

WHITE BANNERS



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LLOYD C. DOUGLAS



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**THIS BOOK TREATS OF PRIVATE VALOR
IT IS APPROPRIATELY
DEDICATED TO
BETTY DOUGLAS WILSON**

Chapter I

AFTER so long a pause that Marcia felt sure whoever it was must have gone away, the front doorbell rang again, a courteously brief 'still waiting.'

It would be a neighbor child on the way home from school with a handful of basketball tickets. Or an agent tardily taking orders for cheap and gaudy Christmas cards.

The trip down to the door would be laborious. Doctor Bowen had wanted her to avoid the stairs as much as possible from now on. But the diffident summons sounded very plaintive in its competition with the savage swish of sleet against the windows.

Raising herself heavily on her elbows, Marcia tried to squeeze a prompt decision out of her tousled blonde head with the tips of slim fingers. The mirror of the vanity table ventured a comforting comment on the girlish cornflower fringe that Paul always said brought out the blue in her eyes. She pressed her palms hard on the yellow curls, debating whether to make the effort. In any event she would have to go down soon, for the luncheon table was standing exactly as they had left it, and Paul would be returning in half an hour.

Edging clumsily to the side of the bed, she sat up, momentarily swept with vertigo, and fumbled with her stockinged toes for the shapeless slippers in which she had awkwardly paddled about through two previous campaigns in behalf of humanity's perpetuity. When done with them, this time, Marcia expected to throw the slippers away.

Roberta eagerly reached up both chubby arms and bounced ecstatically at the approach of the outstretched

hands. Wallie scrambled up out of his blocks and detonated an ominously sloppy sneeze.

'Hanky,' he requested, with husky solemnity.

'Well — I should say so,' agreed Marcia. 'Please don't tell me you've been taking cold again.'

Wallie denied the accusation with a vigorous shake of his head, whooped hoarsely, and began slowly pacing the intermittent clatter of their procession down the dingy stairway, the flat of his small hand squeaking on the cold rail of the ugly yellow banister.

The bulky figure of a woman was silhouetted on the frosted glass panels of the street door. Wallie, with a wobbly index finger in his nose, halted to reconnoiter as they neared the bottom of the stairs, and his mother gave him a gentle push forward. They were in the front hall now, Marcia irresolutely considering whether to brave the blizzard. Wallie decided this matter by inquiring who it was in a penetrating treble, reinforcing his desire to know by twisting the knob with ineffective hands. Marcia shifted Roberta into the crook of her other arm and opened the door to a breath-taking swirl of stinging snow, the first real storm of the season.

Outlandish in a shabby plush coat much too large for her — though she was by no means a small person — and an equally frowsy old fur hat drawn down over her brows, the caller displayed a large red apple from which an incredibly long peeling dangled. Obviously expecting her pantomime to speak for itself, the woman — heavy-eyed, pale — silently produced another inch or two of apple-skin tape projected through the slot of an ingenious little knife firmly clutched in a blue-chapped, shivering fist.

'But I mustn't stand here in this storm,' protested Marcia. 'You'll have to step inside. And please shut the door quickly,' she added over her shoulder as she retreated into the comparative warmth of the living-room, the apple-person following with Wallie reeling alongside gazing up at her inquisitively.

'Sorry to have bothered you,' regretted the peddler. It was a singularly low-pitched voice registering the last extremity of weariness, perhaps something of battered refinement too. The gray eyes were cloudy and seemed reluctant to draw a clear focus, though this might be attributed to fatigue rather than a calculated evasiveness.

Murmuring a non-committal acceptance of the apology, Marcia eased Roberta's undependable feet onto the sewing-machine table and stretched out a hand toward the magical tool.

'How much is it?'

'A quarter.'

'I'll take one,' said Marcia, glancing up to meet the gray eyes squarely for the first time. Then she added 'Please' with a slight inclination of her head which seemed to invest the trivial transaction with something like dignity. She was a little surprised at her suddenly altered attitude toward this taciturn woman with the pallid face, the puzzling eyes, and the impossible clothes. It had been habitual with Marcia to make short work of door-to-door canvassers.

