He had gone away to college, and later she to a teachers' training−school, and one unforgettable summer they had accidentally discovered that they held more in common than with anyone else in dull old Centerville. Then Mother died, and from teaching in Capitol City, where she was meeting new people and having new experiences, she had come back home to keep house for Father, and to teach in the same old dingy building where she herself had studied.

"Miss−sAndrews, my birthday's next July, or April — I forget which."

"That's nice, dear."

BUT Jim, after a few months on the Centerville "Enterprise," had gone out into the world, the journalistic world, and pushed rapidly ahead. Several important commissions had been his. He had written her once from Cuba, and once from Japan. A sudden bitterness seized her, that it could be so — Jim to go where he would and she to stay in stagnant old Centerville.

"Miss−sAndrews, do skunks live in this town?"

"Oh, no, dear!"

This last year the whole country had read Jim's war reports, and at rare intervals she had received a letter from him, interesting and friendly. In the last one he had said he had something to tell her when he got back. Well, this was it! And she had wondered — had let herself think that it might mean — A wave of fury, a sense of the loss of her self−respect, swept over her, that she should have allowed her heart to go philandering.

They were at the schoolhouse now. Ella took off her wide blue hat and hung it in the little closet. Then she went over to the corner blackboard and wrote the memory verse for the day:

Goldenrod, what have I learned from you? To be cheerful and loving, gentle and true.

"Hypocrite!" she said savagely.

THE other four women were at Mrs. Tom Tuttle's when Ella arrived. The Tuttle house was very new and displayed a great deal of yellow pine with a varnish smell. Some of the details of the new furnishings, including several lurid fruit pieces in oil, jumped at Ella as she sat down in the shining depths of a golden−oak rocker. Among other bric−à−brac, a painted celluloid collar box of Tom Tuttle's, that had evidently been thought too artistic to be relegated to a mere bedroom, held an advantageous place on the glossy colonnade. No better−hearted people than Centerville held were to be found in the whole world admitted Ella to herself as she gazed, fascinated, at the receptacle which had wandered out of Tom Tuttle's boudoir. But why did so many of them have such atrocious taste?

There was immediate discussion as to what form of social event Jim's entertainment should take. Mrs. Tom Tuttle wanted an evening party, with all the men, women and children in town.

"I just feel like we couldn't do enough for Jim Sheldon and his bride," she wheezed, her chin trembling and her eyes filling with tears. Emotion of any description — joy, pathos, surprise, sorrow, it made no difference — always set her tear ducts to working.

Mrs. Meeker wanted a real supper with long tables and everybody sitting down at once. To Mrs. Meeker, earth held no sorrow that food could not heal, and life's sweetest moment was the one in which some neighbor said, "I just know this is Mis' Meeker's salad."

"It will be late afternoon when they get here," she argued, "and I'll bet supper would taste mighty good to 'em."

"Supper!" Minnie Adams was witheringly scornful. "Jim Sheldon eats dinner at night now."

"Well, I don't care if he does! I can remember the time when he et a good old−fashioned supper. And it's awful silly to call it dinner. 'Breakfast, dinner and supper, created He them.' I believe I could find them very words in the Bible if I set out to hunt."

"What would we serve if we had — an evening meal?" Addie Smith asked hurriedly. Addie was little and pretty and, like many another ultra−pacifist, was mentally a nonentity, the echo of an echo. But she was the doctor's wife and she had more cut glass and china than anyone else in town.

"Potatoes for one thing." Mrs. Meeker was on familiar ground. "I've got a new way; I learned it from Jennie Rhodes when she visited me, and I intended to spring it on the Kensington; but I'm like Mis' Tuttle, nothing's too good for Jim Sheldon and his bride. First, you mash 'em — "

"Jim and his bride?" Ella inquired languidly.

"Oh, you go on, Ella! — and then you put 'em on the plate with an ice−cream mold, and there they stand up just as cute, like little pyramids with a clove at the top."

"A clove! Why, a clove? Why not a clothespin, or a prune? Is there a clove on the top of the pyramids?" Ella's apparently unquenchable spirits were rising.

Minnie Adams insisted on a reception in the town hall. Minnie was very tall and seemed to get thinner toward the top. Even her neck was larger at the base and very long, as though Nature in an absent−minded mood had forgotten what she was doing and gone on making neck.

