

It was one horse too much. Henry broke and ran, with Jake close at his heels. The ponies took after them happily



Novelet

Miracle on Main Street

By ROBERT ARTHUR

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Wishes are Mongolian ponies; beauty is as beauty thinks; all is not gold that flitters. And a child shall mislead them, singing in his sleep, "Little town you've had a busy day"

I

DANNY was crouched on the stairs, listening to the grown-ups talk in the living room below. He wasn't supposed to be there. He was supposed to be in bed, since he was still recovering from the chicken pox.

But it got lonely being in bed all the time, and he hadn't been able to resist slipping out and down in his wool pajamas, to hear Dad and Mom, and Sis and Uncle Ben and Aunt Anna talking.

Dad—he was Dr. Norcross, and everybody went to him when they were sick—and the others were playing bridge. Sis,

who was in high school, was studying her Latin, not so hard she couldn't take part in the conversation.

They were mostly talking about other people in Locustville, which was such a small town most everybody knew everybody else, well enough to talk about them anyway.

"Locustville!" That was Mom, with a sigh. "I know it's a pretty town, with the river and the trees and the woods around it, and Tom has a good practice here, but the people! If only something would shake some of them out of themselves, and show them how petty and malicious and miserable they are!"

"Like Nettie Peters," Dad said, his tone dry. Danny knew Miss Peters. Always hurrying over to some neighbor's to talk about somebody. Whisper-whisper-whisper. Saying nasty things. "She's the source of most of the gossip in this town. If ever there was a woman whose tongue was hinged in the middle and wagged at both ends, it's her."

Uncle Ben laughed.

"Things would be better here," he remarked. "if the money were better distributed. If Jacob Earl didn't own or have a mortgage on half the town, there might be more free thought and tolerance. But nobody in debt to him dares open his mouth."

"Funny thing," Dad put in, "how some men have a knack of making money at other men's expense. Everything Jacob Earl touches seems to mint money for him—money that comes out of someone else's pocket. Like that gravel land he got from John Wiggins. I'd like to see the process reversed sometime."

"But for real miserliness"—that was Aunt Anna, indignant—"Luke Hawks takes all the prizes. I've seen him come into the Fair-Square store to buy things for his children, and the trouble he had letting go his money, you'd have thought it stuck to his fingers!"

"It's a question," Dad said, "which is worse, miserliness or shiftlessness. Miserliness, I suppose, because most shiftless peo-

ple are at least good-hearted. Like Henry Jones. Henry wishes for more things and does less to get them than any man in Christendom. If wishes were horses, Henry would have the biggest herd this side of the Mississippi."

"Well, there are some nice people in Locustville," Sis broke into the conversation. "I don't care what that old gossip Miss Peters says, or that stuck-up Mrs. Norton either; I think Miss Avery, my English and gym teacher, is swell. She isn't awful pretty, but she's nice."

"There's little silver bells in her voice when she talks, and if that Bill Morrow whose dad owns the implement factory, and who takes time off to coach the football team wasn't a dope, he'd have fallen for her long ago. She's crazy about him, but too proud to show it, and that silly Betty Norton has made him think he's wonderful by playing up to him all the time."

"If he marries Betty," Aunt Anna said, "the town won't be able to hold Mrs. Norton any more. She's already so puffed up with being the wife of the bank president and the leader of the town's social life, she'd just swell up a little more and float away like a balloon if she got the Morrow Implement Company for a son-in-law."

Everybody laughed, and the conversation slowly died away.

Mom mentioned how much she disliked that two-faced Minerva Benson who was so nice to people's faces and worked against them behind their backs.

Sis said that Mr. Wiggins, who ran the bookstore, was a nice little man who ought to marry Miss Wilson, the dressmaker, a plain little woman who would be as pretty as a picture if she *looked* the way she *was*.

But he never would, Sis said, because he hadn't any money and would be ashamed to ask a woman to marry him when he couldn't even earn his own living.

THEN they went back to bed. Danny was feeling sort of weak and shaky, so he hurried back to bed before Mom could catch him. He crawled in and pulled the blankets up over him, and then his hand

reached under the pillow and pulled out the funny thing he'd found in the old chest where he kept his games and skates and things.

It had been wrapped in a soft piece of leather, and he had found it in a little space behind one of the drawers. There was a name inked on the leather, *Jonas Norcross*. Dad's grandfather had been named Jonas, so it might have been originally his.

What the thing was was a little pointed piece of ivory, sharp at the tip and round at the bottom, as if it had been sawed off the very end of an elephant's tusk.

Only there was a fine spiral line in it, like in a snail's shell, that made Danny think maybe it hadn't come from an elephant, but from an animal he had seen in a book once—an animal like a horse, with one long horn over its nose. He couldn't remember the name.

It was all yellow with age, and on the bottom was carved a funny mark, all cross lines, very intricate. Maybe it was Chinese writing. Jonas Norcross had been captain of a Clipper ship in the China trade, so maybe it might have come all the way from China.

Lying in bed, Danny held the bit of ivory in his hand. It gave out a warmth to his fingers that was nice. Holding it tight, he thought of a picture in his book about King Arthur's Round Table—a picture of Queen Guinevere of the golden hair. Probably it was a picture like that Sis had meant Miss Wilson ought to be pretty as.

Grown-ups' talk wasn't always easy to understand, the way they said things that weren't so.

Danny yawned. Gee, though, it would be awful funny—He yawned again, and the weight of drowsiness descending on him closed his eyes. But not before one last thought had floated through his mind.

As it came to him, a queer little breeze seemed to spring up in the room. It fluttered the curtains and rattled the window shade. For just a second Danny felt almost as if somebody was in the room with him.

Then it was gone, and smiling at his amusing thought, Danny slept.

II

HENRY JONES woke that morning with the smell of frying bacon in his nostrils. He yawned and stretched, comfortably. There was a clock on the bureau the other side of the room, but it was too much trouble to look at it.

He looked at where the sunshine, coming in the window, touched the carpet. That told him it was just onto nine.

Downstairs pans were rattling. Martha was up and about, long ago. And just about ready to get impatient with him for lingering in bed.

