A Chalk-Line

By Margaret Sutton Briscoe

In Two Parts—1.

In a certain part of the country—what matter where?—the land rises and rolls like an arrested ocean, except that its high running billows are crested with a frothy green, not to be blown away as white foam, because anchored to the tree-tops by myriads of tiny stems. Between these foot-hills, that aspire to scowl at each other after the manner of the great mountains off in the distance, lies the neutral ground of lovely wild ravines, fanning out from their confines into sloping pasture-lands, and dropping down finally to the low-lying farms.

Threading through the ravines, and so on to the pastures, trickle numberless little streams, gathering something from each hill-spring they pass, as the bees from the flowers. In summer these silver ravelings work their way between the green crevices, peaceful as the lowlands they seek; but in that season when all the earth beneath is pregnant with life to be, the spirit of unrest seems also to permeate the springs; then they overfeed the little streams till they wax roistering, trying to swell into rivers, as the hills above have ever striven to ape the mountains.

When summer comes, it is to lay a quieting touch upon all this turbulence, smothering the bent brows of the heights in verdure, wholly drying some springs, restraining others, and soothing all except the great bubbling spring at the foot of the steepest hill, which brooks no control. The little wild animals have grown to depend on that supply of water in the driest season. The soft sides of the basin are always marked by their queer small footprints. Though the spring lies close to the county roadside, there is no beaten path to it save the squirrels', and that runs up and down more than one tree on its way; therefore the owners of the queer little feet had for years gone back and forth printing their steps unmolested, until one hot day—imagine the consternation!—they came to find a strange footprint, as long as their bodies, which circled about the clear bubbling basin, pacing it off, seven footprints this way, nine that.

After that first invasion the print of the great foot, which was not so huge after all, came to be as familiar a mark about the spring as was the little ones'. It would leave the county road, break its path—always a different one—to the spring, mark its impress on the bank, and go its way, generally back to the road, and on to the country store a half-mile beyond. At the tap of that foot on his wooden floor the old storekeeper would turn from serving the most prosperous farmer with—

"In one minute, sir; the lady won't be long. Now, Miss Delia, how can I serve you?"

To which, on a memorable morning, Delia answered, with an apologetic bend of her head toward the young farmer she supplanted:

"A shoe-string, please; and how's your daughter's baby?"

The old man dragged down a box on the counter, smiling fatuously over it as he answered:

"Just a man! Will you see him? I'm minding him to-day."

"No, not to-day, thank you. I stopped in for a shoe-string; I've broken mine."

"Short or long?" said the storekeeper; and Delia slid out from under her petticoats a foot which only the squirrels could have called great. A broken latchet hung in the hole.

"About so long, see?"

The old man leaned over the counter to examine.

"That kind's three cents, then," he said, selecting and wrapping the purchase. "Shall I charge it?"

Delia looked up from her purse, in the depths of which she was searching.

"Has father opened an account here?"

"No, Miss, but I'd be glad to have you or him do so."

Delia shook her head. "So would I," she said, still ransacking her pocketbook. "But father likes to pay cash for everything, and he would be very angry if he knew I owed a cent to anybody." She turned her purse upside down. An old copper two-cent piece and a penny fell out.

"That's just right," said the storekeeper.

"No, it's not—that two cents is my luck-penny. The date on it is my birth year; I have kept it an age."

With bucolic naturalness the old fellow lifted the coin, and, reading the date, smiled broadly: "If you'd cut your teeth on this you couldn't hev kept it an age," he said. "I can't make it more than seventeen years old, any way I count it. You haven't another cent with you, eh? and you won't charge? Then let me make you a present of this, Miss."

He held the bundle toward her, which Delia took laughingly.

"I don't really care so much as that," she said. "Luck-pennies are just superstition. There are the three cents."

At the same time, as she dropped her two-cent piece into the shopkeeper's hand, her fingers unclosed reluctantly, and she lingered to watch her luck in another's possession.

"What was you wanting to buy, sir?" said the shopkeeper, turning to the second purchaser, identified by his boots, spurs, and stock as the master of a horse that neighed impatiently outside.

The rider, who had been leaning unobtrusively against the counter, now moved forward. He had a nice face, with well-shaped features, and brown eyes that were smiling.

"Don't you remember you have served me?" he said. "I am only waiting for my change."

In the midst of the shopkeeper's apologies, Delia walked to the door. Her foot had already crossed the sill when she turned her head swiftly, and stood on the threshold transfixed by these words:

"Well, now, Farmer Ellsworth, that certainly was entirely too keerless of me; and I've forgot your change, too. Two cents, was it? Now, to make up for my bad treatment, jest you take this luck-penny—"

But Farmer Ellsworth's eyes were on the doorway, from which a pair of indignant gray eyes were staring at him. The next moment the eyes and their owner had vanished, with a glint of green drapery flickering against the door-post.

