

BROOK EVANS

SUSAN GLASPELL



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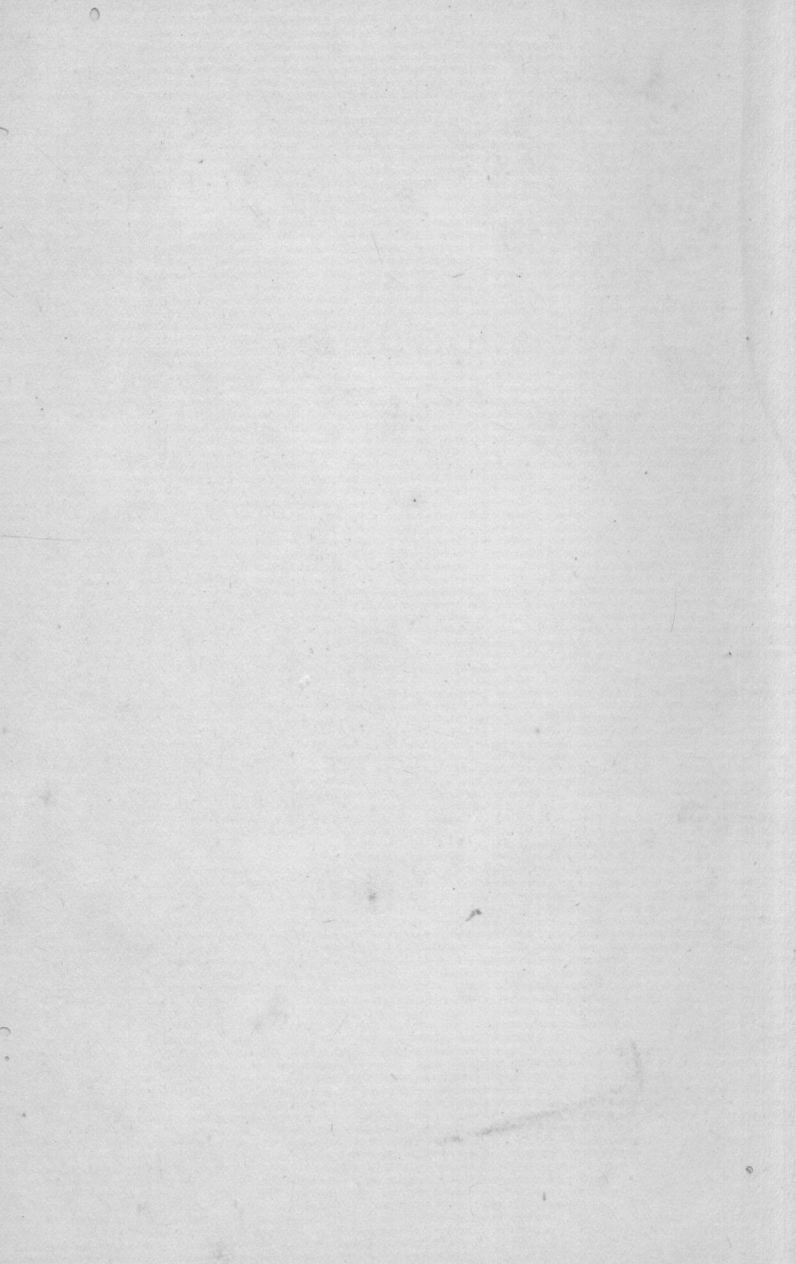


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FOR
NORMAN MATSON



BOOK I

CHAPTER I

Her mother came into the kitchen, looked at the bright green peas which did not yet cover the bottom of the yellow dish, at the basket still heaped with peas in pod, laughed indulgently : "Naomi !". When indulgent the o in her daughter's name was round and long. "What in the world you thinking about ?"

Naomi smiled as she pressed a pod and slipped out five peas. Suppose she had to tell her mother what she was thinking about ? The smile lingered—through the trees she could see the turn in the brook. Regarding her—the slim, slightly stooping girl, hands dreaming over the green pods, "Oh, well," said Mrs. Kellogg, helplessly ; she had a way of saying "Oh—well," either before jelly which would not jell or before other manifestations of life she could not control. But as she examined her jelly, finding it had done what it should she said briskly : "Why Rosie would have had those peas shelled long ago."