"Ho *huhuuu*!" Henry yawned, and pushed down the covers. "I wish I was up an' dressed aw-ready."

As if it were an echo to his yawn, a shrill whickering sound reached him from the direction of his large, untidy backyard. Disregarding it, Henry slid into his trousers and shirt, his socks and shoes, put on a tie, combed his hair casually, and ambled down to the dining room.

"Well!" his wife, Martha, commented tartly, appearing in the doorway with a platter in her hands as he slumped down into his chair. "It's after nine. If you're going to look for work today, you should have been started long ago!"

Henry shook his head dubiously as she set the bacon and eggs in front of him.

"I dunno if I ought to go tramping around today," he muttered. "Don't feel so well. Mmm, that looks good. But I kind of wish we could have sausage oncet in a while."

From the rear yard came another high whinny that went unnoticed.

"Sausage is expensive," Martha told him. "When you get an honest job, maybe we can afford some."

"There's Hawks," Henry remarked, with interest, peering out the front window as a lean, long-faced man strode past the house, with a pleasant but shabbily-dressed little woman trotting meekly at his side.

"Guess Millie has talked him into laying out some money for new things for the kids at last. It's only about once a year she gets him to loosen up."

"And then you'd think, to look at him, he was dying," his wife commented, "just because he's buying a couple of pairs of two-dollar shoes for two as nice youngsters as ever lived. He begrudges them every mouthful they eat, almost."

"Still," Henry said, wagging his head wisely, "I wish I had the money he has stacked away."

From the rear yard came a sound of galloping hooves. Martha was too intent on scolding Henry to notice it.

"Wish, wish, wish!" she stormed. "But never work, work, work! Oh, Henry, you're the most exasperating man alive!"

"Martha, I'm not worthy of you," Henry sighed. "I wish you had a better husband. I mean it."

This time the whinnying behind the house was a concerted squeal from many throats, too loud to go unnoticed. Henry's buxom wife started, looked puzzled, and hurried out to the kitchen. A moment later her screech reached Henry's ears.

"Henry! The back yard's full of horses! Plunging and kicking all over the place!"

THE news was startling enough to overcome Henry's early-morning lethargy. He joined his wife at the kitchen window and stared with popping eyes at the big rear yard.

It was full—anyway, it seemed full—of animals. Martha had called them horses. They weren't exactly horses. But they weren't ponies either. They were too small to be the one and too big to be the other. And they were covered with longish hair, had wild flowing manes, and looked strong and savage enough to lick their weight in tigers.

"Well, I'll be deuced!" Henry exclaimed, his round countenance vastly perplexed. "I wish I knew where those critters came from."

"Henry!" Martha wailed, clutching his arm. "Now there's five!"

There had been four of them, trotting about the yard, nosing at the wreck of the car Henry had once driven, thumping with their hooves the board fence that penned them in. But now there were, indeed, five.

"G-gosh!" Henry gulped, his Adam's apple working up and down. "We must have counted wrong. Now, how do you suppose they got in there?"

"But what kind of horses are they, Henry?" Martha asked, holding to his arm still, as if for protection, in a way she hadn't for years. "And who do you suppose they belong to?"

Henry put an arm around Martha's plump waist and applied a reassuring pressure.

"I wish I knew, Martha," he muttered, "I wish I knew."

"Henry!" There was real fright in his wife's voice. "Now there's six!"

"Seven," Henry corrected weakly. "The other two just—just sort of appeared."

Together they gazed at the seven shaggy ponies that were trotting restlessly about the yard, nosing at the fence as if seeking escape from the limited space.

No more appeared; and seeing the number remain staple, Henry and Martha gained more self-possession.

"Henry," his wife said with severity, as if somehow blaming him, "there's something queer happening. Nobody ever saw horses like those in Indiana before."

"Maybe they belong to a circus," Henry suggested, staring in fascination at the seven uncouth beasts.

"Maybe they belong to us!"

"Us?" Henry's jaw dropped. "How could they belong to us?"

"Henry," his wife told him, "you've got to go out and see if they're branded. I remember reading anybody can claim a wild horse if it hasn't been branded. And those are wild horses if I ever saw any."

Of course, Martha never *had* seen any wild horses, but her words sounded logical. Her husband, however, made no motion toward the back door.

"Listen," he said, "Martha, you stay here and watch. Don't let anybody into

the yard. I'm going to get Jake Harrison, at the stable. He used to be a horse trader. He'll know what those things are and if they belong to us, if anybody does."

"All right, Henry," his wife agreed—the first time he could remember her agreeing with him in, anyway, two years—"but hurry. Please do hurry."

"I will!" Henry vowed; and without even snatching up his hat, he shot away.

JAKE HARRISON, the livery stable owner, came back with him unwillingly, half dragged in Henry's excitement. But when he stood in the kitchen and stared out at the yard full of horses, his incredulity vanished.

"Good Lord!" he gasped. "Henry, where'd you get 'em?"

"Never mind that," Henry told him. "Just tell me, what *are* they?"

"Mongolian ponies," the lanky horse dealer informed him. "The exact kind of ponies old Ghengis Khan's men rode on when they conquered most of the known world. I've seen pictures of them in books. Imagine it! Mongolian ponies here in Locustville!"

"Well," Martha asked, with withering scorn, "aren't you going out to see if they're branded? Or are you two men afraid of a lot of little ponies?"

"I guess they won't hurt us," the stable owner decided, "if we're careful. Come on, Henry, let's see if I'm still any good at lassoing. Mis' Jones, can I use this hank of clothesline?"

Henry opened the kitchen door and followed Jake Harrison out into the yard. At their advent the seven—he was glad to see the number hadn't changed in his absence—ponies stopped their restless trotting and lifted their heads to stare at the men.

Jake made a noose out of the clothesline and began to circle it above his head. The ponies snorted and reared, suspiciously. Picking the smallest one, the tall man let the noose go, and it settled over the creature's thick neck.

The pony's nostrils flared. It reared and

beat the air with its unshod front hooves as the other six broke and scampered to the opposite end of the yard.