Politely but without effusion the peddler produced a barely audible 'Thank you,' and began rummaging — rather ineffectually, for her hands were stiff with cold — in the depths of a capacious old shopping-bag bulging with demonstration apples, while Marcia studied the impassive face at close range. It appeared to mask a personality intended for and probably accustomed to better things than the house-to-house vending of a cheap kitchen gadget. Or perhaps it had a secret to conceal. The woman was a curious bundle of inconsistencies, the dowdy old hat and the rough hands being so shockingly unrelated to the disciplined voice and eyes which testified to a well-furnished mind.

'I shall have to go upstairs for the money,' said Marcia, when the merchandise had changed hands. 'Will you watch my baby?'

The cryptic eyes lifted, lighted, and a smile nervously twitched the corners of the drooping mouth. Muttering something about the snow on her coat, the woman unbuttoned the ill-fitting garment and tossed it aside. The uncouth hat was tugged off also, disheveling a thick mop of well-cared-for, blue-black hair and releasing a crackle of electricity. Without the hat and coat she was only forty, perhaps a little less than that if she were entirely well and contented.

'But I don't like to have you climb those steep stairs for me,' she protested. 'Perhaps you'd better not.'

'I really shouldn't,' confided Marcia. Then, impulsively, 'Would you mind? It's on my dressing-table, a brown leather purse, first door to the right at the head of the stairs.' She slipped her hands under Roberta's arms to reclaim her, but the caller ignored the gesture and cuddled the baby closer to her abundant breast. The gray eyes searched Marcia's youthful face for a moment disconcertingly.

'Do you think,' inquired the gently reproving voice, 'that you ought to let a stranger ramble about through your house hunting for your pocketbook?'

Marcia flushed a little and felt very young and foolish.

'It does sound reckless, when you put it that way,' she admitted, adding, with a naïveté that brought a puckery smile to the visitor's lips, 'What are we going to do about it?' Then, suddenly inspired, 'My husband will be here in a little while. Could you wait?'

'Gladly,' sighed the caller. 'I have been on my feet all day.' She sank into the nearest chair and softly rubbed her white chin against the top of Roberta's silky head.

'It's chilly in here.' Marcia stooped over the wood-basket and dragged the metal screen aside from the cold grate. 'The furnace runs low at this time in the afternoon, and I can't do anything about it.'

'Let me make that fire for you. I'm bigger than you

are.' Again little Roberta was transferred and the stranger knelt before the grate.

'Nobody could be bigger than I am,' murmured Marcia. She sat interestedly surveying the slow but competent movements of her mysterious guest. The shoes were badly worn, but they had once been good — expensively good. Whoever had wanted that hat had not bought those shoes. Marcia felt that the shoes were authentic. So was the black crêpe frock. It was old, but it fitted.

The fire blazed, and with much difficulty the weary woman rose to her feet, clutching the mantel for support. Marcia tried to keep the pity out of her tone when she said cordially, 'Now draw up a chair close to it. You must be half-frozen.'

There was silence between them for some time, the stranger leaning forward with her elbows on her knees and her chin cupped in both hands, staring into the crackling flames. Presently she straightened and turning toward Marcia asked wistfully if she might hold the baby again.

Silently complying, Marcia went through the double doorway into the dining-room and began to clear the table, Wallie hovering close.

'Mum-mee!' he wheedled shrilly. 'Can I have a piece o' bread-n-butter-n-sugar?'

Marcia led the way into the diminutive pantry, Wallie gleefully chirping redundant comments on his good fortune while his mother laid out the makings of a snack. Suddenly his improvised refrain was broken off short. At the same instant Marcia sensed another presence, and glancing around was startled to see her strange visitor standing in the passage. She had Roberta closely nestled in her arms. Her pale lips were parted, slightly baring sound white teeth tightly locked. The gray eyes were importunate — and ashamed.