"Who was that?" the young farmer asked, sharply.

"Don't you know?" said the old man, with aggravating slowness. "For all she's a city girl, she's just as pretty as any flower, ain't she? and in that green dress of hers, with her yallar hair, she's just like a dandelion settin' in its leaves—to me. Why, don't you know who she is? you ought to. Her father's the Mr. McEwan, the old Scotchman who bought your grandpap's old place; and—why, what's the matter with 'em all to-day?" In a country store of lingering farewells it was not usual to see two customers bolt from the door, one after the other. This came with importing new blood into the hills. Not that Ellsworth was exactly new, but then he had been educated in the city, and come home with experimental views of farming, which was almost as bad. Shaking his head, the old man went back to his work, literally minding his granddaughter's baby—figuratively, the store.

Meantime the new blood in Ellsworth's veins had sent him out into the middle of the road, looking hurriedly up and down for the bit of vanishing green. He could see a hundred shades of brilliant summer foliage hedging in the road on either side—nowhere the sage color he sought. But as he glanced down on the dusty track before him he saw there the print of a small shoe that had been made on no country last. It pointed to the right, to be followed by another footprint, and yet another. Ellsworth accepted their leading unhesitatingly, the mute guides gaining personality to him as he went on. Sometimes there was no heel-mark whatever—there she ran; here she turned sharply aside—the reason, that dead snake in the road. Finally, about half a mile from the store, the trail swerved to the left and was lost in the roadside tangle. The young farmer plunged through the bushes after it. In so doing he stumbled and almost fell over a small cairn of white

stones which he had not seen from the road. It was like discovering a door-plate where the entrance had been thought free. He hesitated a moment, then trod down the bushes and blindly forced a path into the woods.

After his first few steps, a sound of gurgling water smote on his ears, growing louder as he went on. The undergrowth was so thick that he had nothing to aid his imagination until he parted the last boughs and came abruptly on the bubbling spring with its great green-rimmed basin, a calm surface of water reflecting the leaves that at every breath fluttered over it like green butterflies. Here and there the silver sheet was momentarily broken by bubbles rising mysteriously from its sandy bottom in lovely white globes, to burst in gassy spouts as they reached the air. The straight, slender boles of the surrounding trees seemed to sentinel and accentuate the quiet of the spot, while, that nothing might be lacking to the picture, the spirit of the place sat balanced on the overhanging root of a tree whose trunk she clasped with one arm, while she bent to dip her handkerchief in the water and cool her flushed cheeks.

After his first moment of motionless surprise, Ellsworth stepped from the woods into the charmed circle. As the released branches closed behind him with a snap as of a shutting door, Delia looked up, startled. She grasped her tree more closely, though she was on the further side of the stream and its width of water lay between her and the intruder, who hastily held up the copper two-cent piece in his fingers, as a kind of introduction and excuse.

"You are Miss McEwan, are you not?" he asked. Receiving no answer, he went on. "I followed you to return your coin. I am very sorry for what happened at the store. May I bring the coin over to you, or shall I lay it here on a stone for you to take after I go?" He had read of brownies who were thus approached and placated by mortals.

Having still received no sign from the other side of the water, Ellsworth laid the coin on a flat stone by the spring and was turning away again into the bushes, when the answer came:

"That is not my two cents."

"Then whose is it?" Ellsworth asked, looking back.

"I have nothing more to do with it. I paid it for the shoe-string that is now in my shoe. It can't be mine."

"It can't be mine, either, for, though you seemed willing that the old storekeeper should have it, when you knew it had fallen to me you showed resentment. Perhaps you may not feel two cents worth the price of my following you, but neither is it worth its price to me. So, if you will allow me, I shall leave the coin where it is."

He was again turning away when she recalled him.

"But I can't allow you. You ought to know I can't. How could I take anything from you?"

Delia had unwound her arm from the tree and retired from the jutting root to firm land.

Ellsworth stooped to take up the coin, making his way deliberately around the spring and drawing near her before he replied:

"If running water destroys spells, I may be unwise to cross to you," he said, smiling. "If you could, I fear you would like to change me into some enchanted monster, wicked as you think me in reality. I run my risk rather than call across the question I want to ask you. Why should you, or your father either, mind taking a little more from me than you already have?"

"More! Why, we've never taken anything."

"No, I really don't think you have, but you've tried to, haven't you?"

"We've taken nothing that was not perfectly fair. Father says an auction is an auction, and he had the right to outbid you, if it was for your grandfather's home."

"I was not thinking of the auction. When neither you nor your father have hesitated to accuse me of burning your house down, I call that taking, or trying to take, more than two cents from me. I rate a loss of character even higher than that: don't you, when you consider it? or have you fully considered, and decided that I must be a criminal?"