Jake Harrison drew the loop tight and approached the pony, making soothing sounds. It quieted, and as they came close let Jake put his hands on it.

"Yes, sir," the stable owner exclaimed, "a real honest-to-Homer Mongolian pony. That long hair is to keep the cold out, up in the mountains of Tibet. Now let's see if there's any brand. None on its hide. Let's see its hoof."

The pony let him lift its left forefoot without protest, and Henry, bending close, let out a whoop.

"Look, Jake!" he yelled. "It's branded! With my name! These critters are mine!"

Together they stared. Cut into the hard horn, in neat letters, was HENRY JONES.

Jake straightened.

"Yours, all right," he agreed. "Now, Henry, stop making a mystery and tell me where these animals came from."

Henry's jubilation faded. He shook his head.

"Honest, Jake, I don't know. I wish I did. . . . *Look out!*"

The tall man leaped back. Between them an eighth pony had appeared, so close that its flanks brushed against them.

"W-where—" Jake stuttered, backing away toward the door in the fence and fumbling for the catch. "Where—"

"That's what I don't know!" Henry joined him. "That's what I wish— No, I don't either! I don't wish anything at all!"

The phantom pony that had appeared directly before them, wispy and tenuous as darkish smoke, promptly vanished.

Henry mopped his face.

"Did you see what I saw?" he asked; and Jake, swallowing hard, nodded.

"You st-started to wish for something, and it st-started to appear," he gobbled, and thrust open the door in the board fence. "Let's get out o' here."

"When I started to wish— Oh, jiminy crickets!" Henry groaned. "That's how the others happened. When I wished. Do you suppose— Do you—"

Pale-faced, they stared at each other. Slowly the stableman nodded.

"Lord!" the ashen Henry whispered. "I never believed such a thing could happen. I wish now I'd never—"

This time the words weren't fully out of his mouth before the ninth pony struck the earth with a sudden plop directly before them.

It was too much. Henry broke and ran, and Jake followed at his heels. The pony, interestedly, chased them. Its brothers, not to be left behind, streamed through the opening in the fence, whickering gleefully.

When Henry and Jake brought up, around the corner of the house, they were just in time to look back and see the last of the beasts trotting out into Main Street. Nine wicked whinnys cut through the morning quiet. Nine sets of small hooves pounded.

"They're stampeding!" Henry shrilled. "Jake, we got to round 'em up before they do lots of damage. Oh, Jehosephat, I wish this hadn't ever happened!"

Neighing raucously, the tenth pony kicked up its heels, throwing dirt in their faces, and set off at a gallop after the others.

III

ABOUT the time Henry Jones was running for Jake Harrison, Luke Hawks was fingering a boy's woolen suit with lean, predatory digits.

"This be the cheapest?" he asked, and being assured that it was—all the clerks in Locustville knew better than to show him anything but the least expensive—nodded.

"I'll take it," he said, and grudgingly reached for his hip pocket.

"Don't you think the material is kind of thin, Abner?" little Emily Hawks asked, a note of pleading in her voice. "Last winter Billy had colds all the time, and Ned—"

The man did not bother to answer. With the well-filled wallet in his left hand, he

inserted thumb and forefinger and brought out a twenty-dollar bill.

"Here," he said. "And I've got thirteen dollars forty cents coming."

Taking the bill and starting to turn away, the clerk turned abruptly back. Luke Hawks had snatched the money from his hand.

"Is anything—" he began, and stopped. Testily the man was still holding out the note.

"Take it," he snapped. "Don't make me stand here waiting."

"Yes, sir." The clerk apologized, and took a firmer hold. But he could not take the bill from Luke Hawks. He pulled. Hawks' hand jerked forward. Scowling, the lean man drew his hand back. The money came with it.

"What's the matter, Luke?" Emily Hawks asked. Her husband favored her with a frown.

"Some glue on it, or something," he muttered. "It stuck to my fingers. I'll get another bill out, young man."

He put the twenty back into the wallet—where it went easily enough—and drew out two tens. But neither would these leave his hand.

Luke Hawks was beginning to go a little pale. He transferred the notes to his left hand. But though his left hand could take them from his right, the clerk could take them from neither. Whenever he tugged at it, the money simply would not come loose. It stuck as close to Luke Hawks' fingers as if it were part of his skin.

A red flush crept into the man's cheeks. He could not meet his wife's gaze.

"I—I dunno—" he muttered. "I'll lay it down. You pick it up."

Carefully he laid a ten dollar bill on the counter, spread his fingers wide, and lifted his hand. To his horror and fright, the bit of green paper came with it, adhering firmly to his finger tips.

"Luke Hawks," his wife said sturdily, "it's a judgment on you. The good Lord has put a curse on your money."

"Hush!" Hawks warned. "Netty Peters has come in the store and is looking. She'll

hear you and go gabbing nonsense all—”

“It is not nonsense!” his wife stated. “It’s truth. Your money will not leave your fingers.”

LUKE HAWKS went deathly pale again. With a strangled curse, he snatched out all the money in his wallet and tried to throw it down on the counter. To his intense relief, one folded green slip fluttered down, though the rest remained in his hand.

“There!” he gasped. “It ain’t so! Boy, how much is that?”

The clerk reached for the paper.

“It—it’s a cigar coupon, sir,” he reported, his face wooden.

Luke Hawks wilted then. He thrust all his money into the ancient pigskin wallet and being careful his fingers touched only the leather, held it out to his wife.

“Here!” he directed. “You pay him, Emily.”

Emily Hawks folded her arms and looked straight into his frightened eyes.

“Luke Hawks,” she said, in a firm, clear voice that carried through the entire store, “for eight years my life has been made a misery by your mean, grasping ways. Now you can’t spend any of your money. You’ll starve to death before you can even spend a nickel for bread.

“And I’ve a good mind to let you. If I don’t buy anything for you, you can be sure no one will give it to you. The people of this town would laugh themselves sick seeing you with your hands full of money, begging for a bite to eat. They wouldn’t give it to you, either.”

Luke Hawks knew they wouldn’t. He stared down at his wife, who had never before dared act like this.

