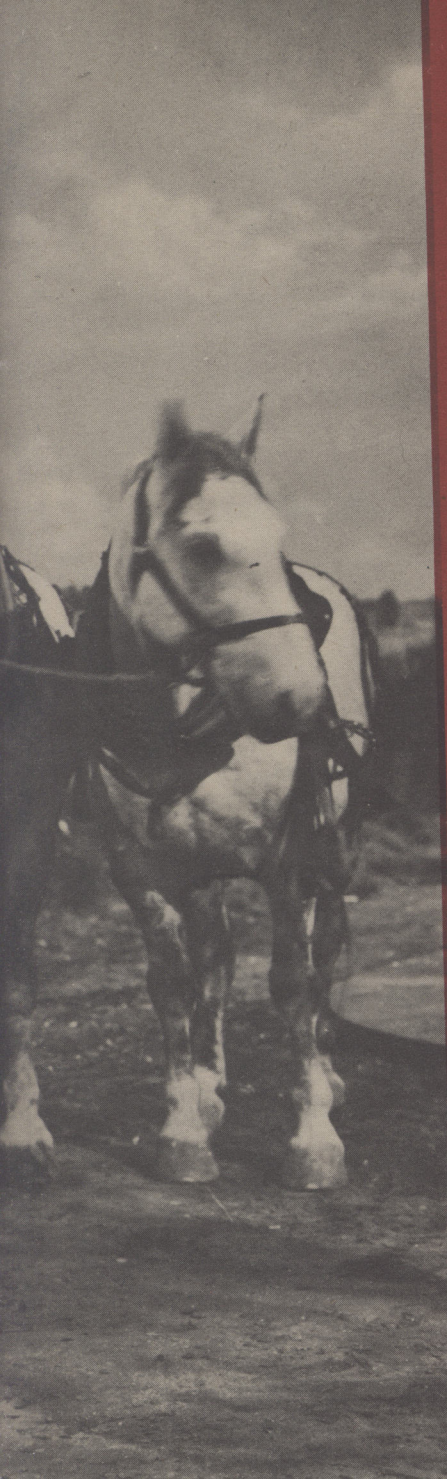

GEORGE VICTOR MARTIN

Our Vines Have Tender Grapes

GROSSET & DUNLAP FILM CLASSICS LIBRARY

GROSSET & DUNLAP
Publishers, New York
1945

FOR OUR VINES HAVE TENDER GRAPES

MOTION PICTURE EDITION

UNDER THE TITLE OF

OUR VINES HAVE TENDER GRAPES

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Introduction

IT IS VERY SWEETLY FITTING THAT THIS BOOK SHOULD BE ONE of the first of the new series of Film Classics that Grosset & Dunlap are publishing, to redeem "movie editions" from their quondom bargain-basement status, by issuing some of the more distinguished of the newly filmed books with all the dignity and decorum formerly reserved for original editions.

The Film Classics Library, of which this book may be considered the key, or corner stone, accords Hollywood a new measure of respect. It indicates that books, as such, are not above being heightened rather than diminished in their interest and stature by the process of being screened. It serves as recognition, in short, that the motion picture, as an art-form, has come of age.

From the days of *Boy Meets Girl* onward Hollywood has been overdue for some such tribute. Too long kidded as the place were good authors go to die, too long characterized by authors and playwrights as a sort of Midas-in-reverse, turning everything to dross that it touches with its gold, Hollywood has earned the right to appear in a new role.

For such a purpose, this book is heaven-sent. Hollywood's role, in relation to this book, is that of a Diogenes, seeking and finding, with its Kleig light held lantern-like aloft, an honest book. For Hollywood, truly, "discovere " this fine novel.

Without the picture, this book could hardly have been

rescued from the oblivion which engulfed it on its appearance five years ago. The few of us who read it when it first came out tried, many times since and without avail, to get this neglected little classic back into active print.