'Perhaps you would like some too.' Marcia tried to make the invitation sound half-playful, hoping to safeguard the woman's self-respect if she could.

'Oh — please! If you would.' The deep-pitched voice was husky. 'I haven't had anything to eat since morning and I'm not so very long out of the hospital.'

'You should have told me,' chided Marcia gently. 'Do help yourself — and there's some cold tongue in the refrigerator. I'll make you a cup of tea. Not much wonder you're fagged. Was it an operation?' Proceeding into the cold kitchen, she lighted the gas under the kettle.

'I don't know,' replied the half-starved woman indifferently, surrendering Roberta and taking up the bread-knife in a shaky hand. 'Maybe they do call it an operation.' She began eating ravenously.

Shocked by the exhibition of such hunger as she had never seen so candidly displayed, Marcia retreated a step, fumbling at her beads with agitated fingers. She felt rebuffed too, for surely her solicitous query had deserved a better reply than this casual impertinence.

'I mean,' explained the woman, her articulation muffled by the food she was wolfing, 'is it an operation when you have a baby? I know,' she continued, between spasmodic swallowings, 'that it's an operation when you have something unhealthy that has to be cut out of you, but having a baby is the most natural thing in the world, or at least it would seem so seeing how long it was going on before there were any surgeons or hospitals.'

Indisposed to debate whether childbirth should be considered as an institution or an operation, but personally interested in babies as individuals, Marcia inquired, 'What did you do with it?'

'He's at the hospital. They said he could be adopted.'

'Have you no friends?'

'No, that is — not here.'

'Relatives?'

'Well, none wanting a baby.' She turned to cut another slice of bread.

'That's too bad,' sympathized Marcia. 'There's your tea on the kitchen table. Come, Wallie. You run in now

and sit by the fire. Go on — quickly. Do as Mother tells you.'

'I don't want to,' squeaked Wallie. 'I want to watch the lady eat.'

Marcia was devastated with chagrin, wondering whether an apology on behalf of her unfortunate offspring would ease the strain, when the problem was solved for her by a good-natured laugh and a mumbled 'I don't wonder.'

Unable to think of anything appropriate to say, Marcia smiled faintly and led her reluctant child into the living-room, where she lowered Roberta into the perambulator and returned to her task at the dining-table, for some moments mechanically moving the dishes about, wishing this awkward situation had not arisen. She hoped the woman would go soon. Surely she had enough to worry her without adding anything more. Paul would be here at any moment. He would go popping through the kitchen immediately on his way to the furnace. He would discover this famished woman and interest himself in her predicament. Anyone could see at a glance that she shouldn't be turned out into the storm. And it would be quite right and proper to ask her to stay if they could afford it, or had a suitable place for her. Paul would think they had. He was so hopelessly impractical, so heart-breakingly in debt, so childishly indifferent to their plight. And in a month there was to be the hospital and the nurses and the doctor — without the slightest vestige of a plan for these imperative expenses. Poor Paul. He should have married someone who knew how to manage. . . . No — she would have to see to it that the unhappy creature was out of the house before Paul arrived. For the moment Marcia quite forgot the real reason for the woman's tarrying.

Resolutely she gathered up a double handful of dishes and carried them to the kitchen sink. The stranger promptly joined her there, turned back her sleeves, and began drawing hot water into the dishpan.

'You'll not need to help,' said Marcia crisply. 'There

aren't many. I can easily do them alone. Thanks — just the same.' She tried to make the dismissal significant without being unkind.

'Where do you keep the aprons?' inquired the woman, unimpressed by Marcia's rather stiff repudiation of her proffered services.

'But — really ——' Marcia was being very firm now. 'I prefer to do them myself.' She accented every word, secretly reproaching herself for having to offend the grateful tramp.