“No,” he protested. “Emily, don’t say that. Here, you take the money. Spend it as you want. Get the things we need. I’ll leave it all to you. You—you can even get the next most expensive clothes for the boys.”

“You mean you want me to handle the money from now on?” Emily Hawks demanded, and her husband nodded.

“Yes, Emily,” he gasped. “Take it. Please take it.”

His wife took the wallet—which left Luke Hawks’ hands readily enough—and counted the money in it.

“Five hundred dollars,” she said aloud, thoughtfully. “Luke, hadn’t you better give me a check for what you’ve got in the bank? If I’m to do all the buying, the money’ll have to be in my hands.”

“A check!” Luke exclaimed. “That’s it! I don’t need money! I’ll pay by check.”

“Try it,” Emily invited. “That’s the same as cash, isn’t it?”

Luke tried it. The check would not leave his fingers either. It only tore to pieces when the clerk tugged at it.

After that, he capitulated. He took out his book and signed a blank check, which Emily was able to take. She then filled it in for herself for the entire balance in the bank—twenty thousand dollars, Luke Hawks admitted with strangled reluctance.

After that she tucked the check into the bosom of her dress.

“Now, Abner,” she suggested, “you might as well go on home. I’ll go to the bank and deposit this to my account. Then I’ll do the rest of the shopping. I won’t need you.”

“But how’ll you get the things home?” her husband asked weakly.

Emily Hawks was already almost to the door—out which Netty Peters had just dashed to spread the news through the town. But she paused long enough to turn and smile brightly at her pale and perspiring husband.

“I’ll have the man at the garage drive me out with them,” she answered. “In the car I’m going to buy after I leave the bank, Abner.”

IV

MISS WILSON looked up from her sewing at the sound of galloping hooves in the street outside her tiny shop.

She was just in time to see a small swift figure race by. Then, before she could won-

der what it was, she caught sight of herself in the big mirror customers used when trying on the dresses she made.

Her whole name was Alice Wilson. But it was years since anyone had called her by her first name. She was thirty-three, as small and plain as a church mouse—

But she wasn't! Miss Wilson stared open-mouthed at her reflection. She—she wasn't mouse-like any longer. She was—yes, really—almost pretty!

A length of dress goods forgotten in one hand, a needle suspended in mid-air in the other, Alice Wilson stared at the woman in the glass. A small woman, with a smiling, pink and white face, over which a stray lock of golden hair had fallen from the piled-up mass of curls on the top of her head—curls that gave out a soft and shining light.

The woman in the mirror had soft, warm red lips and blue eyes of sky-azure clearness and depth. Alice Wilson stared, and smiled in sheer delight. The image smiled back.

Wonderingly, Alice touched her face with her fingers. What had happened? What kind of a trick were her eyes playing on her? How—

The clatter of hurrying footsteps made her jump. Netty Peters, her sharp face alight with excitement, her head thrust forward on her skinny neck like a running chicken's, ran in. Miss Wilson's dressmaking shop, the closest place to the Fair-Square store, was her first stop on her tour to spread the news of Luke Hawk's curse.

"Miss Wilson," she gobbled breathlessly, "what do you think—"

"*She thinks you've come to spread some scandal or other, that's what she thinks,*" a shrill, file-like voice interrupted.

The voice seemed to come from her own mouth. Netty Peters glared.

"Miss Wilson," she snapped, "if you think ventriloquism is funny when I'm trying to tell you—*just like you're going to tell everybody else!*" the second voice broke in, and Netty Peters felt faint. The words had come from her own mouth!

She put her hands to her throat; and because her mind was blank with fright, her tongue went busily ahead with what she had planned to say.

"I saw Luke Hawks—*just like you see everything*"—that was the shrill, second voice, alternating with her own normal one—"in the Fair-Square store and they—*were minding their own business, something you might do*—they were buying clothes for their poor starved children whom they treat so shamefully—*trust you to get that in!*—when Mr. Hawks tried to pay the clerk—and you were watching to see how much they spent—the money wouldn't leave his fingers—*did you ever think how many people would be happy if sometimes the words wouldn't leave your throat?*"

The town gossip ceased. Her words had become all jumbled together, making no sense, like two voices trying to shout each other down. There was a strange fluttering in her throat. As if she were talking with two tongues at the same time. . . .

Miss Wilson was staring at her strangely, and Netty Peters saw for the first time the odd radiance in Miss Wilson's hair, the new sweetness in her features.

Incoherent words gurgled in the older woman's throat. Terror glazed her eyes. She turned, and with a queer sobbing wail, fled.

Alice Wilson was still looking after her in bewilderment when another figure momentarily darkened the doorway. It was Mr. Wiggins, who owned the unprofitable bookstore on the other side of her dressmaking establishment.

Ordinarily Mr. Wiggins was a shy, pale-faced man, his thirty-eight years showing in the stoop of his shoulders, his eyes squinting behind thick glasses. He often smiled, but it was the small, hopeful smile of a man who didn't dare not to smile for fear he might lose heart altogether.

But today, this day of strange happenings, Mr. Wiggins was standing erect. His hair was rumpled, his glasses awry, and his eyes blazing with excitement.

"Miss Wilson!" he cried. "The most amazing thing has happened! I had to tell somebody. I hope you don't mind my bursting in to tell you."

Alice Wilson stared at him, and instantly forgot about the strange thing that had happened to her to be interested in Mr. Wiggins's experience.

"Oh, *no!*" she answered. "Of course I don't. I—I'm glad!"

Outside there were more sounds of galloping hooves, shrill squeals, and men's voices shouting.

"There seems to be a herd of wild ponies loose in the town," Mr. Wiggins told Miss Wilson. "One almost knocked me down, racing along the sidewalk as I was coming here. Miss Wilson, you'll never believe it, what I was going to tell you. You'll have to see for yourself. Then you won't think I'm mad."

"Oh, I'd never think that!" Miss Wilson assured him.

Scarcely hearing her, Mr. Wiggins seized her by the hand and almost dragged her to the door. A flush of warm pleasure rose into Miss Wilson's cheeks at the touch of his hand.