Delia's foot patted the soft bank into little shapes upon which her eyes fastened.

"What proofs have you against me?" Ellsworth went on.

Delia hesitated before she spoke. "I don't think father ever quite said that you yourself set fire to our house."

"No, I think this has been the formula of accusation: 'We can't, of course, identify the hand that fired the building, but the mind behind is not far to seek.'"

Delia flushed suddenly crimson. She looked up resentfully. "Why don't you say all this to my father—not to me? And you know that you did say at the auction you'd rather the old home be burned down than see any other man live in it."

"I was very angry at the auction; I said much that I have been sorry for since. I was unreasonable, and I should have been glad to tell your father so, did he ever give me the chance to speak to him. I can offer no more proof that I did not fire your house than you that I did so, for I have no alibi. My general character alone speaks for me, but it can't speak very well or eloquently when one of you looks full in my face, refusing the mere courtesy of a passing greeting, and the other has only to learn my name to treat my touching a coin she has held as an insulting contamination. At least that's what your eyes said at the door of the store."

Delia glanced swiftly at him, and he went on eagerly: "Don't you see that you have condemned me, unseen, unheard, and without even circumstantial evidence? You have not once looked at me fully. Do I seem to you as a criminal? I can never offer you an iota more proof of my innocence than at this moment. If you believe me guilty—you may as well believe it forever."

He spread out his hands when he ended, as if all the evidence were in, and the verdict awaited.

Delia lifted her eyes, but it was to gaze thoughtfully at the trees on the other side of the stream. When, with a quick motion, she turned her head, the young farmer flushed to the roots of his hair; his eyes glowed as hers swept his face.

"A vulgar tramp's revenge!" he cried. "Do you think I could stoop to that?"

Delia gazed at him long and earnestly.

"No, you didn't do it," she exclaimed, suddenly. "I do believe you."

Ellsworth stretched out his hand involuntarily, then drew it back.

"Yes, I will," said Delia, holding out hers. "But you must convince my father also."

Ellsworth took the girl's hand in his, and as he touched it thought of the coin he had held, warm from these same fingers.

"Will you help me with your father?" he asked.

She withdrew a little, standing for a moment with knit brows, thinking.

"You had better leave convincing father entirely to me," she said, at last. "He's a Scotchman, you know, and that means he's hard to change. I'll tell him I'm sure we were mistaken, and then, when the time comes for you to speak to him yourself, I'll warn you of it."

"Do you think he also will accept my face as my sole evidence?"

Delia again glanced up critically. "You couldn't have done that," shaking her head. "Father will believe you in time, as I do; and when father and I believe, we believe, when we hate we hate, and when we like we like." She smiled without coquetry. There was an almost rural simplicity in her manner.

"I thought you were from the city," said Ellsworth, abruptly speaking his thought, and Delia laughed.

"Do I seem like a country girl? I was never before in real chicken and cow country like this, but I love it—I knew I should; I've been begging father to buy a country home for years. I've never seen much of city life either, for father and I scarcely went out of our house and garden there. He taught me all I know himself. Poor father! He never cared to go outside those walls after my mother and my

brother died." She paused and sighed. "Somehow this spring, all inclosed by the trees, reminds me of our city garden—that's why I like to come here. Since I built my aquarium, I come every day."

"Where is your aquarium?" asked Ellsworth.

He would have preferred saying nothing. He felt as a man who by chance has uttered an open sesame, and feared lest, equally by chance, he should say the word which would close the door.

Delia again climbed out upon the overhanging root. "See this," she said, beckoning.

Ellsworth knelt at the back of the root and looked down also, as Delia lifted some veiling grasses, and discovered a stone-inclosed fortress half under the water, which trickled in and out between the crevices. The fortress was filled with water-animals of all kinds—spring-keepers, frogs' eggs, and little tadpoles.

"I made that," said Delia. "I dragged all the stones here, and had the spring muddy for days. I caught all those beasts and put them in too. Look at my tadpoles. I raised that whole crop. See, some of them have put out two legs, and some four. They blossom like flowers, don't they?—only they are so ugly. Why, there's a new one with his tail quite gone—a real frog. Aren't they funny? What are you doing?"

Ellsworth had leant forward over the water, and was making a seine of his hand, in which he caught a little creature, all tail and legs, that was scuffling along near the muddy bank. Delia gave a cry of rapture as he flung it into the fortress, over which she hung in delight.

"It's queerer than any I have. I'm so glad you caught it!" She looked at Ellsworth, evidently turning over in her brain an idea of adequate recompense. "I'll speak to my father about you just as soon as I can, after I go home. Do you know, I'm a little afraid of my father, so I must wait for the best time."

"But you mustn't speak to him on my account, if you are afraid."

