

S A L L Y B E N S O N

M E E T M E

I N

S T. L O U I S

CLEVELAND



NEW YORK

THE WORLD PUBLISHING COMPANY

Published by THE WORLD PUBLISHING COMPANY
2231 WEST 110TH STREET : CLEVELAND • OHIO

By arrangement with Random House













FORUM BOOKS EDITION
First Printing January 1944
Second Printing March 1944

HC

COPYRIGHT 1941, 1942 BY SALLY BENSON
MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

**THIS BOOK IS FOR
MY FAMILY**

CONTENTS

	JUNE 1903	3
	JULY 1903	33
	AUGUST 1903	55
	SEPTEMBER 1903	79
	OCTOBER 1903	101
	NOVEMBER 1903	125
	DECEMBER 1903	151
	JANUARY 1904	175
	FEBRUARY 1904	197
	MARCH 1904	223
	APRIL 1904	243
	MAY 1904	269



J u n e 1 9 0 3

Tootie Smith was awake, but she lay in bed without opening her eyes. She could tell it was a sunny day by the light which shone through her eyelids. It was a bright-orange shade, and she knew that the room was flooded with sunlight. On rainy days the light that came through her eyelids was a dark purplish brown. She stretched her thin little legs and felt the scab, a really good one, on one knee with her hand.

There were two doors to her room, one leading to a large, square, central hall and the other leading to a back bedroom, where her mother and father slept. The doors were open, and Tootie could feel the hot summer breeze as it blew across her bare legs and could hear the window shades moving back and forth with a sucking sound. In her parents' room, someone was walking about quietly, and she heard the screen being raised in one of the back windows. "It's Lon," she thought. "And he's

going to tell me that thing about the pony again."

She waited for him to speak. "Well!" he said. "I'll be doggoned!"

Tootie set her lips and kept her eyes tightly shut.

"I'll be doggoned!" Lon repeated. "Well, that's a good one on me! Who'd ever think it? Here I was yesterday playing a joke on poor little Tootie, telling her there was a pony in the back yard, and darned if it doesn't come true!"

His voice was filled with excitement, and Tootie stirred uneasily in her bed.

"Tootie," he called softly.

She didn't answer, and he came into her room, calling her again.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. His bright-blue eyes were shining and his light-brown hair was damp where he had wet it to keep down the cowlick that grew on the crown of his head. He wore white duck trousers, spotted with grass stains, and a white shirt open at the neck. "Tootie," he said. "What do you think?"

"There isn't," she said.

"Isn't what?"

"Isn't a pony in the back yard."

He walked over to the window, jingling the coins in his pocket and frowning. "I was afraid of that." He pretended to be talking to himself. "Afraid she wouldn't believe me. I should have known. Shouldn't have said anything." He sighed. "Of course," he went on, "I deserve it after the lie I told her yesterday. Anyone who would tell a lie to a little six-year-old girl is a cad."

"I don't believe it," Tootie said.

He turned to face her. "And why should you?" he asked. "It's nothing short of a miracle. Yesterday, I admit, there was *not* a pony in the back yard. I played you a dirty trick. I'm ashamed of myself—a man of eighteen deceiving a little child. Why, I wouldn't blame you, Tootie, if you never spoke to me again. I wouldn't blame you if you never even wrote me next winter, when I'll be thousands of miles away from St. Louis in Princeton, New Jersey, alone and without friends in the bitter cold."

Tootie smiled. "I didn't really mind about yesterday," she said. "And I got some candy

with the dime. Is it really so cold in Princeton?"

"Colder than Greenland, they tell me," he said. "And snow as high as this house."

"Gosh!" she cried. "How will you get to school?"

"On sleds," he said. "That is, the freshmen have to use sleds, but the seniors use dog teams." He moved toward the door. "I think I'll tell Agnes about that pony. She's always wanted one."

"Is there a pony?" Tootie asked. "Is there, *really*?"

"You have my word for it," he said. "A white pony. Snowy white, with a little saddle that looked to me as though it were studded with gems. Imitations, I suppose. But they certainly shone like real."

"A white pony," Tootie repeated. "Yesterday you told me a black pony."

He bowed his head. "*That* was a lie."

She sat up and lifted the mosquito netting that hung like a canopy over her bed. It smelled strongly of oil of pennyroyal. She slid under it and stood on the dark-green carpet in her bare feet. Her nightgown was too short for

her and came just below her knees. Her shins were a mass of bruises. Last night her mother had twisted her hair into a knot on the top of her head and pinned it with a large bone hairpin. But the hairpin had become loosened and her hair hung down curly and damp at the nape of her neck.

"Going to look at him?" Lon asked.

"No," she said. "I think you're fooling."

"Well, it's up to you," he said. He went out into the hall, and she could hear him running down the stairs. "Say, Mamma!" he called. "Have you a piece of good, stout rope?"

Tootie tiptoed to the hall door and closed it. Then she walked softly into the back bedroom in her bare feet. The screen in the window was still open, and for a moment she stood staring at it, torn with doubt and sick with apprehension. If there was a pony in the back yard and she didn't claim him first, Rose or Esther or Agnes might see him, and she would miss the opportunity of a lifetime. Lon had sworn there was. She walked slowly to the open window and leaned out.