A little breathless, she ran beside him, out the shop door, down a dozen yards, and into the gloom of his tiny, unpatronized bookstore.

On the way, she barely had a glimpse of three or four shaggy ponies snorting and wheeling further up the street, with Henry Jones and Jake Harrison, assisted by a crowd of laughing men and boys, trying to catch them.

Then Mr. Wiggins, trembling with excitement, was pushing her down into an old overstuffed chair.

"Miss Wilson," he said tensely, "I was sitting right here when in came Jacob Earl, not fifteen minutes ago. You know how he walks—big and pompous, as if he owned the earth. I knew what he wanted. He wanted the thousand dollars I owe him, that I borrowed to buy my stock of books with. And I—I didn't have it. None of it."

"You remember when my aunt died last year, she left me that property down by

the river that I sold to Jacob Earl for five hundred dollars? He pretended he was just doing me a favor buying it, to help me get started in business.

"But then high grade gravel was discovered on the land, and now it's worth at least fifteen thousand dollars. I learned Earl knew about the gravel all the time. But in spite of that, he wanted the thousand he loaned me."

"Yes, oh yes!" Miss Wilson exclaimed. "He would. But what did you *do*, Mr. Wiggins?"

Mr. Wiggins combed back his disheveled hair with his fingers.

"I told him I didn't have it. And he took off his glove—his right glove—and told me if I didn't have it by tomorrow, he'd have to attach all my books and fixtures. And then he put his hand down on top of my little brass Chinese luck piece. And guess what happened?"

"Oh, I couldn't!" Miss Wilson whispered. "I never could!"

"Look!" Mr. Wiggins' voice trembled. He snatched up a large dust cloth that hid something on the counter just before Miss Wilson's eyes. Underneath the cloth was a squat little Chinese god, about a foot high, sitting with knees crossed and holding a bowl in his lap.

On his brass countenance was a sly smile, and his mouth was open in a round O of great amusement.

And as Miss Wilson stared at him, a small gold coin popped out of the little god's mouth and landed with a musical chink in the bowl in his lap!

Alice Wilson gasped. "Oh, John!" she cried, using Mr. Wiggins' Christian name for the first time in her life. "Is it—is it money?"

"Chinese money," Mr. Wiggins told her. "And the bowl is full of it. It's filled just since I ran over to get you. One comes out of his mouth every second. The first one came out right after Mr. Pearl put his hand on the god's head. Look!"

He scooped up the contents of the bowl and held them out, let them rain into Miss

Wilson's lap. Incredulously she picked one up.

It was a coin as large perhaps as an American nickel. In the center was punched a square hole. All around the edges were queer Oriental ideographs. And the piece of money was as fresh and new and shiny as if it had just come from the mint.

"Is it real gold?" she asked tremulously.

"Twenty carats pure at least!" John Wiggins assured her. "Even if it is Chinese money, the coins must be worth five dollars apiece just for the metal. And look—the bowl is half full again."

They stared wide-eyed and breathless at the little grinning god. Every second, as regularly as clockwork, another gold coin popped out of his open mouth.

"It's as if—as if he were coining them!" John Wiggins whispered.

"Oh, it's wonderful!" Alice Wilson told him, with rapture. "John, I'm so glad! For your sake. Now you can pay off Earl."

"In his own coin!" the man chortled. "Because he started it happening, you know, so you could call it his own coin. Perhaps he pressed a secret spring or something that released them from where they were hidden inside the god. I don't know."

"But the funny thing is, he couldn't pick them up! He tried to pretend he had just dropped the first couple, but they rolled out of the bowl and right across the floor when he reached for them. And then he began to get frightened. He grabbed up his hat and his glove and ran out."

Then John Wiggins paused. He was looking down at Alice Wilson, and for the first time he really saw the change that had occurred in her.

"Why—why—" he said, "do you know, your hair is the same color as the coins?"

"Oh, it isn't!" Miss Wilson protested, blushing scarlet at the first compliment a man had paid her in ten years.

"It is," he insisted. "And you—you're lovely, Alice. I never realized before how lovely. You're as pretty as—as pretty as a picture!"

He looked down into her eyes, and without taking his gaze away, reached

down and took her hands in his. He drew her up out of the chair, and still crimsoning with pleasure, Alice Wilson stood and faced him.

"Alice," John Wiggins said, "Alice, I've known you for a long time, and I've been blind. I guess worry blinded me. Or I'd have seen long ago how beautiful you are and known what I've just realized. I know I'm not much of a success as a man but—but Alice, would you be my wife?"

Alice Wilson gave a little sigh and rested her face against his shoulder so that he might not see the tears in her eyes. Happiness had mostly eluded her until now, but this moment more than made up for all the years that were past.

John Wiggins put his arms about her, and behind them the little god grinned and went busily on with his minting. . . .

JACOB EARL stamped into his library in his home and locked the door behind him, with fingers that shook a little.

Throwing his hat and stick down, with his gloves, onto a chair, he groped for a cigar in his desk and lit it, by sheer force of will striving to quell the inward agitation that was shaking him.

But—Well, any man might feel shaken if he had put his hand down on a cold brass paperweight and had felt the thing twist in his grip as if alive, had felt a shock in his fingers like a sudden discharge of electricity, and then had seen the thing start to spout gold money.

Money—and Jacob Earl gazed down at his soft, plump white hands almost with fright—which had *life* in it. Because when he had tried to pick it up, it had eluded him. It had *dodged*.

Angrily he flung away his barely smoked cigar. Hallucinations! He'd been having a dizzy spell, or—or something. Or Wiggins had fixed up a trick to play on him. That was it, a trick!

The nerve of the man, giving him such a start! When he had finished with the little rabbit he—he—

Jacob Earl did not quite formulate what he would do. But the mere thought

of threatening somebody made him feel better. He'd decide later what retaliation he would make.

Right now, he'd get to work. He'd inventory his strong box. Nothing like handling hard, tangible possessions, like stocks and bonds and gold, to restore a man's nerves when he felt shaky.

He spun the combination of his safe, swung open the heavy outer door, unlocked the inner door, and slid out first a weighty steel cash box locked by a massive padlock.