"Oh, I'm not exactly afraid—only sometimes I think I don't know him so very well for a person I live in the house with, and who is so devoted to me. You see, when I was little, my father was too devoted to my brother to think of me always. He used to come to the foot of the nursery steps and call, 'Boy, boy!' Sometimes that made me cross and I wouldn't go, though I knew he expected me to come without being called. Then father would be cross himself and say: 'You know perfectly well that when I call *boy* I mean *girl* too.' But I wanted him to say girl. Poor father, he had to call girl, or nobody, soon enough! I don't know which he missed most—my brother or my mother. We all had fever, and—father and I got well. You don't wonder father's cross sometimes, do you?"

"Is he cross to you?"

"No, not really. He's just a little fussy and scoldy sometimes; then I leave the tents and come here and sit. Did you know we were living in tents since you burned our house down?"

Ellsworth laughed with her. "I heard so," he said; "and of course I have seen the shine of your white walls in the distance. Are you comfortable?"

"Comfortable? I was never so happy in my life as this summer. I wish you would burn the house down again, if father decides to rebuild. Between my home and the tents and my water resort here, it is as if I were being swung up from the earth into the branches. At night the stars all seem speaking to us, the heavens are so close; and when the moon shines—you never saw moonshine—you never lived in tents! It's not like moonlight. I hope father will be convinced about you before the summer is over. I'd like you to see moonshine once."

"Draw me a plan of your tents," said Ellsworth. "Here's a bit of pencil and the back of an old envelope. Let me see how you live."

Delia laughed as she laid the envelope on her knee, tracing lines upon it. "I can't draw, but do you understand that?"

She held out a ground-plan of a group of tents clustering about a central court on which she laid the point of her pencil.

"That's our dining-tent," she said. "It has a scrubbed board floor, and is very large. The tent over there is father's, and this tent on the other side, marked with a cross, is mine. In the early morning we roll up all the sides everywhere, and we can see the sky and trees from one end of our home to the other. The dew comes in, and the birds sing, and the branches are just outside, and it's not being on earth at all!" Delia paused, drawing a long breath. "I'm afraid I'm talking too much," she said, "but it's a kind of relief to talk outside the tent. There, if you speak loud, the servants all hear you, and if you whisper they think you are talking about them."

"How did you discover this retreat?" asked Ellsworth.

"Just by accident. I was on my way to see the old storekeeper's grandbaby. I like to have a play with it every day. Have you ever seen it?"

"No, I don't think I ever have."

"Oh, you'd remember if you had. It's a most beautiful baby. One day on my way there I stopped to chase a squirrel that ran straight here. I was so surprised and delighted I built a cairn of white stones in the road to mark my entrance. Did you see it?"

"Not until I felt it. I fell over your threshold on my way. Has no one else ever disturbed you?"

"Never, but I live in fear that they will, and begin to water cows here, or something horrid."

"No," said Ellsworth, rashly. "Not a cow shall set its hoof here. I will have this wood fenced off from the pasture that lies at the back."

"You!" cried Delia, her eyes opening. "Then you own this spring?"

"I did," said Ellsworth, retrieving, "but I have sold it."

"To whom?"

"I sold it an informal kind of way. It was of no earthly use to me. I didn't even know it was here, and the purchaser didn't want the coin paid for it. I did. The sale has never been ratified on either side, nor the fences raised. Still, I consider I have sold the place for this copper two-cent piece." He drew Delia's luck-penny from his pocket as he spoke.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"That this lot, with all the improvements, aquariums, and so on, is to be had at the price of a lucky penny. I need luck."

"Do you mean to say that I have been trespassing on your land all this time? Don't you think that was rather funny, when I hated you so? Of course I can't buy the spring with the two cents that are yours, anyhow."

"But don't you see that if you buy this spring from me I shall pace it off at once, stake the lines, and be trespassing whenever I come over the boundaries? As it stands, I have the right to come here whenever I will."

"Well, I shouldn't care, so you don't let cows come with you. Besides, you have caught me the best beast I have in the aquarium. See him trying to get out."

They bent together over the water.

"Yes," said the young farmer, wisely, "it's far easier to keep out than to get out, isn't it?"

As he looked down he saw his face and Delia's gray eyes mirrored together in the spring. It seemed to him suddenly that it was to and of himself that he had spoken.

When, a few moments later, Delia looked up to exclaim at the growing gloom of the woods, and with a hurried farewell disappeared as a green vision melting into the green of the bushes, Ellsworth did not attempt to detain or accompany her. As he stood alone in the quiet, following the rustling of the branches in her hands and about her feet, the gurgle of the stream swiftly escaping from the basin, the whisper of the leaves, the soft stir of the woods—all spoke to him with new voices and seemed repeating his words, Yes, far easier to keep out—far easier.

He turned from the spring and strode resolutely through the inclosing trees toward the road.

"But being in—" he said aloud, as he beat his way through, "but being in—"