Perhaps "classic" isn't the word. A classic, by proverbial definition, is a book everybody's heard of and nobody's read. So it remained for Hollywood to make it a classic in that sense. And now, thanks to the picture, this edition can remedy the latter deficiency, by making it possible for everybody to read this book that everybody has, at long last, heard of.

You will have had a chance to see the picture by the time this edition makes its appearance. Without having seen the picture, it is still easy to see how that mighty atom, Margaret O'Brien, could well do justice to the Selma who is its central character. In fact, it's hard to see how anybody else possibly could. But it is no reflection on the motion picture to suggest that it will inevitably have left you all the book's overtones, that are the essence of its charm, to discover to your own delight. For it is hard to see how any other medium of communication could extract from the printed page all the ineluctable magic of this book.

This magic is so inherent, so integrated in George V. Martin's words, that one hesitates to stray very far away from them in talking about the book itself.

What is this book, then? It's "a symphony in a small heart, and only a fervent *Jeepers* to tell about it . . . you can't put your finger on it and you can't tabelate and catalog and describe nor tell its number of dimensions nor state its color and composition . . . Try as you will, there's only *Jeepers!*" In other words, the whole story is told on the intellectual level of the 9-year-old girl who is its central character.

What's it all about? About "a very beautiful world apart from all other worlds."

But isn't it a real world, an actual setting? Well, yes; yes and no. It's about a place called Benson Junction, a "small world that was very far from Milwaukee and Appleton and Green Bay, but very close indeed to the fjords and mountains and sky-high lakes and fishing boats of Norway."

Well, there isn't any Benson County, but there is a Little Norway section in Wisconsin. But never seek to find, anywhere there, the world that opens off this book's magic casement. For this is a world of silence more profound, and deeper peace, than any of us has known or will find, elsewhere than in these pages. Silence "apparent neither to eye nor ear, yet visible, audible. Grass blades drooped with the weight of it. You could almost hear the corn growing."

It's all word-magic, really. A book of such quiet peaceful pages that you think nothing's happening, as you go along, and only realize afterward how much has been happening. A book of audible silences. "Smells that had colors." And as for color, the book is as white, but never colorless, as a snowflake, which has in its gleaming whiteness all the colors that there are.

Its theme, its plot, its whole scenario, could be reduced to a sentence, and long ago was: *a little child shall lead them.*

This small world, where people are "coffee-hungry," and kids "candy-hungry," and dignitaries are Editor, or Teacher, or Ford-Agency Peterson's, belongs not to Wisconsin, nor to Little Norway, but only to George V. Martin, in whose heart and mind it has its only being. And, once you've read this book, in yours.

How does it make you feel? Unless you're one great callous all over, very probably it will make you feel as

Selma felt about a story *she* read: "the beauty of it turned her all warm and liquid inside. She wished it were longer, and all too soon she was nearing the end."

Three years ago I called this book, in print, "The most delightful surprise package of the last decade, and the most original contribution to American letters since Saroyan," and further said that "if he ever writes another book like it, or even if he doesn't, George V. Martin would seem to me to be a mighty important writer."

Do you suppose he will ever write another book like this? Very probably not. Because this is it. George V. Martin can say now, what Whistler is supposed to have said in response to a similar question: "Why repeat a masterpiece?"

ARNOLD GINGRICH

Chicago, Illinois, July, 1945

PART I

Summer

I

FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE HILL, UP THERE SIDE BY SIDE, they looked like a quotation mark. Selma Jacobson and Arnold Hanson. To a bird in the air the children's heads, color of autumn wheat, would have appeared as a time-faded colon. They came upon a sparrow fluttering in the road and stooped far over, knees straight, hands extended toward the earth, looking like an ornamented M. They stopped to rest when near the top of the hill, and then they started walking again, holding hands, looking like an H. Their high-laced shoes waked sleeping ghostlings that lay in the powdery dirtroad, and the ghostlings rose on beams of sun, to settle back as soon as it was safe.