Weighty, because it held the one thing a man couldn't have too much of—gold. Pure gold ingots, worth five hundred dollars each. Fifteen thousand dollars' worth of them.

He'd had them since long before the government called in gold. And he was going to keep them, government or no. If he ever had to sell them, he'd claim they'd been forgotten, and found again by accident.

Jacob Earl flung open the lid of his gold cache. And his overly ruddy face turned a sudden pallid gray. Two of the ingots in the top layer were missing!

But no one could get into his safe. No one but himself. It wasn't possible that a thief—

Then the gray turned to ashen white. His eyes started, his breath caught in his throat. As he stared, a third ingot had vanished. Evaporated. Into thin air. As if an unseen hand had closed over it and snatched it away.

But it wasn't possible! Such a thing couldn't happen.

And then the fourth ingot vanished. Transfixed by rage and fright, he put his hands down on the remaining yellow bars and pressed with all his might.

But presently the fifth of his precious chunks of metal slipped away from beneath his very fingers into nothingness. One instant it was there, and he could feel it. Then—gone!

With a hoarse cry, Jacob Earl dropped the cash box. He stumbled across the room to his telephone, got a number.

"Doctor?" he gasped. "Doctor Norcross? This is Jacob Earl. I—I—"

Then he bethought himself. This couldn't happen. This was madness. If he told anyone—

"Never mind, doctor!" he blurted. "Sorry to have troubled you. It's all right."

He hung up. And sat there, all the rest of the day, sweat beading his brow, watching the shiny yellow oblongs that had fallen on the floor vanish one by one.

*

In another part of town, another hand crept toward the telephone—and drew back. Minerva Benson's hand. Minerva Benson had discovered her deformity almost the instant she had arisen, late that morning. The stiff, lifeless face affixed to the back of her head now. Thin, vicious, twisted, the features of a harpy.

With trembling fingers she touched it again, in a wild hope that it might have vanished. Then she huddled closer on the end of the sofa in the darkened room, whose door was locked, blinds drawn.

She couldn't telephone. Because no one must see her like this. No one. Not even a doctor. . . .

*

And in her tiny, spinsterish home Netty Peters also crouched, and also feared to telephone.

Feared, lest that strange, dreadful second voice begin to clack and rattle in her throat when she tried to talk, tried to ask Doctor Norcross to come.

Crouched, and felt her throat with fingers like frantic claws. And was sure she could detect something moving in her throat like a thing alive.

V

MRS. EDWARD NORTON moved along the tree-shaded streets toward the downtown section of Locustville with all the self-conscious pride of a frigate entering a harbor under full sail.

She was a full-bodied woman—well

built, she phrased it—and expensively dressed. Certainly the best-dressed woman in town, as befitted her position as leader of Locustville's social life and the most influential woman in town.

And today she was going to use her influence. She was going to have Janice Avery discharged as teacher in the high school.

Distinctly she had seen the young woman *smoking* in her room, the previous evening, as she happened to be driving by. A woman who should be an example to the children she taught actually—

Mrs. Norton sailed along, indignation high in her. She had called first at Minerva Benson's home. Minerva was a member of the school board. But Minerva had said she was sick, and refused to see her.

Then she had tried Jacob Earl, the second member of the board. And he had been ill too.

It was odd.

Now she was going directly to the office of Doctor Norcross. He was head of the school board. Not the kind of man she approved of for the position, of course—

Mrs. Norton paused. For the past few moments she had been experiencing a strange sensation of puffiness, of lightness. Was she ill too? Could she be feeling light-headed or dizzy?

But no, she was perfectly normal. Just a moment's upset perhaps, from walking too fast.

She continued onward. What had she been thinking? Oh, yes, Doctor Norcross. An able physician, perhaps, but his wife was really quite—well, quite a dowdy. . . .

Mrs. Norton paused again. A gentle breeze was blowing down the street and she—she was being swayed from side to side by it. Actually, it was almost pushing her off balance!

She took hold of a convenient lamp post. That stopped her from swaying. But—

She stared transfixed at her fingers. They were swollen and puffy.

Her rings were cutting into them painfully. Could she have some awful—

Then she became aware of a strained,

uncomfortable feeling all over her person. A feeling of being confined, intolerably pent-up in her clothing.

With her free hand she began to pat herself, at first with puzzlement, then with terror. Her clothing was as tight on her as the skin of a sausage. It had shrunk! It was cutting off her circulation!

No, it hadn't. That wasn't true. She was growing! Puffing up! Filling out her clothes like a slowly expanding balloon.

Her corset was confining her diaphragm, making it impossible to breathe. She couldn't get air into her lungs.

She had some awful disease. That was what came of living in a dreadful, dirty place like Locustville, among backward, ignorant people who carried germs and—

At that instant the laces of Mrs. Norton's corsets gave way. She could actually feel herself swell, bloat, puff out. Her arms were queer and hard to handle. The seams of her dress were giving way.

The playful breeze pushed her, and she swayed back and forth like a midnight drunk staggering homeward.

Her fingers slipped from the lamp post.

And she began to rise slowly, ponderously into the air, like a runaway balloon.

MRS. EDWARD NORTON screamed. Piercingly. But her voice seemed lost, a thin wail that carried hardly twenty yards. This was unthinkable. This was impossible!

But it was happening.

Now she was a dozen feet above the sidewalk. Now twenty. And at that level she paused, spinning slowly around and around, her arms flopping like a frightened chicken's wings, her mouth opening and closing like a feeding goldfish's, but no sounds coming forth.

If anyone should see her now! Oh, if anyone should see her!

But no one did. The street was quite deserted. The houses were few, and set well back from the street. And the excitement downtown, the herd of strange ponies that all day had been kicking up their heels as they dodged in and out of alleys,

whinnying and squealing as Henry Jones and his volunteer assistants tried to pen them up, had drawn every unoccupied soul in Locustville.

Mrs. Norton, pushed along by the gentle breeze, began to drift slowly northward toward the town limits.