Naomi laughed. Of course Rosie would have had them shelled. What did Rosie—twelve—have to think about ? But now Naomi's fingers began to move—fingers running, fingers running a race. Peas danced into the dish, pods fell upon other pods. She wanted a bath before supper, get that slip ironed for her blue dress. The last thing she would put on the blue dress—they would not know.

At thought of their not knowing, as if to make up for something, she talked pleasantly with her mother of how Willie, her little brother, seven, had disappeared from sight with the brook. He and the Seares boy were playing tramp. Said they were going to play begging at houses.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Annie Kellogg, "hope they don't beg at Maria Copeland's!"

"Oh," said Naomi, shocked. "Oh, I guess they won't do that."

"No," her mother agreed, rather grimly—"I guess not."

Naomi looked at her mother. No, people didn't beg at Mrs. Copeland's—didn't even play begging. Not Kelloggs. Well, *she* didn't beg there. She didn't have to!

"What," she began guardedly, "what is it about Mrs. Copeland?"

"Oh, she's queer," her mother said. "Stand-offish. Always was. Thinks she's better than other folks."

"Of course," said Naomi. As if she didn't know that! "But why?"

"Why? How do I know why?"

A shadow moved across the sunlight on the pods. A man was moving across the yard. Caleb Evans stood in the door.

Oh, dear. Now her mother would ask him to stay for supper!

"Well, well—*Caleb*," her mother was shaking hands. "So you got back!"

"Yes, I got back," he said, in his high voice which sometimes made it hard to keep from laughing when

he prayed in church. He held out a limp hand to Naomi. As it was in this fashion he shook hands with her—how did he manage to shake hands with her mother at all?

“Well, Naomi”—with Caleb the *mi* of her name became a squeak. “See your mother manages to keep you busy.”

“That’s right,” she said, and looked down at her work, for his eyes were too glad to see her, eyes too small to be that glad.

“Now you just make yourself at home, Caleb. Mr. Kellogg’ll be up from the meadow. And I’ll whip up some baking powder biscuits for supper. Maybe you’ve not had them out in Colorado. And just yesterday ‘Omi made a chocolate cake.”

“Well, say—guess I’m in luck,” said Caleb, and Naomi had to act as if he had said something.

They had missed him at church, Mrs. Kellogg told him. Brother Baldwin said Sunday, in meeting, he hoped they would soon have Brother Caleb Evans with them again.

“*Well*——” Caleb began.

“Now don’t tell me you’re going for good!” cried Naomi’s mother.

Caleb crossed his knees. “Mrs. Kellogg,” he said, a little unsteady with importance, “I have come home to sell my store,” and he looked at Naomi.

Now she was pleasanter to him. What would he do out there?

He told of the land he had taken. It was a mountain valley. Well, they called it a valley, he laughed. It was miles and miles long—most a hundred, and wide too, the shape of a big meat platter it was, and

shut in by mountains—bigger than you had seen in pictures, even, snow on them all the year. “Goodness!” cried Mrs. Kellogg, “what a place to live!”

A great place to live, Caleb insisted, and talked of the new irrigation system, potatoes as big as turnips. Naomi’s father came up from the meadow, and Caleb told him about farming in Colorado. “It’s pretty too,” he said, looking Naomi’s way; “flowers grow wild, just like the grass. And at sundown, as the sun goes down in the west, it’s the mountains to the eastward are red as blood.”

“Now, *Caleb*,” protested Mrs. Kellogg, teasing him the way they all teased one another at church sociables.

Caleb liked his new land. He wasn’t so bad when he talked about it. At supper Naomi even asked him questions.

“I never heard Caleb talk so much,” her mother said as they cleared the table after Caleb had gone out to the barn with Mr. Kellogg.

“No,” Naomi agreed, cordially, “he was quite interesting, wasn’t he?” But now she wanted him to go. She’d have to wear her white slip—she had wanted the blue sateen! And how would she get away by half-past eight? She didn’t want to keep Joe waiting, and—why it seemed she couldn’t live if she didn’t see him to-night! Shaking the tablecloth in the doorway, she stood looking up the brook. Her father and Caleb were examining the new mower. Caleb had a hardware store at their edge of town, he was supposed to know something about machinery. But would he go home now?

"I'll have to study to-night," she told her mother, firmly. Naomi was going to summer Normal.

"You must visit with Caleb awhile first."

"He's visiting with father," and indeed it was always a question whether Caleb came to see Naomi or Naomi's parents. He was much nearer her age than theirs, but he was such a "worker in the church" it seemed to put him in their generation.