The yard to the house at 5135 Kensington

Avenue stretched back about three hundred feet to the alley, down which the trolley cars ran. At the end of the yard, facing the house, were a brick-and-cement ashpit and a two-story clapboard woodshed and chicken house. Her eyes travelled over every foot of the yard. There were the wooden walk that led from the house to the woodshed, the canvas hammock under the big maple tree; there were the row of cherry trees, the pear tree, and the two peach trees; there were the lilac bush, the clump of peonies, the rosebushes, and the snowball bush; there was the lawn of grass and red and white clover; but there was no pony.

She let the screen down gently and went back to her room, which she shared with Agnes. She noticed that Agnes had made her bed. She thought that Agnes must have moved very quietly, and wondered if Lon had laughed with Agnes about the pony while she lay asleep. She slipped her nightgown over her head and pulled on a pair of white drawers with starched ruffles. The apron she had worn yesterday hung on a hook in the wardrobe. She put it on, fastening the two buttons at the back of the neck but leaving the bow at the back of her waist untied. A vision of the white

pony still danced before her eyes. She could see the curve of his proud head and the way he stamped his small feet. She saw the jewels of his saddle sparkling in the sun. Her eyes clouded with tears as she stooped to pick up her sandals, and as she slid one foot into the right sandal, her toes touched a wad of paper. There was a quarter wrapped in the paper and a poem written on it. She put the quarter in her apron pocket and read the poem. It said:

*Tootie is a bad girl,
Tootie is a fraud,
Tootie is the worst girl
I ever sawed.*

Rose was sitting in the sliding swing on the front porch when Tootie went downstairs. She was reading a letter, and by the number of stamps on the envelope Tootie could tell it was a special-delivery letter. The air was sweet with the scent of the honeysuckle vine that grew over the porch. When Rose looked up from her letter her soft-brown eyes were kind. "He ought to be ashamed of himself," she said.

"Who?" Tootie asked.

"Lon."

"Oh!" Tootie laughed. "You mean about the pony. I knew he was only fooling. I didn't even look."

"Well, I'm glad," Rose said. "I told him you were too smart to fool twice in succession. Back up here and I'll tie your bow. And you'd better not let Mamma catch you with your hair uncombed."

Rose didn't tie a pretty bow. Esther tied the best bows. But Tootie stood patiently while Rose fumbled with it and then combed Tootie's hair with one of her own side combs. When she had finished, Tootie sat down beside her on the swing, moving one of the cushions, a tan leather one on which was burned the head of an Indian girl. It was Tootie's favorite pillow, because the Indian girl's headband was made of real red and green stones sewed to the leather.

Rose finished reading her letter and put her arm around Tootie. "Well, if he isn't the silliest man!" she said. "Really, sometimes I think he's lost his mind."

"What's he done now?" Tootie asked. She bounded up and down on the swing. "Tell me! Tell me!"

Since John Shepard had entered the life of the Smith family when he'd come all the way from New Haven to spend the Christmas holidays with Harry Dodge over five months ago, he had been a fascinating topic of discussion. For one thing, he was a junior at Yale and lived in New York, and for another, his father was a judge. The first night he had called on Rose, all the family had discreetly disappeared, and Mr. Smith had even closed the folding doors between the parlor and the dining room, where he sat playing solitaire. Of course, Mr. Smith had asked his usual question when Rose told him that a boy named John Shepard was coming to call. "Never heard of him," he said, wetting the end of his cigar with his tongue. "What does his father do?"

He had merely grunted when Rose told him that John's father was a judge, but he had closed the folding doors, which was more than he had ever done before. Mrs. Smith had hoped that Rose wouldn't take the thing too seriously, but she called up Miss Thibault, the dressmaker, and together they had made a new dress for Rose. Esther thought that John was wonderful for no profounder reasons than

that he wore trousers and went to Yale. Even Agnes, who didn't like anybody, merely said that he hadn't any chin. "He's better than that Harry Dodge, though," she added. "*He* looks like a dish of melted strawberry ice cream."

Lon couldn't understand what John Shepard saw in Rose, and Grandpa Prophater pretended he couldn't remember John Shepard's name and called him Mr. Dodge and Mr. Riley. When the holidays were over and John went back to New Haven, letters began to come—two or three days apart at first. But now they came daily, special delivery, and Esther had discovered that the letters began "Dear Siddums," a nickname that John had made up from Rose's middle name, which was Sidney. He had introduced new words and Esther and Rose had added them to their vocabulary. Things were now "keen" and people were no longer "folks" but "folk." So Tootie knew that if Rose thought John Shepard had lost his mind, he must be going to do something very spectacular indeed. It must be something more than sending flowers and ten-pound boxes of Page & Shaw candy. "What's he done now?" she repeated.

"He's going to telephone," Rose said. "Telephone long-distance from New York."

Tootie gasped. "Does Mamma know?" she asked. "Can I tell her?"

"You *may* tell her," Rose answered. "He's phoning at half past eight. Goodness knows what I'm going to do. I have an engagement with Joe Riley for eight."

"Break it, Rose! Break it!" Tootie begged.

Rose put her hand up to her hair and smoothed her pompadour. "I'll see," she said. "You'd better get your breakfast."

"It's too hot to eat," Tootie said. "I'll eat some plums." She bounced up and ran into the house.

Rose sat still in the swing, holding John Shepard's letter in her hand. She thought of the way his hair curled, crisp and tight on his head, of his eyes, which were cool and gray and almost cold at times; she remembered the way his hands looked and how his pipe smelled. But most of all she wondered what he was going to say to her when he telephoned tonight. He would never, she thought, spend all that money just to say hello, although he had written he wanted to hear her voice. Yet it seemed