

THANKSGIVING

By Thyra
Samter Winslow

Ma Housing Had Despaired of Anything Ever Happening in Centerville —Until She Took a Lonely Ride Along a Country Road and Found Fate Again Staging an Old, Old Tragedy

MA HOUSING woke up, as she always woke up, with a little start as if an unheard alarm clock had rung. She knew it was because for so many years a real alarm clock had rung and she had had to jump hurriedly out of bed. There had been babies to wash and breakfast to cook—and then years of getting children ready for school—and then more years of getting grown boys and a girl ready for, well, for the world.

Now Ma Housing lay quietly in bed and tried to feel luxurious. She knew that downstairs Irma May, with her two trained dark hands, was already preparing the simple breakfast and would, through the day, do all the things that she herself had done for so many years.

The children had insisted on Irma May. "Now, ma, if you're foolish enough to live in that silly town all alone in that big house," they had said, "at least you're going to have some one to look out for you—some one there in case something happens."

So Irma May was there. And sometimes, through the long days of nothing to do, Ma Housing rather wished that "something would happen." Anything, almost.

Not that the children weren't good to her. They were. She was awfully proud of them. Of all of them. Even of the wanderer, Ben, when the rest of the family were a bit doubtful. And she didn't blame them for not living in Centerville, though she didn't think it was quite as dreadful a place as they made out.

Ma Housing could have gone to New York. They had written and asked her to come. But in New York she felt "confused and strange and not at home, even with her own children. She always felt she was putting them out, interfering with their plans. It was better when they came to Centerville. Christmas, maybe—

But this was Thanksgiving.

Ma Housing bathed and dressed quickly, the way she always did, as if there were important things to be done right away. She put on a warm jersey dress, for the morning was cool. It was a gray dress with white wool embroidery and Lorraine had sent it to her.

After breakfast Ma Housing read the morning paper, still in the kitchen while Irma May cleaned the breakfast things and straightened up Ma Housing's room. Then Ma Housing put on a big gingham apron and the two of them went about preparing the Thanksgiving dinner.

This dinner would have astonished the onlooker, especially if the onlooker had known that Ma Housing and Irma May were the only ones who were going to eat dinner in the old house. For there were three turkeys! And three pies! And quantities of baked potatoes all hollowed out and seasoned and put back into the shells again, and a great pot of string beans, neatly sliced, and on the table stood three jars of Ma Housing's favorite preserves and packages of nuts and raisins. Ma Housing and Irma May worked busily, chatting as they worked. Ma Housing tasted and added butter and cream and spices. She was having an awfully good time.

Ma Housing and Irma May had good appetites, but they were not gluttons. They had no intention of eating three turkeys and the things that went with three turkeys. But it was Thanksgiving and if you can't do something for some one on Thanksgiving to make some one a little more thankful or a little happier, well, it didn't seem to Ma Housing there was much excuse for the holiday.

One of the turkeys and the accompanying dinner was for old Mrs. Fredder, who lived in the little brown cottage on the other side of Jerome hill. Mrs. Fredder's son, Henry, had hurt his foot almost a month ago. His foot was better now, but things being slack at the lumber mill they hadn't held his job for him and there were three little Fredders and Henry's wife.

The other dinner was for the Bartels. Mr. Bartel wasn't out of work; that is, he had as much work as he had had in a long time. But there wasn't much paunting and decorating being done in Centerville and Mr. Bartel was getting old. The Bartels had no children. Their only son had been drowned skating on the river when he was 17. The two of them, living alone all these years!

Ma Housing and Irma May remarked how nice it was that they both liked turkey. They apparently didn't remember that they had said the same thing about the turkey last year and the goose last Christmas and the year before—when the children couldn't come. They liked turkey creamed on toast, and turkey cold and turkey hash. A turkey lasts a long time when there are only two.

WHEN the two turkeys were cool enough to pack, Ma Housing and Irma arranged the two big baskets. Cranberry sauce left in the molds, potatoes in covered dishes. Vegetables. Little red hot-house tomatoes brought into Centerville especially for the holiday. The pie safely on top.

The door bell rang. Irma May hurried to the door, though Ma Housing didn't try to hide her eagerness. What if—

It wouldn't be Ben. He'd know the front door was locked and come around to the kitchen. But one of the others—

Irma May held three telegrams in her hand. Ma Housing's hands trembled a little as she opened the envelopes. Nice telegrams. A long night letter from Lorraine. Shorter messages from Donald and Lewis. What good children they were!

Ma Housing was on her way upstairs to straighten up and put on her hat when she heard a new noise. Some one coming around to the kitchen door! A voice! A man's voice!

She almost lost her footing as she turned around and hurried down into the kitchen again.

It was Bill Morris, who worked for the express company.

"This came three days ago, Mrs. Housing," Bill said, "but a letter came before that saying it was to be delivered on Thanksgiving day, so we figured out it wasn't anything that would spoil. Your family certainly don't forget you on holidays."