"Your father'll want to go to bed. Now you be nice to Caleb, Naomi, his first night home. He's such a good man," she added, piously, and when her mother took that tone it seemed a little insincere, though no reason why it should. "My, how he will be missed in the church."

Being nice to him—that of course was all that would come of it, and her mother really wouldn't want more to come of it—Caleb looking like this; though it wasn't so much the way he looked, as the way he *was*. He made her think of someone in a silly play, pretending to be alive, and not being funny about it. Even people who knew less about things than her mother and father would know that a girl who had gone around some with Joe Copeland never could be anything but nice to Caleb Evans.

She went into her room to comb her hair, and pulling it down the way Joe said made her beautiful, she smiled to think how much better she knew him than anyone suspected, how much more it was than going around some. But here she was both happy and troubled; it seemed silly not to go around with him the way other couples went together when they were in love. What was the matter with Joe's mother,

anyway? She'd better get over her silly, old-fashioned notions. This was 1888! Joe was twenty-one. Did she expect him to be tied to her all his life? And why didn't Joe tell her, once and for all? Well, he would soon. Very soon now. Then what would her own mother and father think—when they knew it had kept on unknown to them?

Naomi's father thought he had stopped it. He said the Copelands weren't any better than the Kelloggs, if they did have a bigger house and more land, and if Maria Copeland wouldn't let her son go with Naomi openly—this after Joe, much embarrassed, came over to get out of taking her to a lawn social where his mother would be—then Joe Copeland needn't think he could sneak over and sit in the Kelloggs' parlour. So they didn't sit in the parlour. They sat by the brook.

In the yard she heard her father say Copeland, and stood by the open window as he told Caleb about a wonderful new haying machine they had at the Copelands'. He had seen it to-day from the meadow. First one of its kind around there.

"Naomi," called her mother, in undertone, "they're coming in now."

On the porch her mother told the news of the church, then went inside to see that Rosie really went to bed, instead of just pretending. Her father yawned and yawned, finally said, "Well, I was up at five this morning. I'll be up at five to-morrow. Guess I'll leave you young folks to entertain yourselves." He laughed as though this were a joke, and it did seem a joke—Caleb as young folks, and entertaining. Because it was too much like a joke

she was nice to Caleb at first, telling him about Normal.

It became dark. Night was a friend now—inviting, sheltering. Nice sound in the trees to-night, and through them she saw the stars. She could hear the brook, singing in the bigger music of the trees, the brook which came from the Copeland place and ran through theirs, into which Joe told her he whispered messages for her. Joe was like that. Joe was her lover—all through her went this message, as she watched the thin, uncertainly moving shoulders of Caleb Evans, on whose neck fell the light from the hall. He should have moved out of the light.

Soon now Joe would be leaving home for the turn in the brook, that secret place where it was hidden from the Copeland house and from the Kelloggs'. He would be sitting there, perhaps lying flat on the grass beside the water. He would spring to his feet, his arms around her. "Naomi," he would whisper. "Naomi!" There together—just them—and as if everything around them were their friend. The brook——

"It's the country of the future," Caleb was saying in his high voice. "If the sugar beet factory . . ."

When she had a chance she said, "The worst thing about Normal is that we have to study so hard. Why we have to study at night."

"You do?" said Caleb, not paying much attention. He pulled a long grass beside the step and began splitting it down its length. "I'll be going out there in about two months now." He jerked the blade of grass in two. "How'd you like to go with

me?" he asked, a little giving her the feeling this was a joke at a church sociable.

"Oh, I couldn't go so far from home," she answered with a laugh.

"We would make a new home." No, not a joke now. He was proposing to her!

"Thank you, Caleb," she said. "It is not possible," she added, primly, saying within herself, "Well, I should think not!"

"It's not so lonely out there as you might think," he went on, argumentatively, the way she had heard him argue in meeting. "There's young folks in the town. My land's only three miles out. You'd have your own horse and buggy."

"You'll find some nice girl right there in that town, Caleb," she said, gently.

"It's you I want!"—and as he looked up at her she wanted to move away from him, for she saw he did want her, and that kind of wanting was between her and Joe.

But it gave her a chance to get away. She rose and said with dignity: "I am sorry, but I do not feel that way, Caleb. And if you will excuse me, I will really have to do my studying now."