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By Harriet Lummis Smith

As Arnold came out from town in his automobile he saw Ellen Dodge walking ahead in the road, with a basket on her arm and her head flung back in the way that was Ellen's own. Ellen was the only girl anywhere about who ever walked when she could ride. But although she was so plainly enjoying the walk, she promptly accepted Arnold's invitation and scrambled up beside him in the runabout.

"I'm awfully glad you came along," she said.

Something in her manner kept him from taking her words as a compliment.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I was just wishing that I could learn to run an automobile, and the next minute you came along to give me a lesson. It's like a fairy story."

"Why do you want to learn?" asked Arnold curiously.

"I want to fit myself to do something useful. I'd like to drive an ambulance, I believe. You don't know what a helpless feeling it gives you, being a girl, while this war's going on."

The shadow that crossed his face made Ellen realize how tactless she had been. She looked at him in some distress, fully aware that it would only make a bad matter worse to say that she was sorry.

"I know it gives you a rather helpless feeling to be a man that's no good," he answered bitterly. "It makes me sick when I look at my exemption card."

Ellen's expression was compassionate. It did not occur to her to try to console him by belittling his grievance, for from her standpoint the physical delicacy that kept him from wearing a United States uniform was the greatest of misfortunes.

"Well," Arnold said, trying to shake off his depression, "if you want a lesson, let's change places and start in. It isn't every girl I'd try to teach, Ellen, but you're one of the kind that doesn't get rattled over every little thing. You could drive an ambulance or most anything else you had a mind to."

The lesson was a long one, and Ellen confessed that she was somewhat bewildered. "I can remember what to do if I think long enough," she explained; "but by that time I'd have run over somebody or smashed up the car."

Arnold smiled. "This is only the first lesson. You don't expect to get very far in one lesson."

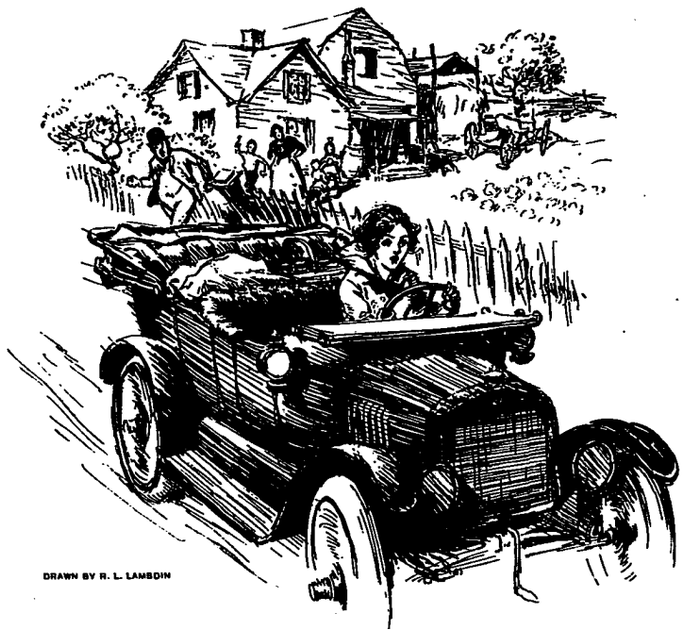
But when they parted at her door, he abandoned the qualified approbation of the teacher for the enthusiastic admiration of the friend. "You're a wonder, Ellen. You've learned more in this little time than I did the first week."

"Have I really?" she asked, and flushed with pleasure. "Then please give me another lesson before I've had time to forget this one. It makes me feel awfully good to get started on something that really counts."

"I don't know why you talk that way! I guess everyone knows how you worked in the garden this summer and how much stuff you put up. And it was you that got the other girls in this valley started."

Ellen was smiling as she turned away; for the storeroom off the cellar was the pride of her heart. Sometimes when her feeling of helplessness passed the bounds of endurance she went down the dark cellar stairs and stood looking at the shelves loaded with crocks and jars and bottles and jelly glasses. Even if she could not fight in the trenches, those spring days when she had toiled in the garden, and the summer days when she had stood over the preserving kettle, had not been wasted.

As Ellen approached the house after bidding Arnold good-by, the clamor of excited voices



DRAWN BY R. L. LAMSDIN

CHILDREN WERE SCREAMING, DOGS BARKING, AND A MAN'S VOICE WAS ROARING HOARSELY, "STOP, OR I'LL FIRE!"

reached her ears. She opened the kitchen door on a scene of confusion. Mrs. Moran, a neighbor, stood in the middle of the room talking vehemently, while Ellen's mother made an occasional ineffectual attempt to stem the tide.

