

Will's Valentine

The worst hurt I ever got in the State Police was during Prohibition when I tried to get a drunk woman out of the way of the law in a saloon. She stepped on my foot and her sharp high heel went straight through past the bone. Not that it amounted to much if you think of the whole of Lincoln County, but it does show how powerful women are and they don't even know it.

When I got through the state troopers' school in Charleston and they said I'd be going to Galloway down in Lincoln County, I wondered why they were punishing me. You need to know first thing that I am big and have red hair, thin but red. Anyway, I always have tried to be gentle like my folks taught me, because when you are big you can hurt someone. Partly I learned this from a female. I nearly got kicked in the head by a cow before I learned that if you use your full strength pulling milk, you won't get much milk.

But I did learn it. The stuff about redheads and temper is wrong. I have seen it over and over. My daddy was red-haired and he never scolded me in his life. He let me try out things for myself and carried me home when I needed it.

Now my mother was a bit different. She was a redhead, too, I guess, but her hair was brown with red where the light would shine on it. Daddy and I sometimes sat and looked at her head in the window light when she was working at the sink. She named me William Joseph and if anybody called me Billy Joe where she could hear it, you'd know why I said she was different. She would say, "If you don't know enough to speak politely, you don't know enough to eat at my table. Out." And she would hold the door open till the person she was talking to left. Same for swearing and making fun of people weaker than you.

When it came to making fun of people stronger than you, well, we were all good at that. We listened to Will Rogers on the radio and nearly died laughing. His humor suited the McCoughlins. Finally Ma settled for people calling me Will, but I was never Billy Joe.

Well, the day I first saw Galloway it was no surprise. The county courthouse rose on top of a middle-sized hill and the school sat on top of a low rise. The post office, Pa Hicks's store, the Hager Hotel, and Win Harper's Barber Shop were in between. Lawyers' offices were mostly on Court House Hill, and the funeral home, drugstore, Farmers and Merchants Bank, and the old building they showed Friday night movies in were down toward the river. People lived all between, but the Gillenwaters lived in a big stone house right across from the courthouse and next door to the Northern Methodist Church and parsonage. The State Police headquarters was in the jail building behind the court-

house, so that is how I came to walk by the Gillenwaters' so much.

Mrs. Gillenwater was tiny and fair, and people said she spent her share of Mr. Gillenwater's oil-drilling money on books and a piano. But she was plain dressed; Widow Elkins made her clothes out of material from Hicks's. I knew that because I saw a bit of the widow. She made the best chicken and dumplings you ever tasted.

Mrs. Gillenwater spoke to everybody, she was that plain. Her children played mostly in their big yard that stretched all the way down the back of Court House Hill. They had dogs and cats and a playhouse under a maple tree. Mrs. Gillenwater worked in her garden and played the piano at the Methodist Church.

When Jake Monday first told me he sure felt sorry for her, I thought she had TB or something. But later, after we got better acquainted and he quit acting like the old trooper with me the kid, I asked what he meant.

"Hell, Will, what is the matter with you? Old Gillenwater keeps a woman in a fancy house in Huntington. Has white rugs all over the floor and furniture made out of metal, I heard. I know who she is. Grew up over on Trace Creek. He went over there to drill and found more than oil. Everybody knows. I figure that's why Mrs. Gillenwater keeps her young'uns so close. Some women have it hard."

As time went on, I heard more about Mrs. Gillenwater, a lot more than I said, although I could have talked. I got acquainted with her when I did a program about the law for

her Ladies Circle. They met at Gillenwaters' and served me chipped apple pie with homemade ice cream before I spoke. I tied West Virginia law in with the Old Testament. I tried to use Methodist understanding. The women liked me a lot. After that, one of them asked me to dinner every Sunday.

A few days after the meeting, Mrs. Gillenwater was working in her roses by the front fence when I walked by. She looked up and smiled. She wore a green checked dress with a white belt around her slim waist and her hair shone in the sun.

"Will, I want to thank you again for that program. It really woke up the women to think that they are equal to men under the law. You had to go pretty deep to find that in the Old Testament."

"Well, I guess the truth is it doesn't always work out fair." She lowered her eyes and I saw pink coming into her cheeks, but I stumbled on. "I mean, the law isn't perfect."

She smiled at me with her head at a slant. "You are certainly right about that. But what is?"

"Not me, I can tell you." I saw a glint of red in her hair where the sun played with it.

"Would you like a glass of lemonade and some pound cake? It's so hot today." She held the gate open and I walked onto the cool front porch and sat down on a swing with June, the youngest Gillenwater girl. She showed me her new book about *Little Women* after Jo grew up.

"You're some reader for only eight years old," I said.

She looked at me, with her head tilted, like her mama's, and said, "I read because I like to." With that she turned

back to her book and I stretched my legs in my leather leggings out as far as they would go. I felt right at home by the little girl with her mother bringing cake that smelled of mace.

People talked about me, of course. I was that shy young policeman from up near Clarksburg and it was natural that I should spend my spare time helping out around the church and the parsonage. Sometimes over at Gillenwaters', too. The preacher's wife put her hand on my arm one day and said, "God will reward you for helping that poor woman. Her man treats her shamefully and her so helpless."

She was right about my reward, but not about the helpless part. One night we had just finished washing up after a church Valentine's Day dinner. Mrs. Gillenwater and I turned the lights out and started up the basement steps. She stumbled and nearly fell. When I caught her, I just forgot myself completely and kissed her. I mean I really kissed her. I thought I had gone to heaven till I heard people upstairs closing up the church.

"Mrs. Gillenwater," I started to mumble when she drew back her hand and slapped me. She hit me so hard my head slammed against the wall.

"Don't you *ever* call me that again." She marched straight-backed up the steps, called goodnight to the preacher, and went home to her children. I called her Rachel after that, and the bump on my head felt like a Valentine.