The sun was straight above, concentrating, glaring upon this little part of Wisconsin with a great single eye as though all other areas upon the earth must needs suffer from lack of sunlight. For surely, since so much brightness was being lavished upon a single spot, there could not be enough to go around. God was big all right, and could do a lot of things, but just the same, there would have to be many cloudy places indeed to make up for this awful heat.

They trudged along. Sometimes they lifted their hands and laid their palms and fingers on their blonde hair. They pressed the heat that was in the hair down upon their heads, and then they would think more than ever that it was very, very hot.

"I hope we don't meet Ingeborg Berg," Arnold said. "I hope we don't meet Ingeborg Berg way out here."

"She won't hurt you," Selma said.

"I'm scared of her," Arnold said. "She always hugs me."

"Ma said she isn't right," Selma said.

"Isn't, uh . . . ?" Arnold questioned with a rising inflection.

"Isn't right. That means crazy."

"In the head?"

"Ma said it; in the head."

"Ingeborg Berg is old," Arnold said.

"Oh yes," Selma said, "she is twenty-eight years."

A calf bawled from beneath a twiggy tree; bawled its middle-register-of-a-bass-viol cry at the succulence of sumac and maple and soft pine needles across the dirtroad. It went and touched the barbed wire with its head, and realized that previous hurts had not been imaginary. It eyed the children approaching, was happy when they stopped, and droolingly sucked their willing fingers, then watched them continue on and on up the hill, with their shoes whispering along in the dust. A surrey followed the children and passed them, and before the dust had settled the calf had forgotten its late bereavement. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, it flung up its tail, kicked up its hooves, and dashed away. Happily, happily, no longer lonely.

"Here's Johnny Gustavus' place," Arnold said. And then he added wistfully, "He's got pheasants."

"Not now," Selma said. "We'll look at them after. We have to go home for dinner."

"Oh, all right," Arnold said.

"Anyhow, we found some new cow paths," Selma reminded him.

"Yes," Arnold said.

The road folded over the top of the hill and a great-girthed elm gnarled up at that place, shading the fold with green-fringed biceps. The tree was kingly in stature and demeanor, and in scope of vision. Beneath its branches was a flat rock, three yards or so across—a symbol, too, of ruggedness. Upon this rock the children sat. They slitted their eyes, even though they were in absolute shade, because just beyond their little oasis was that heat, boring down like the ray of a burning glass that is held just so. Arnold lay back, but Selma remained sitting up, keeping guard because she was the older. She pulled the hem of her gingham skirt forward as far as it would go, almost to her knees. "You shouldn't had oughta sleep now," she said. He rolled over on his side, touching her with his knees. "Uh-uh," he grumbled. She patted his crooked overalled leg. "You're starting to do it, though."

"Ummmmm."

Well, so let him be. Even *she* was tired and a little sleepy, and she was all of nine years old. How much more tired and how much more sleepy must *he* be. For Arnold she thought was only seven, and this was soon after the scarlet fever that he had lain in bed with in the early spring. She remembered, now, how it was when he was peeling, when he was not sick any more. She smiled in pale-lipped tenderness at that thought of him at the window, inside the stuffy house, and of herself outside. And how they would press their noses against the pane with only the glass between them, and pull down the lower lids of their eyes, and stretch their mouths wide with their fingers, making each other laugh, not wanting to laugh; wanting, rather, to cry because they could not be together. At last his heels had begun to peel, and that was the beginning of the end of the illness. But how slowly the skin came off! He would stick

his skinny legs up and hook the heels on the sill ledge so that she might see how the shedding was getting along.