Pretending not to realize this sudden shift of mood, the stranger smiled indulgently and began washing the dishes. The food had braced her up and every motion testified to an amazingly prompt revival of latent energy. Marcia decided to make a last stand. Time was passing rapidly. On the verge of tearful exasperation, she said: 'You have your own work to do, and I'm keeping you from it. I'll go and get your money for you at once. My husband might be delayed. And it is getting dark. I mustn't detain you.'

Flicking the hot suds from her hands, the woman followed as far as the dining-room without comment and stacked up the rest of the dishes. Marcia made an impatient little gesture of bafflement, her knuckles digging into her forehead. Weak in the knees, she slumped into a chair by the grate, hoping to recover her strength for the painful trip upstairs. Minutes passed. The energetic clatter of dishes had subsided now and the unwelcome volunteer in the kitchen could be heard walking about. She was coming quietly into the living-room. Marcia glanced up dully, relieved to see the woman take up the frumpy old coat and the mangy hat and the preposterous shopping-bag from the chair where they had sprawled in an untidy pile.

'I'm going up for the money now,' said Marcia weakly. 'Thank you for doing the dishes.'

'I'll be in the kitchen,' replied the woman, draping her effects over her arm.

That was ever so good, thought Marcia. The poor dear

had caught the idea that she must go and was planning to leave by the back door to avoid a collision with the man of the house. Perhaps she had divined that she was expected to be gone when he came. Pulling herself together, Marcia dragged her burdensome body up the stairs and down again, wincing at every step of the return trip. There was a mighty stamping of snowy feet on the front porch as she hurried through the dining-room. Perhaps the worrisome incident could be closed in the nick of time.

At the kitchen doorway she stopped and speechlessly surveyed a dismaying scene. In apparent contentment, the woman was seated in the corner with a pan in her lap, peeling her experimental apples with one of her patent knives. She looked up brightly and smiled.

'Pie,' she explained — and then added irrelevantly, 'My name is Hannah.'

For all of fifteen minutes Hannah had the kitchen to herself. She was much perplexed. The girlish blonde had been so pleasantly kind — and then had suddenly gone into a panic of desire to get her out of the house. That would be because her husband was a brute. The pretty thing was clearly frightened about something, and undoubtedly that was it. Hannah thoughtfully stroked her chin with the back of her hand and wondered what she ought to do — stay and help get dinner and put the disordered kitchen to rights, in payment for her food, or take her quarter and vanish.

While she debated, half-intelligible wisps of conversation drifted through from the living-room where the nervous and distraught girl-wife was pouring out her story. Occasionally his soft voice offered a soothing comment. He wasn't a brute. Hannah continued to peel her apples. The situation was clearing up. She smiled and shook her head a little, compassionately, eavesdropping without compunction on the private talk, occasional phrases of which were becoming audible. They were stony-broke, their

credit was exhausted, they were going to have another baby, they couldn't take on any more obligations — all this in the harassed voice of the lovely blonde — and here was this hungry person out in the kitchen peeling her own apples with the unquestionable expectation that her services would be recognized and rewarded.

'But' — the man was saying reassuringly — 'you need help, Marcia, and if she wants to do something for you, in return for your kindness, why not let her?'

'But we can't afford it, Paul.'

'Why can't we? We've been in tight corners before.'

Now they were just going around and around, getting nowhere. The apples were all peeled. Having intruded this far into their family complications, Hannah felt that a little more impudence on her part would not be likely to alter her status very much, so she decided to go to the basement and do something about the fire before it went out, if indeed it had not already done so. Then, if they were agreed that she mustn't stay and help, in return for the food she had eaten, they could say so — and she would go. She sincerely hoped they would not insist on this, for it was plain to be seen that the young woman was almost at the end of her physical resources.

The first door she tried unlatched with much difficulty, but when it did consent to let go it was generous enough, unexpectedly disgorging a great many of the larger articles which the shallow closet contained — an ironing-board, two brooms, a mop, and the long handle of a carpet-sweeper bounding violently out to assault her, attended by a covey of dust-cloths. The eruption caused a deal of racket and for a little while there was no sound of talk in the house. Then his father called Wallie to come back here, and Hannah coaxed the things into their lair again, all but the umbrella which had opened in flight and couldn't be closed without risk of a compound rib fracture.