Tree branches scraped her and ripped her stockings as she clutched unavailingly at them. A crow, attracted by the strange spectacle, circled around her several times, emitted a raucous squawk that might have been amusement, and flew off.

A stray dog, scratching fleas in the sunshine, saw her pass overhead and followed along underneath for a moment, barking furiously.

Mrs. Norton crimsoned with shame and mortification. Oh, if anyone saw her!

But if no one saw her, no one could help her. She did not know whether to pray for someone to come along or not. She was unhurt. Perhaps nothing worse was going to happen.

But to be sailing placidly through the air, twenty feet above the street, puffed up like a balloon!

The breeze had brought her out to a district marked for subdivision, but still vacant. Fruit trees grew upon the land. The playful wind, shifting its quarter, altered her course. In a moment she was drifting past the upper branches of gnarled old apple trees, quite hidden from the street.

Her clothes were torn, her legs and arms scratched, her hair straggling down her back. And her indignation and fear of being seen began to give way to a sensation of awful helplessness. She, the most important woman in Locustville, to be blowing around among a lot of old fruit trees for crows to caw at and dogs to bark at and—

Mrs. Norton gasped. She had just risen another three feet.

With that she began to weep.

The tears streamed down her face. All at once she felt humble and helpless and without a thought for her dignity or her position. She just wanted to get down.

She just wanted to go home and have Edward pat her shoulder and say, "There, there," as he used to—a long time ago—while she had a good cry on his shoulder.

She was a bad woman, and being punished for it. She had been puffed up with pride, and this was what came of it. In the future, if ever she got down safely, she'd know better.

As if influenced by the remorseful thoughts, she began to descend slowly. Before she was aware of it, she had settled into the upper branches of a cherry tree, scaring away a flock of indignant robins.

And there she caught.

She had quite a lot of time in which to reflect before she saw Janice Avery swinging past along a short cut from the school to her home, and called to her.

JANICE AVERY got her down. With the aid of Bill Morrow, who was the first person she could find when she ran back to the school to get aid.

Bill was just getting into his car to drive out to the football field, where he was putting the school team through spring practice, when she ran up; and at first he did not seem to understand what she was saying.

As a matter of fact, he didn't. He was just hearing her voice—a voice that was cool and sweet and lovely, like music against a background of distant silver bells.

Then, when he got it, he sprang into action.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "Mrs. Norton stuck up a tree picking cherries? I can't believe it."

But he got a ladder from the school and brought it, gulping at the sight of the stout, tearful woman caught in the crotch of the cherry tree.

A few moments later they had her down. Mrs. Norton made no effort to explain beyond the simple statement she had first made to Janice.

"I was picking cherries and I just got stuck."

Wild as it was, it was better than the truth.

Bill Morrow brought his car as close as he could and Janice hurried her out to it, torn, scratched, bedraggled, red-eyed. They got her in without anyone seeing and drove her home.

Mrs. Norton sobbed out a choked thanks and fled into the house, to weep on the shoulders of her surprised husband.

Bill Morrow mopped his forehead and looked at Janice Avery. She wasn't pretty, but— Well, there was something in her face. Something swell. And her voice. A man could hear a voice like that all his life and not grow tired of it.

"Lord!" he exclaimed, as he slid behind the wheel of his car. "And Betty Norton is going to look just like that some day. Whew! Do you know, I'm a fool. I actually once thought of— But never mind. Where can I take you?"

He grinned at her, and Janice Avery smiled back, little happy lines springing into life around the corners of her lips and her eyes.

"Well," she began, as the wide-shouldered young man kicked the motor into life, "you have to get to practice—"

"Practice is out!" Bill Morrow told her with great firmness, and let in the clutch. "We're going some place and talk!"

She sat back, content.

VI

THE sun was setting redly as Dr. Norcross closed his office and swung off homeward with a lithe step.

It had been a strange day. Darned strange. Wild ponies had been running through the town since morning, madly chased by the usually somnolent Henry Jones. From his window he had seen into the bookstore across the street and distinctly perceived John Wiggins and Alice Wilson embracing.

Then there had been that abortive phone call from an obviously agitated Jacob Earl. And he had positively seen Mrs. Luke Hawks going past in a brand new car, with a young man at the wheel who seemed to be teaching her to drive. Whew!

There would be a lot to tell his wife tonight.

His reflections were cut short as he strode past Henry Jones' backyard, which lay on his homeward short-cut route.

A crowd of townsfolk were gathered about the door in the fence around the yard, and Dr. Norcross could observe others in the house, peering out the windows.

Henry and Jake Harrison, mopping their faces with fatigue, stood outside peering into the yard through the cautiously opened doorway. And over the fence itself, he was able to see the tossing heads of many ponies, while their squeals cut the evening air.

"Well, Henry"—that was Martha, who came around the corner of the house and pushed through the crowd about her husband—"you've rounded up all the horses all right. But how're you going to pay for the damage they did today? Now you'll have to go to work, in spite of yourself. Even if they aren't good for anything else they've accomplished *that!*"

There was an excitement on Henry's face Dr. Norcross had never seen there before.

"Sure, Martha, sure," he agreed. "I know I'll have to pay off the damage. But Jake and me, we've got plans for these hooved jackrabbits. Know what we're going to do?"

He turned, so all of the gathered crowd could hear his announcement.

"Jake and me, we're going to use that land of Jake's south of town to breed polo ponies!" he declared. "Yes, sir, we're going to cross these streaks of lightning with real polo ponies. We're gonna get a new breed with the speed of a whippet, the endurance of a mule, and the intelligence of a human.

"Anybody who seen these creatures skedaddle around town today knows that when we get a polo pony with their blood in it developed, it'll be something! Yes, sir, something! I wish—

"No I don't! I don't wish anything! Not a single, solitary thing! I'm not gonna wish for anything ever again, either!"

Norcross grinned. Maybe Henry had something there.

Then, noting that the sun had just vanished, he was home.

UP IN his room, Danny Norcross woke groggily from a slumber that had been full of dreams. Half asleep still, he groped for and found the little piece of ivory he had kept beside him ever since he had fallen asleep the night before.