Ma Housing peered at the address on the box, saw the name of the sender. She was happy when she saw Lorraine's name. A box from Ben would have meant definitely that he wasn't coming home. This was nice! And there was still a chance that Ben might come!

The box was grand! A big new black and white tweed coat with a gray squirrel collar and a fur lining! The boys had given Ma Housing a black caracul coat for Christmas two years ago, but she thought it was too good to wear except for "best," and they laughed over the fact that this meant she hardly ever wore it at all. This coat she could wear every day.

There was a big lot of candy, too—Jordan almonds. Ma Housing's favorite. And a striped flannel bath robe and some candy for Irma May. And a note from Lorraine saying the coat was from all three of them and the candy was from the children. It was a nice surprise—the box. Ma Housing wondered why it made her feel a little sad.

MA HOUSING put on her new little black hat and the new coat, though the weather was a little too warm for it. The coat fit absolutely perfectly—Lorraine was so clever seeing about things like that. She brought the shining new

Ma Housing drove over toward the new bridge. She liked to watch its slender, graceful curve against the sky. It didn't seem nearly substantial enough looking to hold the cars that drove over it, though she knew how strong it was. There weren't many cars today.

Near the bridge Ma Housing stopped the car. The river and the sky were gray behind the black silhouette of the bridge, but the trees across the river were still orange and red. It was peaceful. A sort of an end to things. Maybe folks who didn't have anything left to do—

A figure of a woman stood on the bridge. Ma Housing didn't know how she got there; hadn't

"Sure," said the girl. "Young. That's it. All those years ahead."

"Yes," agreed Ma Housing, "sometimes it does seem a long time. But you're young and husky. And you've got something to live for. You're going to have a baby."

"Yes," said the girl. "Ain't that reason enough?"

"Most people don't feel that way about it," said Ma Housing.

"Maybe I wouldn't," said the girl. "If I was like folks around here." She waved her hand into a vague curve. "A home and a husband. Taken care of. Some place to go."

"But you didn't just spring up," said Ma Housing. "You've been living some place."

"I was living some place, all right," said the girl. "Lots of places. Yesterday I lost my last place. I walked all night—and today. Nobody wants a girl around—like this. I guess I can't blame them. Now I haven't any place at all. Except here. And now you came along."

"Where's your husband?" asked Ma Housing. Her voice was gentle.

"As if you didn't know I didn't have a husband!" said the girl. The sullen look was stronger. "Even if I do get the baby born, what then? It wouldn't have a father."

"Of course the baby has a father," said Ma Housing, suddenly calm, as if conversations like this were the most commonplace thing in the world. "Was he a healthy, strong young man?"

The girl began to cry.

"Sure he was," she sobbed. "Big and strong. Good—good looking. You don't think I'd have cared enough otherwise."

Not very articulate, hesitating over words, she told Ma Housing about things. The story was simple enough, certainly. And not new, even to Ma Housing.

The girl had been in an orphan asylum until she was eight. "The Children's and Old Folks' Home of Bergen county." Then the Jacksons had taken her to live with

"Don't do that!" said Ma Housing sharply.

seen her walking past. But then she hadn't been looking, especially. A dozen people could have passed. She looked at the woman now. A curious figure, bundled in black. A young girl. No, a sort of a misshapen figure. Why—

Quickly Ma Housing jumped out of the car. She didn't even stop to slam the door. She ran faster than she had run in years. She knew now what the woman had in mind. For the woman stopped, looked around, went over to the side of the bridge.

The woman reached the iron railing, started to climb over!

Ma Housing ran as fast as she could. What if she couldn't get there in time? If she called—the woman would surely jump. There was no one else around.

Ma Housing muttered something under her breath. If it were a plea to God it was a most undignified plea, not the sort one usually made to a divinity.

"Come on, God! Be a good sport! Hold her off!" prayed Ma Housing, using the words her boys might have used. It never occurred to her that she was being profane.

The god to whom she prayed must have sensed the spirit back of the words, for Ma Housing, out of breath, her heart beating the way Dr. Stimson said she should never let it beat, laid a firm hand on the black shoulder just as the woman put her other foot over the rail.

"Don't do that!" said Ma Housing sharply, the way one talks to a naughty and difficult child. "Do you know what you are going to do?"