"BUT, Minnie," Ella interposed diplomatically, "a reception is so stiff. At least it would be stiff for informal Centerville people to give."

"Oh, I don't think so — and it would show her that we know how to do things right. She's probably a New York girl — or she may be French, for all we know. Good land! I hope not. We'd have to motion out everything we had to say. Anyway, a reception wouldn't be stiff when we got it to going good."

"How do you stop it when you do get it to going?" Mrs. Tuttle wanted to know.

"Maybe it would be like Mrs. Whitman in her new electric car over at Greenwood," Ella suggested. "She couldn't stop it, you know. She went round and round the garage all afternoon calling out to the men every time she went by. And they couldn't make out what she said, and thought she was just showing off."

Everyone laughed. Ella, apparently, was the gayest of all.

"It would be nice to have a picture of Jim up," Addie Smith suggested timidly. As it was Addie's first contribution to the general reserve fund of ideas it should have been met with more respect, but it only called forth from Ella: "Horrors! Addie! You'll be wanting to paste his war articles up on the walls of the hall."

"Speaking of the hall," Mrs. Meeker put in, "I think a lot of Japanese umbrellas and lanterns could be fixed to cover the walls, they're so dingy — "

"And, maybe, we could get Sam Fong to come up and stand under them for atmosphere." It was Ella again, making the others laugh. "Thank goodness, I'll always be like that," she thought to herself, as though she had just made a discovery. "Outside I'll always be gay and silly."

MINNIE ADAMS won. It was to be a reception. Tom Tuttle was to go to the train and get the guests in his car. Minnie had sniffed to herself over this particular detail, Tom's car being of that make which carries a very modest price and a very immodest notoriety. But as Tom had been honored with the telephone message from Jim, there was nothing to do but submit.

If Jim and his wife chose to change their clothes, Tom was to stop with them at his house, and then bring them

on over to the hall. There were several hundred other details connected with the soirée, definitely planned, so that the whole thing would move, barrage−like, with the precision of clockwork. For genuine leadership, Marshal Foch had nothing on Mrs. Thomas Tuttle.

Ella found herself swept along on the tidal wave of preparations, hating it, heartsick, loathing the attempt of these kind, simple folk to make of themselves something they were not.

The receiving line was to have been composed of the five who had met at Mrs. Tuttle's, but Ella balked. If this horrible thing had to be, she, at least, didn't purpose to be a member of the shock troops. She compromised by agreeing to take charge of the frappé bowl, far in the rear of the long hall.

On Friday afternoon the old hall over Hodge's Dry Goods Emporium looked, as the "Enterprise" would later describe it, "a bower of loveliness." Under Ella's direction the school children had magnanimously brought in half the maple leaves and at least two−thirds of the blazing sumac in the precinct.

Red−faced, puffy Mrs. Tom Tuttle had on a dark purple silk which gave her the appearance of being about to expire from an apoplectic stroke. Tall, angular Minnie Adams, with an aigrette from her last winter's hat in her hair, had, in defiance of Biblical axiom, by taking thought added a cubit to her stature. Mrs. Meeker's best black silk was slightly awry from much journeying to and fro between the sandwich table and the coffee pot. Addie Smith had on a really beautiful gown purchased at Capitol City.

"If she only doesn't say 'have saw,'" thought Ella.

Ella, herself, was in white — a dainty, sheer dress which she carried with that little indefinable air that no one else in Centerville possessed.

"You look like a bride yourself, Ella," Mrs. Meeker paused in one of her breathless flittings to the kitchen. "I wish to the land it was you — you'd 'a' made Jim a real smart wife."

"Ah, madam, I thank you!" Ella bowed in mock solemnity and then laughed gayly, while The−Thing−In−Her−Heart winced and moaned.

The assemblage was noticeably lacking in masculinity. To be sure, a few brave souls were there — Doctor Smith and old Judge Adams and the two ministers and the editor of the "Enterprise." But not for the President of the United States would the majority of the Centerville men have gone through that boiled−shirt ordeal.

It was almost time now. The receiving line nervously eyed the chalk marks which designated the exact spot where, in a few moments, it was to function.

The train whistled in. That was the cue for several dozen people to do several dozen different things. Ella's particular response to this signal was to go down two flights of stairs to the cellar under the dry−goods store and bring up part of the cold frappé, which had been packed since noon in an ice−filled tub, as the ice from the old frog pond was too dirty to put into the beverage. She did her assigned task, and then, with taut nerves, stood by the rear window of the hall and looked out over the dismal array of boxes, barrels and sheds, waiting —

At a slight commotion on the stairway she breathed a little prayer for composure and walked over to take her place at the frappé bowl. Even so walked Marie Antoinette out onto the balcony at Versailles.

