

The Free Press Short Story

"My Efficient Cousin Ann"

FRANK PARRINGTON

THE brakes squeaked as Nicholas Warren shoved the pedal down to the floor board. The rear end of the sedan he was driving skidded to the left as the tires passed rolling and slid along the concrete. A clank of metal on metal rent the air. His car had "side-swiped" a roadster driven by a pretty girl who had turned into the side street just as Nicholas was about to come out of that street.

The collision had damaged a fender on each car, but neither driver was hurt and no other harm was done. The girl, Ann Gray, hopped from her car and walked around the sedan. "If you'll keep your brakes properly adjusted, Nick," she said, "you wouldn't have accidents like this."

"My brakes are all right," reported Nicholas. "I stopped before I got to the stop sign, didn't I?"

"Yes, you stopped, but your brakes don't pull evenly. The rest of your car swayed to the left and that's what caused the accident."

"The lady is right," declared an officer who had arrived on the scene. "Do you want to make a complaint against this young man?"

"No, he's only my cousin Nick," Ann replied. "He'll pay for having my fender fixed, and that's all there'll be to it. He may be short of spending money for a while, but it will be good for him."

"If that's a joke, it's a lousy one," said Nicholas irritably. "You know I haven't a cent and just have to hang around and live on my father. His car is damaged just as much as yours, and if I was going to pay for either, it would be his I'd pay for."

"Tut, tut Nick! What a way to talk to your cousin!" Ann climbed back into her roadster and a group of spectators stood around, waiting at the incident and obviously siding with the girl.

"Yeah, my efficient cousin Ann," Nicholas put a world of sarcasm into the word efficient. "She knows all about everything, from a full floating axle to a Neanderthal man. Good night!"

Ann smiled as she kicked her starter pedal and rolled away, leaving Nicholas trying to start his engine after flooding the carburetor. He was further irritated by the unsympathetic comments from the crowd, and from Benjamin Floyd his companion, who had stayed in the sedan, chattering proceedings without taking part.

"Ann's a corking fine girl," said Benjamin. "I don't see why you're always so sore at everything she says and does."

"She's too efficient, that's what's the matter," returned Nicholas. "She knows how to do everything. She gives me a pain to do everything."

At last Nicholas rolled away, his face red with self-consciousness as the crowd applauded when his engine started.

"I don't care; I think you're lucky to have a cousin like Ann," continued Benjamin. "I could fall for her any old time."

"Yeah, you would, but you aren't her cousin, and she doesn't bob up always at just the time to make you feel like a dunce. Now you know they laugh at you, she's doing?—She's singing in our choir. Good night! Ann singing! Why, she never sang a note till last winter."

"All the same, you can count on it, she'll be good," declared Benjamin. "If she'll be singing, believe me, she'll be a singer."

"She'd get away with murder," said Nicholas sourly. "She'll know every note in the book and have 'em all, so they'll come and eat out of her hand. But she gives me a pain. If she's a singer, I'm a millionaire—and I haven't two nickels to rub together."

"You'll go on, getting sorer and sorer, Nick, till you'll be trying to get her out of the choir."

"I mean at that, I'm about fed up with having Ann tell me how to do everything, from adjusting brakes to singing the tenor part in an anthem. Either she gets out of the choir or I do, and I'm telling you, it won't be me that gets out."

Ann and Nicholas were not only cousins, but they were equal heirs to whatever estate their grandfather, old Hiram Gray, had left. The old man had been supposed to be healthy, but at his death little of value had been found, save the old homestead and its furnishings.

Times that had netted the two heirs only the income from their respective shares since the principal sum would not be paid to them until the following year, when both came of age.

Ann's father was well to do and could give Ann the things she wanted. Nicholas' father was "low" fortune and it took all he could scrape together to keep Nicholas in the home-town college where both he and Ann were completing their education. Part of Nicholas' resentment toward Ann was due to jealousy of her ability and advantages.

Nicholas' how drove the sedan into the family garage and he and Benjamin got out. "Well, the next thing is to explain to Dad," said Nicholas. "The worst of it is that the best excuse I have is that what Ann said—it's always like that. She's always right. Do you know, she says some day we're going to find a lot more money or valuables that belonged to Grandfather Gray. That's one time I wouldn't object to her being right."