And that day, that great day when he came outside to play. Spring had been well along. It was the warmest day of the summer so far. She had stood at the pump trembling a little, held back somehow, from rushing up and taking his hand. He had come out into the light, the glorious sunlight, had rolled in the grass like a joyful puppy, emitting little yelps. He had run to the fields to greet the cows, the calves, the two leggy colts. He had run and run. He had run to the pump where she stood and had made the water gush out of the spout by hanging on the handle and then pushing it quickly up with his shoulder, hanging, pushing, hanging, sending the water gurgling to the stock tank. She had smiled then, as she was smiling now, tenderly, and with an almost motherly pride. Little Cousin Arnold. Jeepers.

Away down there to the south flowed a tiny river. She knew the river was there, even though she couldn't see it. But she could see the roads flowing. County Road 16 flowed east and west; State Aid 37 flowed to north and south. They mingled their currents where they crossed in Benson Junction. Benson Junction was the low point, and wagons and buggies floated there. But after doings in town, the town became a sort of water shed, and everything flowed back.

Arnold rolled over on his back and emitted a tiny snore. Selma giggled a little, then decided that she did not feel like giggling, and then she felt a little sad. She wished he would wake up. She looked down at him and called to him mentally, half closing her eyes, and thrusting her face forward. She called to him, "Hoo, hoo, I wish you would wake up, I wish you would. Wake up, wake up, wake up." Her lips

did not move. "Aw, c'mon, Arnold, wake up. Gee, it isn't any fun for me. We have to go home."

A fly came and whizzed about, a disconcerting fly with much energy and inquisitiveness. It buzzed through the air, all ready to sit on Arnold's head, but Selma sent it tearing away. Then it hummed back, and Selma lay down beside Arnold, the better to protect him from this winged thing that would not take no for answer.

It was good to lie here. Just to lie here and not do anything and not think anything. It was very nice. When her eyelids drooped, then the fences and the trees and even the sounds stepped back, and when she opened her eyes, they all came back and stood where they had been. She saw and felt them go away and come back, go away and come back, go and come . . . go . . . go . . .

All the silence of the countryside closed in, apparent neither to eye nor ear, yet visible, audible. Grass blades drooped with the weight of it. A sparrow in a tree cheeped, and the cheep sank to the earth, not bouncing. A squirrel lay stretched on its belly, feet out and clutching, as though the silence were heavy for it, and its little heart pummelled its ribs, dubadub in that quick way, but the tail did not flick, nor was it arched up, but lay upon the earth, and the silence did that too. A bumblebee went by, like a heavily-loaded transport plane, winging mightily to bring its perfumed cargo safely to hive. And the world of the children's sleeping was as beautiful as the world of their waking.

II

Selma awoke to the honking of an automobile horn. The racket forced a wedge between her eyes, forced in and in,

growing wider, and pushed the sleep out the sides of her head and away. She squinted at the apricot blare of brightness outside the ring of tree shade, learning again what it was to see. Lying on her side, she couldn't see the road.

"Hello, little lazy bones," a man's voice called through the heat.

She sat up and looked, shading her eyes with her hand.

"Oh, hello, Editor," she said. Her voice sounded scratchy, and she cleared her throat to get the sleep dregs out. "Arnold," she said, shaking him, "wake up. Here's Editor, Arnold." She slipped off the rock and went to the car.

"Want a ride home?" Editor said.

She opened her eyes happily and wide at the invitation so that the sun hurt them. She cupped her hands, fingertips and wrists together, and looked at him through the hole she made.

"Oh yes," she said. "And thank you very much."

He grinned at her, and Selma grinned back at him through her protecting hands. She had been thinking for a long time that someday she would marry Editor. She didn't know just how long she had been planning on that, but it had been a long time. Maybe ever since he came back from his job in Chicago, when he took over his father's newspaper before the father died.

"Can I honk your horn?" Selma said.

"Honk away," Editor said.

She stepped up on the running board and blasted away on the horn till Arnold sat up. He rubbed his eyes.

"He'll be all right soon," Selma said. "We were out discovering new cow paths and Arnold got sleepy."

"Of course *you* didn't," Editor said.