"I'm going to start in this afternoon and bury 'em!" cried Mrs. Moran. "They've taken a part now, but they'll come back for the rest."

"Anything my country needs," began Mrs. Dodge; but Mrs. Moran would not let her finish.

"If only I'd paid attention to what my sister wrote me! She said somebody told her the government was just getting folks to do all this canning so as to have it to fall back on."

"Some women have given their sons!" cried Mrs. Dodge. "I'm not going to grudge my country a ham or two and a few jars —"

Ellen, who had stood unnoticed in the doorway, broke in. "Why, mother, what's happened?"

It was the overwrought Mrs. Moran who answered. "Plain stealing is what has happened, government or no government. When I think of the way I worked over that corn —"

"We worked as hard as anybody, but I don't grudge it!" cried Mrs. Dodge. "A man came round just now, Ellen, to see if we had more put up than we ought to have."

"*More* than we ought," repeated Ellen. "But they wanted us to put up all we could."

"That was the trick!" Mrs. Moran interposed shrilly. "So there'd be more for them when they wanted it."

Mrs. Dodge disregarded the interruption. "He asked about the size of the family, and then he went down to the storeroom, and he said we had two more hams than the government allows for a family of this size, and he took them and a basket of canned stuff. I say it's little enough to give up for your country."

"Mother!" Ellen cried. "How did you know the government sent him?"

"Why, he said so, Ellen, and besides he had a badge—it was a button on his lapel."

"What sort of button was it?" Ellen asked.

"I didn't look at it very closely," her mother replied. "It was red, white and blue, I think."

"And did you let him have those things without anything to prove that he wasn't a common swindler, except a red, white and blue button?"

Mrs. Dodge only stared at her daughter. "A swindler," she repeated helplessly. The idea was so new to her that she could not adjust herself to it.

Ellen's mind was working quickly. She remembered that during the summer there had been indications of a definite attempt to discourage housekeepers from canning and preserving food. Rumors had gone about that the government would commandeer those home supplies, and, although the county newspaper had pointed out the absurdity of the tales, they had found many believers. The more she thought of it now the surer Ellen felt that the man with the patriotic button was either acting in the interests of the propaganda to discourage conservation another year, or else was an ordinary swindler.

"Did you say he came in an automobile? What was the number?"

Mrs. Dodge shook her head dismally; she had not noticed. But Ellen's thoughts had taken a new turn.

"He came to Mrs. Moran's and then here. Probably he'll go straight to the Cutlers'. I'm going to see if I can get there in time to stop her from giving him everything in the house."

"You want to be careful, Ellen," warned Mrs. Dodge. "If it should be somebody the government had sent out —"

"It isn't. I'm sure it isn't. The more I think about it the plainer it is."

Ellen ran through the yard to the barn, hastily saddled Toby, the fat, old horse, and swung herself upon his back. Toby, still chewing a wisp of hay, snorted with surprise when Ellen's riding whip stung across his flank.

Mrs. Cutler was washing out some things for the baby and crying into the tubs. Waiting only long enough to hear that the "government" man had just gone, Ellen took the short cut across the fields to the next farmhouse. The road between the Cutlers' and the Puttses' was especially bad, and Ellen did not believe that the man could have got there soon enough to finish his business before her arrival.

She was right. As she urged Toby across the field behind the Puttses' barn, she saw an automobile standing at the door of the farmhouse. Ellen slipped from the horse's back, and approached the house on foot.

Although the day was chilly, the door was ajar. Within was a babel of voices. Mrs. Putts was expostulating hysterically, and several children were crying. Ellen caught a glimpse of a stalwart man with a cigar between his teeth and his hat tilted rakishly over his ear.

"That's all right, ma'am." The deep voice sounded compellingly above the shrill tumult. "I'm sent by the United States government to take the surplus that ain't allowed a family the size of yours. And I've got orders to place under arrest anybody that offers resistance."

The rumble of that deep voice had a peculiar effect on Ellen. She had planned to confront the man and to inform him that she had seen through his little scheme. She had not counted on his being quite so broad across the shoulders. The idea of walking up to him and telling him that he was an impostor did not appeal to her, and, moreover, it would do no good. That big, brutal man, looming so large in Mrs. Putts's little kitchen, would take whatever he wanted, in spite of Mrs. Putts's tears and her own accusations.

Ellen turned and looked at the machine. It was a touring car, of the same make as Arnold's, she thought. The rear was filled with the results of the day's collection. Ellen approached near enough to see a basket filled with jars that had come from her own house. She read in her own handwriting the words, "Plum marmalade."

Her anger dispelled her misgivings and stiffened her courage. Plum marmalade! They had been saving it for very special occasions, like Thanksgiving and Christmas!