THEY were coming in. There was Jim, taller, leaner, browner, his head thrown back with that familiar air, and the boyish smile she knew so well. And — that — beautiful — girl! She was not over twenty−two or−three, lithe, lovely, radiant. She was in gray, a soft, exquisite pearl−gray. >From the tips of her slender gray−shod feet and the tips of her slender gray−gloved hands to the drooping dove−winged hat, she was perfection.

Jim was shaking hands with Mrs. Tuttle, while his wife stood waiting with a pretty air of shy interest, until, with a protective gesture, he drew her forward.

Ella's feet and hands were cold and her cheeks blazing. She did not know that, in the heightened color of her fair skin, the soft waves of her hair, the cornflower blue of her eyes, and the lovely contour of her face, she was as beautiful as the young girl she envied.

She only knew that everything was going wrong. Mrs. Tuttle, in her atrocious purple dress, had bounced out of the receiving line, thrown her massive arms around the girl and kissed her. Ella shuddered. From experience she knew what a combustion it had been.

The whole line was breaking up. Everyone was laughing immoderately. She could hear Minnie Adams's high henlike cackle, and Mrs. Meeker's bass rumble that always sounded as though she were using a megaphone. And in a few minutes Jim would bring that exquisite creature back here to meet her and to drink iceless punch. How characteristic of Centerville was that dirty frog−pond ice! The whole thing was horrible. They were frog−pond

people, doing things in a frog−pond way. Oh, she was ashamed of Centerville, ashamed of Mrs. Tom Tuttle's effusion, ashamed of her own handmade dress that she had thought so dainty in its white laciness. The girl would laugh at them all. And Jim — because he loved her — Jim would laugh with her. She could not endure it!

"Georgiana!" she called to a young girl who had come up the back stairway. "Georgiana Meeker! I'm going to run down and see about the rest of the frappé. Will you come and take charge of the bowl, please?" Some of life's bitterest moments are also its politest.

Ella did not pause until she was in the kind, if cobwebby, seclusion of the cellar. Good sense told her that she would have to go back to face the music eventually, but, for a few moments, away from all prying eyes, she would nurse and cuddle the hurt little−girl heart of her. Mechanically, like all faithful souls who work while they grieve, she picked up a chunk of ice to replenish the melting supply in the tub.

Two blue serge legs were coming down the narrow stairway. They seemed to be bringing Jim Sheldon with them. He had to duck his head to get through the doorway. "Where are you, Ella Norer, I adore 'er?"

The little half−dark, wholly−dusty cellar seemed electrically charged with the sheer vitality of his presence. He was coming toward her with both hands out. Nervously, Ella dropped the ice. According to laws immutable, the tendency of all falling objects is to descend in a perpendicular line. The frappé was at the lower end of the perpendicular line. Further, in accordance with another of nature's laws that no two objects shall occupy the same place at a given time, several quarts of frappé politely slopped out to make way for the ice.

"Oh, Jim!" she said feebly. "I've spoiled the frappé. That was ice from the old frog pond."

He threw back his head and laughed.

"What's a frog or two between friends, Ellanora?" He ran the words of her name together musically, so that they sounded like a caress.

Together they fished out the ice, and after that, with an immaculate handkerchief, he wiped the spots on her dress and dried her hands comfortably.

Then, quite suddenly, a singular thing happened. James Warren Sheldon, somewhat worldly−wise, wholly capable of taking care of himself, plainly embarrassed, dropped Ella's hands. With the way of femininity since the world began, Ella immediately became mistress of the situation.

"It seems nice to see you, Jim. We're all so glad that you took time to come to us. She's a darling — and so pretty."

"Isn't she? And she's as sweet as she is pretty." Jim's temporary discomfiture had vanished. "Poor little girl! Her mother died first, and then her daddy was killed in an auto accident the first time I was in France. When I got back, she seemed to cling to me so — "

SO THAT was the way it happened! Wasn't that just like kind−hearted Jim? To Ella there came the fleeting vision of her own independent self. No, assuredly, she had not been of the clinging type.