She tried the other door. The stairs to the basement, now that Hannah had located them, were pitch-dark at the

top, though a feeble yellow light glowed from one of the rooms in the cavern below. Just inside the door there was an electric bulb which did not respond when she turned the button. Groping her way cautiously down the narrow steps she found the furnace-room by the aid of the almost extinct lamp which presumably had been burning all day. The coal supply was low, but there was a plenty of everything else in the dingy room. Hannah vigorously shook down the ashes and clinkers, opened the drafts, and shoveled in a small quantity of coal, thinking it indiscreet to offer the fire very much nourishment until it was feeling better. While she waited for signs of its resuscitation there was time to glance about. She shook her head and whispered, 'Tsch, tsch.'

It was none of her business, of course, but there was a battered trunk with no lock, no hasps and one handle, a broken chair, a pile of magazines, a bicycle with two flat tires and a mildewed seat, a roll of old rugs and strips of carpet, a three-legged card-table, a hobby-horse with one ear, one rocker and no tail, a tall filing-cabinet, and a serviceable but very grimy office desk on which reposed two high stacks of old books covered with soot, a pile of folded chintz draperies, a gilt clock, a half-dozen flower-pots with earth in them, an unstrung tennis racquet, one roller-skate, and a cracked cut-glass berry-bowl containing three hickory nuts, a bunch of rusty keys, a doorknob, a spool of white silk thread, a monogrammed belt-buckle, five dominoes, a box of fish-food, a toothbrush, and a small gift copy of *Sartor Resartus*. Hannah threw in another shovelful of coal and wondered what they would be thinking overhead when they heard all the noise she was making.

Retracing her steps upstairs, she decided to carry on with the pie. Pulling open the flour-bin in the kitchen cabinet, she was pleased to find it nearly half full. It contained also the flour-sifter, a couple of little tin dies for cutting cookies, a rolling-pin, and a lead pencil which must have got in by accident. Hoping to be equally successful

in locating the other ingredients for the pie, Hannah went to the refrigerator, taking pains to avoid the sluggish stream which ambled aimlessly across the pantry floor and whose headwaters, she knew, had their origin in an overflowing pan beneath the icebox.

Opening the door she found a tin bucket filled with lard. Excellent luck, thought Hannah. There was a plentiful supply of almost everything. The refrigerator was stuffed to capacity; four quart milk-bottles, all partly used, but one which was empty, a highly ornamented glass jar with a few slices of cold tongue, the skeleton of a rib roast from which most of the choice meat had been cut, two asparagus tips in a saucer, a few stalks of discouraged celery, one candied sweet potato holding forth alone in a large bowl with the smugness of an old settler, three half-used glasses of jelly, and, side by side, a pound of unwrapped butter and a slice of Roquefort cheese. Hannah removed the cheese.

There was also a neat paper parcel. She argued with herself for a moment and opened it — four French lamb chops. Then she took the can of lard to the kitchen-cabinet where operations were resumed on behalf of the apple-pie. She was stooping over to light the gas in the oven when masculine footsteps commanded her attention. The man was in his middle thirties, slender, a little over average height, and very good-looking.

‘How do you do,’ he said pleasantly. ‘Mrs. Ward tells me — I am her husband, by the way ——’

‘I thought you might be,’ replied Hannah, unperturbed. ‘I knew she was expecting you.’

‘Mrs. Ward has been just a bit upset. You see ——’ He hesitated for an instant.

‘Yes, I know,’ assisted Hannah companionably. ‘It’s her condition. What with two little children on her hands and nobody to help her and another baby expected soon, she naturally would be nervous.’

‘Of course,’ he agreed. ‘But the point is that Mrs. Ward