"Only after Arnold," Selma said.

"Is it cool down there by Lake Thursday?" Editor said.

"Yes," Selma said. "Only walking back is hot."

"It'll be cooler riding in the car," he said.

"Cooler than a cow path, I betcha," Selma said.

They were silent for a little while, looking over at Arnold still sitting under the tree, and getting used to being awake.

"As a rule I like the little paths myself," Editor said, looking over Selma's head at the fields of growing things. "Sometimes I have to go on the highway, but I don't do it because I want to. I like to touch things as I go along."

"Arnold is always touching things," Selma said.

Editor came back from his dream and looked down at Selma and grinned at her. She liked his teeth as she always did, his clean straw hat, and his little mustache that scratched her when he kissed her cheek.

"Hurry up, Arnold," Editor said. "I've got to get back to town. Hop in, Selma."

Selma went around the front of the car and to the other side. Editor opened the door for her and she climbed in. It was an open car and the top was down. The leather seat was hot on her thighs where the sun had been striking it, and she squirmed. Arnold came over and got in, too. Their legs stuck straight out in front of them.

"Where we going?" Arnold asked.

"You're going home," Editor said. "I'll drop you off."

"I'm going to eat at Selma's," Arnold said.

"Egg pancakes," Selma said. "We're going to have egg pancakes today."

"With jelly?" Editor asked.

"Honey," Selma said.

"We almost met Ingeborg Berg today," Arnold said to Editor. "Almost, but not quite."

"We didn't either," Selma said. They were riding along.

"You're just making that up." She turned to Editor: "He's just making that up."

"I'm not either," Arnold said. "I'm always almost meeting her. She never goes far away so I'm always almost meeting her. When I meet her she hugs me."

"She hugs all little children," Editor said. "That's because she loves them."

"I'm not little," Arnold said. "I'm seven."

"I'd forgotten," Editor said.

"My mother said Ingeborg Berg isn't right," Selma said.

"That means crazy," Arnold said. "It means crazy in the head. That's because her father beats her."

"He beats Mrs. Berg, too," Selma said.

"Ingeborg's not crazy," Editor said. "She just isn't quite as smart as we are, that's all."

"Arnold didn't know what that meant till I told him," Selma said; "that about Ingeborg Berg not being right."

"Maybe somebody had to tell you, too, before you knew, Selma," Editor said.

"I suppose so," Selma said.

"See?" Arnold said.

"I'm sorry," Selma said.

The car stopped in the road before the Jacobson place.

"Got a love for me, little Selma?" Editor said.

She hugged his neck, and then she and Arnold stepped out. The car pulled away.

"Look," Arnold said, "it isn't even time to eat yet. Your father is still out there in the field."

III

Pa Jacobson's house was a small one. There were just three rooms downstairs, if you counted the summer kitchen. Then there was the regular kitchen and the parlor. Upstairs were two rooms to sleep in, with enclosed stairs leading up. The outside of the house was painted white. The inside was scrubbed clean. There was a low porch that sagged a little and that had slim posts holding up the porch roof. The house was about a hundred feet from the dirtroad.

"Selma," Ma Jacobson called from the summer kitchen, "you and Arnold go wash."

"All right, Ma," Selma said.

They went to the pump at the side of the house.

There was a red hip-roofed barn for ten head of cattle, with plenty of hay space above. At one end of the barn was a machine shed. There was a wagon in the shed. The wagon was green with red stripes and red wheels. The name on the wagon box was *Studebaker.*

"I'll pump for you first," Selma said, and she started pumping.

"You're pumping too hard," Arnold said. "You're splashing on my shoes."

"I'm sorry," Selma said, and she pumped slower.

There was an orchard behind and alongside of the house. Three hundred apple trees grew there. In a pasture near the road were two giant crab-apple trees. There was a windmill on a four by four timber tower, and a pipe line down to the stock tank near the barn.

"Now you pump for me," Selma said.