His brow wrinkled. He had been on the stair, listening to the grown-ups talk. They had said a lot of queer things. About horses, and money, and pictures. Then he had gotten back in bed. And played with his bit of ivory for awhile.

Then he had had a funny thought, and sort of a wish—

The wish that had passed through his mind, as he had been falling asleep, had been that all the things Dad and Mom and the others had said would come true, because it would be so funny if they did.

So he had wished that just for one day, maybe, all Henry Jones' wishes would be horses, and money would stick to Luke Hawks' fingers, and Jacob Earl would touch something that would coin money for somebody else for a change.

And, too, that Netty Peters' tongue really would be hinged in the middle and wag at both ends; and Mrs. Benson have two faces, and Mrs. Norton swell up and blow around like a balloon.

And that Miss Wilson would really be as pretty as a picture, and you could truly hear silver bells when Miss Avery talked.

That had been his wish. But now, wide awake and staring out the window at a sky all red because the sun had set, he couldn't quite remember it, try as he would. . . .

*

Crouched in her darkened room, Minerva Benson felt the back of her head for the hundredth time. First with shuddering horror, then with hope, then with incredulous relief. The dreadful face was gone now.

But she would remember it, and be haunted by it forever in her dreams.

*

Netty Peters stared at herself in her mirror, her eyes wide and frightened. Slowly she took her hands from her throat. The queer fluttering was gone. She could talk again without that terrible voice interrupting.

But always after, when she began to speak, she would stop abruptly for fear it might sound again, in the middle of a sentence.

*

"I've decided, Luke," Mrs. Luke Hawks said with decision, "that we'll have the house painted and put in a new furnace. Then I'm going to take the children off on a little vacation.

"No, don't say anything! Remember, the money is in my name now, and I can spend it all, if I've a mind to. I can take it and go away to California, or any place.

"And no matter what you say or do, I'm not going to give it back!"

*

Jacob Earl uttered a groan. The last gold ingot had just vanished from the floor of his library.

*

John Wiggins turned. The tiny *chink-chink* that had sounded all afternoon had ceased. The little god still grinned, but the coins were no longer coming from his mouth.

"He's quit," the little man announced to the flushed and radiant Alice Wilson. "But we don't care. Look how much money came out of him. Why there must be fifteen thousand dollars there!

"Alice, we'll take a trip around the world. And we'll take him back to China, where he came from. He deserves a reward."

*

With the red afterglow tinting the little

lake beside which he had parked the car, Bill Morrow turned. His arm was already about Janice Avery's shoulders.

So it really wasn't any effort for him to draw her closer and kiss her, firmly, masterfully.

THE door to Danny's room opened. He heard Dad and Mom come in, and pretended for a minute that he was asleep.

"He's been napping all day," Mom was saying. "He hardly woke up enough to eat breakfast. I guess he must have lain awake late last night. But his fever was down, and he didn't seem restless, so I didn't call you."

"We'll see how he is now," Dad's voice answered; and Danny, who had closed his eyes to try to remember better, opened them again.

Dad was bending over his bed.

"How do you feel, son?" he asked.

"I feel swell," Danny told him, and struggled to a sitting position. "Look what I found yesterday in my box. What is it, Dad?"

Doctor Norcross took the piece of ivory Danny held out, and looked at it.

"I'll be darned!" he exclaimed to his wife. "Danny's found the old Chinese talisman Grandfather Jonas brought back on the last voyage of the *Yankee Star*. He gave it to me thirty years ago. Told me it had belonged to a Chinese magician.

"It's peculiar power, he said, was that if you held it tight, you could have one

wish come true, providing—as the Chinese inscription on the bottom says—your mind was pure, your spirit innocent, and your motive unselfish.

"I wished on it dozens of times, but nothing ever happened. Guess it was because I was too materialistic and wished for bicycles and things.

"Here, Danny, you can keep it. But take good care of it. It's very old; even the man who gave it to Grandfather Jonas didn't know how old it was."

Danny took back the talisman.

"I made a wish, Dad," he confessed.

"So?" Dad grinned. "Did it come true?"

"I don't know," Danny admitted. "I can't remember what it was."

Dad chuckled.

"Then I guess it didn't come true," he remarked. "Never mind; you can make another. And if that one doesn't happen either, don't fret. You can keep the talisman and tell people the story. It's a good story, even if it isn't so."

Probably it wasn't so. It was certain that the next time Danny wished, nothing happened. Nor any of the times after that. So that by and by he gave up trying.

He was always a little sorry, though, that he never could remember that first wish, made when he was almost asleep.

But he never could. Not even later, when he heard people remarking how much marriage had improved Alice Wilson's appearance and how silvery Mrs. Bob Morrow's voice was.

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By KURT STEEL

THE stars in their courses, circling the Manhattan heavens, must have looked down apprehensively at the affairs of the Thayer family. For, since two of the Thayers took such an interest in the stars, it may be supposed that the stars returned the compliment.

Both NAT THAYER, the wealthy publisher, and BERYL, his addle-pated second wife, are ardent believers in astrology, particularly of the sort expensively peddled by the fashionable faker, CLEARSE OWEN. MARCIA, Nat's daughter by his first marriage, watched her father's growing fanaticism on the subject with a good deal of alarm. First, because she both distrusts and fears Owen. Second, because Owen's advice is threatening to play havoc with her marriage to RICHARD LANNING, Beryl's winning and irresponsible nephew.

Richard, newly fired from his position with Thayer's publication firm, demands that Nat Thayer release to him the money left him by his mother. Thayer, the trustee of the estate, is determined to ask the opinion of the stars—and Clearse Owen—on the subject. Richard is determined that he shall not.

Marcia sends Richard to the Thayer camp on Lake Manitou to cool off, while she tries to manage her father; and is alarmed when Thayer announces his decision to take Owen up to the camp for the momentous conference.

BERYL THAYER, in one of her mercurial shifts, is suddenly convinced that Owen is a charlatan and tries to persuade HANK HYER, the detective, to break Owen's hold over her husband. PIERRE DAWSON, Thayer's partner, is also eager for Hyer to



This story began in last week's Argosy