"Ella, I'm wondering if you'll do something for me. Could you — would it be inconvenient — could I leave her here with you for a few days while I go on a short business trip? She needs mothering so badly; and while you seem a perfect kid to me in most ways, you've always seemed motherly, too. Gee! I remember one time when I busted my head and you spilled liniment and tears all over me." They both laughed, and for a moment Ella gave no thought to the difficult task before her.

Suddenly, Jim caught one of her hands in both of his. "Ella, I didn't seem to realize what you meant to me — until I got out there — in Flanders! Queer, how everything fell away from me out there but the things that count! I always thought a lot of you, but I supposed it was just a good friendship. When it came to me — so clear — its full meaning — I knew if I lived to get back to you I'd tell you what a mistake I had made, and how much I had always cared."

The creeping, crawling horror in Ella's mind twisted around her heart and clutched, biting, at her throat, so that she put her free hand up to it. Not that! Surely not that — when it was too late. It wasn't worthy of Jim to talk like this! It was an unbearable thing to see him fall from his pedestal of Right and Honor. Love was big, but Love's ideal was bigger.

She seized the lapels of his coat and spoke swiftly: "Jim, don't say it! As you care for our friendship and the days gone by, never think it again — never think of thinking it! I did care — and perhaps you did too, and didn't realize it. But that's over. That had to do with your heart; but the thing you've just said now has to do with your soul! and — "

"Ella," — he put his hands over her own that were tugging desperately at his coat, and gave them a little shake — "what are you talking about?"

"Oh, the immeasurable wrong of your saying that! After you're married!"

There was a lightning−like change of expression on Jim's face. "Good lord, Ella! I'm not married!" He seemed divided between merriment and the seriousness of the moment. "That's Grace — little Gracie Sheldon, my kid cousin. Do you mean you weren't upstairs when we first came in and straightened matters out? Such a pow−wow!" Jim was laughing boyishly. "It was certainly rich! I thought the dear old souls would eat her up. And you should have seen Grace and Georgiana Meeker fall on each other's necks. It was Tom Tuttle's mistake, and mine too. If I had called her 'Grace' over the 'phone, he'd have known, I suppose, but I said 'Miss Sheldon,' as I naturally call her to other people. And Tom, of course, thought 'Mis' Sheldon' was a newly−acquired bride."

It is a very dizzying process — taking an emotional plunge like that. It left Ella very weak and limp, both physically and mentally.

Jim put his hand under her chin and lifted her scarlet face, but she would not raise her eyes. "No, Ellanora, I'm not married — and you said you cared."

"That was said under — under — a — misconception — of — "

"I'll grant that — but it can never be unsaid." He dropped his voice to its tenderest tone. "Say it again, Ellanora; without any misunderstanding."

She lifted the lids from love−brimming eyes: "Oh, Jim! I — I do care."

SO IT came about that the guest of honor climbed up two flights of stairs a little later, carrying the frappé to his own party. And Ella followed to kiss shyly the familiar−strange little neighbor−girl who had grown into such a charming young lady. Then, with prickly little chills chasing up and down her spine, and her cheeks ablaze, she served to the perspiring multitude a great deal of frappé permanently weakened by several quarts of well−water.

And always, no matter where she was looking, she could see Jim looming up above everyone, shaking hands, laughing; could hear him saying, "Auntie Tuttle, you certainly look good to me!" And, "Mrs. Meeker, I'll bet forty cents these are your sandwiches. They're worth a trip half around the world."

Oh, the deliciousness of the secret! The surprise of Centerville! Jim had said he would give her just two weeks to get ready, had scouted her notion of finishing the school year, had said she didn't need any new clothes, that they had a few dresses left down in New York. Oh, the exquisite joy of knowing she was going with Jim! Everywhere — anywhere! Honolulu, Hongkong, the moon!

With brimming heart Ella looked at the noisy crowd about her. How kind everyone seemed! What a good old place Centerville was! She was recklessly unashamed of a dozen children who had taken possession of a temporarily abandoned sandwich table and were breaking world records in cramming down the spoils; was shamelessly unabashed when old Sandy Wing, overalled, coal−grimed, wiping his face with a red bandana, came up the back stairway to wring Jim's hand; was audaciously laughter−stricken — with Jim — when Mrs. Meeker hissed across at her, "My good land of liberty, Ella, there's a lot of little sticks and leaves in the bottom of this frappé bowl!"