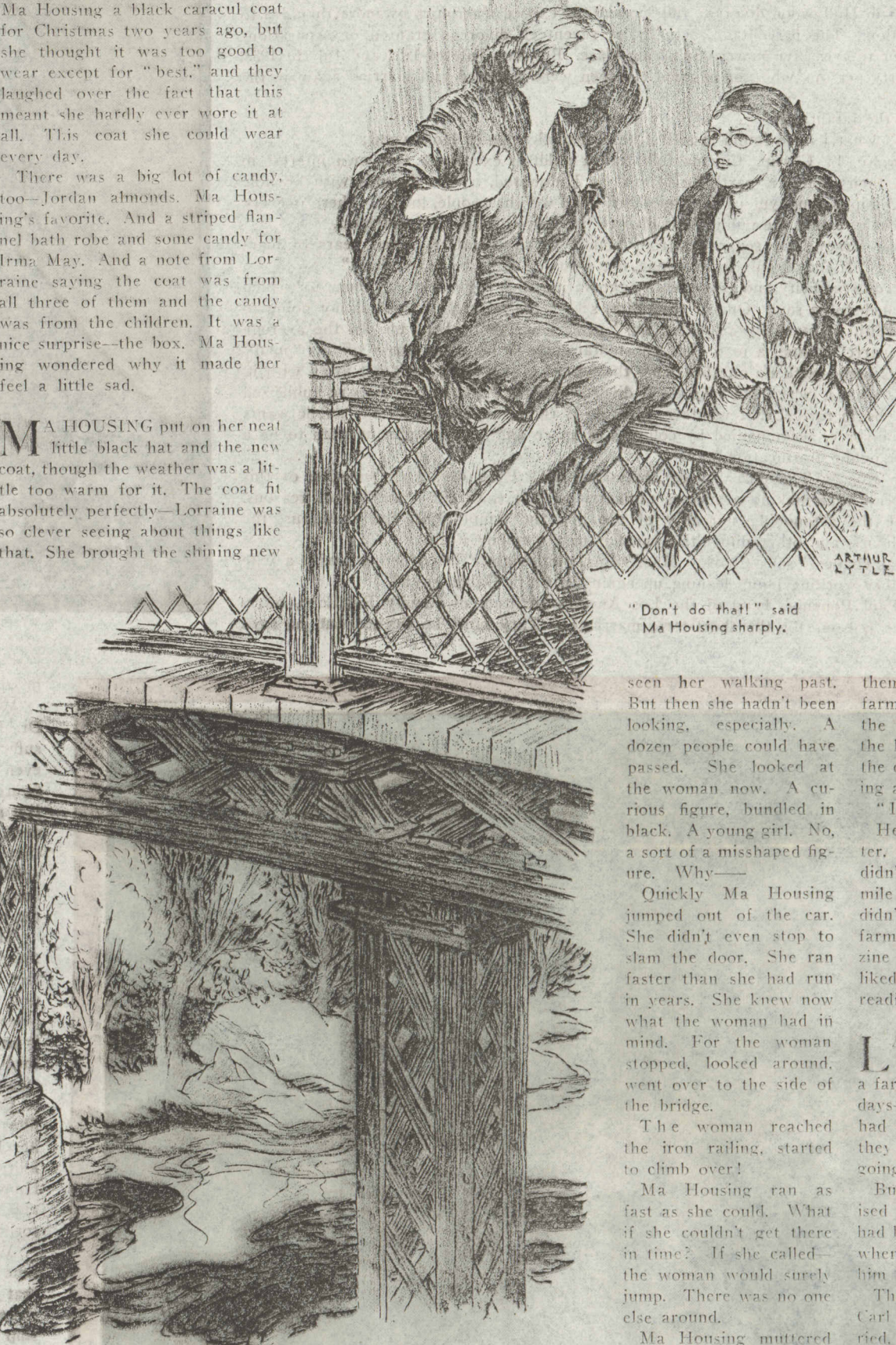
THE figure twisted out of her grasp, turned around, climbed down again. For the first time Ma Housing saw the face of the person whose life she was trying to save. Why, she was a girl, a young girl. Not more than 18 or so. She had a tender, oval, white face, and her eyes were big and gray and frightened now.

"I—I was going to kill myself," said the girl slowly. "I would have been in the water—it would have been nearly over—if you hadn't come along."

"And wouldn't that have been a sensible thing to do!" said Ma Housing. "A young girl like you—and this Thanksgiving day!"

"That's one reason why," said the girl. She was a little sullen now. "What have I got to be thankful for?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Ma Housing. "I don't know you very well. I don't know anything about you except that you gave me a scare. But you're young, for one thing. Lots of folks would think that being young was something to be thankful for."



ARTHUR LYTLE

Kidneys Must Clean Out Acids

"The only way your body can clean out acids and poisonous wastes from your blood is thru the function of millions of tiny kidney tubes or filters but be careful, don't use drastic, irritating drugs. If poorly functioning kidneys and bladder make you suffer from Getting Up Nights, Leg Pains, Nervousness, Stiffness, Burning, Smarting, Acidity, Neuralgia or Rheumatism, Lumbago, or Loss of Energy, don't waste a minute. Try the Doctor's prescription called Cystex (pronounced Siss-tex) Formula in every package. Starts work in 15 minutes. Soothes and tones raw, irritated tissues. It is holding millions and is guaranteed to fix you up or money back on return of empty package. Cystex is only 75c at drugists."