Walking to the front of the machine she began to crank it. She was thankful for the turmoil in the kitchen. Mrs. Putts was holding out gallantly. Toby, cropping the scant grass, paused to look inquiringly at his young mistress. The engine began to throb like a big heart, but it did not beat so fast as Ellen's.

As she went by Toby she gave him a cut with the whip. The animal jumped aside, snorted, suddenly realized that he was free, and started for home. Shaking from head to foot, Ellen climbed into the automobile. Fortunately, it was facing the road, for she could not possibly have turned it; but she knew how to start it, and she did. All of the controls and pedals were identically the same as in Arnold's car.

When she had almost reached the highway she heard a stentorian shout behind her. To the start it gave her Ellen attributed her collision with the wooden post of Mr. Putts's fence. She left the post wrecked as she sped on her way. There was a terrible uproar back in the Puttses' yard: children were screaming, dogs barking, and a man's voice was roaring hoarsely, "Stop, or I'll fire!"

There was nothing about the voice that made Ellen desire an interview with its owner. Instead she said to herself, "Now, what was it Arnold said I must do if I wanted to go faster?" After a minute she remembered, and the little car skimmed along the highway at a very creditable rate of speed.

The noise behind her grew faint. She did not look back, for Arnold had told her that that was an inexcusable offense in a motorist, but she knew that the hurrying figures about the farmhouse must be dwindling rapidly. If the man with the button had kept his word and fired, his aim had not been true.

Ellen's destination was the town ten miles away. As she approached it she began to meet vehicles, but she was relieved as well as surprised to find that, instead of insisting that she should observe the traffic regulations, they showed the utmost willingness to take to the gutter and give her the entire road. Absorbed as she was in her task, she vaguely realized that the drivers of those vehicles seemed immensely interested in her performance.

Once inside the limits of the town, she slowed down. Progress of any sort was becoming difficult, for there were many carriages and automobiles going apparently in all directions. The presence of pedestrians, too, was terribly confusing. In trying to avoid a couple who undertook to cross the street in the wrong place, Ellen narrowly avoided a collision with a grocer's wagon, the driver of which yelled at her angrily.

But at last she reached the goal she had set for herself—the low brick building adorned with a gilt sign that informed the public that it was the police station.

The chief of police was sitting back comfortably in his swivel chair, when an automobile stopped in front of the building. But it did not stop quite so soon as it should have done; it bumped a telephone pole, and the driver went out sprawling.

The chief of police jumped from his chair

and hurried to the scene as Ellen was picking herself up. "Are you hurt?" he inquired.

"No. Not a bit."

"I guess I'll have to arrest you for careless driving." His tone was less genial.

"I was as careful as I knew how to be."

"Where's your operator's license?"

"I—I haven't any."

"H'm! Looks like I should have to arrest you for that, too. Hello!"

The chief of police looked at Ellen as if he were expecting her to explain something.

"Well?" she asked resignedly.

"You haven't got any numbers on this car. I suppose you know that's an offense in the eyes of the law."

"This isn't my car. I just took it."

Evidently the chief of police was unaccustomed to such frankness in criminals. He relieved his mind by a long whistle.

"I took it because I thought the man was an impostor," Ellen explained. "And I came right here as quickly as I could because I was sure you'd know the best thing to do."

"Well, well, come inside and let's hear about it." The chief of police was only human. His manner showed a marked unbending.

After Ellen had told her story there was no more talk of arresting her. The chief of police agreed entirely with her point of view.

"He may have done it just to discourage folks, so there wouldn't be so much preserving and canning next year," he said. "Nothing's too much trouble for that kind, and nothing's so small that they overlook it, either. Then again it may be that he's only a sharper who saw a chance to stock up for the winter without any expense. We'll find out when we've found the owner of the machine."

A farmer drove Ellen home, and all the way she kept an eye open for the man she had seen in Mrs. Putts's house. But the self-styled representative of the government never appeared to prefer charges against the girl who had stolen his machine. The various edibles that he had commandeered, after forming an unusually interesting exhibit at the police station, were finally returned to their owners. The Dodges made a little celebration in honor of the occasion. Mrs. Dodge cooked one of the hams and opened a jar of plum marmalade.

When Ellen took her second lesson with Arnold a few days after the first, she showed so many lacks in her knowledge of driving a car that he was amazed.

"And you drove that car from the Puttses' place to town without knowing that!" he cried. "Ten miles and didn't know that! If you ever get your wish, Ellen, and go across as an ambulance driver, you won't be in much more danger working under fire than you were that day. It's the biggest wonder you got through without an accident."

"Oh, danger," Ellen said indifferently. "You forget about that, you know, when you are doing something that really helps."