Just as he was slipping under, he realized what he was doing, he tried to grasp hold of her, but she fought him off until he lost consciousness. It was many minutes before she finally brought him to the shore. They had drifted far down the stream from their starting point.

They landed at the foot of a bank where the town maintained a dumping ground for trash. Here Ann worked vigorously over her cousin for some minutes.

Finally he was able to sit up. He and Ann sat there on an old, discarded kitchen range boiler. "Do you recognize this boiler?" asked Ann.

"Nicholas looked at the old galvanised iron range boiler without much interest. "Yeah, I guess it's the one that was in Grandfather's house," he replied. "It has that painted eye on it."

"That eye means something we've never figured out," declared Ann. "I've been thinking about it and some day the explanation will come to me."

Nicholas felt little like discussing then and there the possible meaning of enigmatic signs. He sat humped over on the boiler while Ann went out to the highway and signaled a passing truck driver to stop and take them home.

The truckman left them in front of Ann's house and Nicholas had not yet said anything in appreciation of all that Ann had done for him. He tried to voice a thank you as they parted but it was a failure.

"Well, I kept her from one rehearsal, anyway," said Nicholas grimly to himself as he went to his room to put on dry clothes.

He was sitting on the running board of the family car the next morning

when Benjamin Floyd came sauntering into the garage. "How's this busted fender?" asked Benjamin.

"Oh, the insurance company is going to take care of both cars and fix 'em up," Nicholas replied.

"How about Ann? You still out to put something over on her to get her out of the choir, and all that bunk?"

"It isn't bunk," answered Nicholas. "She added one more reason yesterday why I should get even. She saved me from drowning." He related the incident.

"And you're sore about that?"

"It's just that she can do everything and do it so efficiently. All our relatives think I'm dumb—and she's the world's smartest."

"I come a lot nearer agreeing with your relative than with you," Benjamin told him.

"You would, but not if you were Ann's cousin."

"Is it so hard to be Ann's cousin?" asked a laughing voice, and Ann came in the door. "What are you two concocting anyway?"

"Why, Nick's waiting for you to do something more to prove he has the smartest cousin in town," said Benjamin.

"Maybe I can do that little thing," was the smiling reply. "Nick, you know that range boiler with the eye on it. I've figured out what that means."

"Is that so?" asked Nicholas, skeptically.

"Come along and we'll go down to the dump pile where we saw it yesterday and cut into it. We always thought that eye meant to look in the direction it was looking. We did that and we looked in every direction for fear the boiler



TELEPHONE TALKS IN THE WATSON FAMILY



"Here's Dad, it's his turn now!"

BAD-FAIRY POOL TO DO GOOD

In a spot which many believe is the haunt of a bad fairy, the greatest artificial lake in the Irish Free State is to be built to provide Dublin with additional water, power and light. In the wilds of the Wicklow mountains the River Liffey runs over a fall and down a slope into a pool, which legend has called Poulaphuca. The slope is to be cut away so that the sheer drop of the water will be doubled to provide the power. A valley is to be dammed and flooded to make an artificial lake 8,000 acres in extent. One of the best mountain roads in Ireland running from Poulaphuca across Wicklow Gap to Glendalough, is to be rebuilt for 100 miles. The project will cost about \$15,000,000 and will take about four years to complete.

Friday night's a special night with the Watsons. Promptly at eight the telephone bell tinkles and Bob's hearty voice comes booming over the wire—then Muriel's and the youngsters'. "Long Distance keeps us young," say their grandparents. "It's the cheapest pleasure we know of."

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Sub-Arctic Outpost Renamed Radium City



On the petition of 100 per cent of the residents of the tiny settlement, on the shores of Great Bear Lake, 30 miles from the Arctic Circle, Cameron Bay, P.O., N.W.T., has been renamed Radium City. Seven miles from the silver-radium camp at Eldorado, it serves the mine as post office, radio station and has the R.C.M.P. post for the area. The Radium City P.O. is pictured with Via Ingram, famed figure of the far north, who serves as postmaster (CENTRE), with an outgoing mail. Air mail comes in by air from Edmonton, 1,140 air miles south. Collectors, particularly in the United States and Great Britain, continually send letters to Ingram with requests that the stamps be cancelled with the mark of the sub-Arctic post and returned to them.

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Tomatoes HOME GROWN HOTHOUSE Firm, per lb. 19c 7

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