

# By R. VIGUS

"Keep looking up at him with that 'Oh, you great big wonderful man' look. . . ."

"Aw, no, Gertie—he's so big—he gets that look all the time!"

"Oh, I got it! I know!"

"Listen, Thelma, you know how a man loves to feel big and protective—like that? They just eat it up. Well, you give him a chance to protect you—and—uh—. Say, I got it! You usually walk down to the picture show every Saturday night, don't you?"

"Well, listen. You tell him that you just have to come by and see me about something. Tell him that it's very important. Bring him down this way with you."

Now at Stafford's Drug Store, on the way down here, will be a crowd of loafers and bums. There always is on Saturday night. Walk past them slowly, and get slightly behind Billie—then say, real suddenly, 'Oh, Billie! That man insulted me!' Then you point to one of the men around there.

Pick out a little man, so Billie won't get bruised up, of course. Well, when he gets through defending your honor, you rush over and say, 'My hero! Oh, Billie, how I love you! That'll slay him! That'll get 'em every time. It always does in the movies, doesn't it? And Hollywood understands Love, doesn't it?'"

"Gosh," gasped Thelma, "Gosh, do you really think that it would work? Boyohboy, I believe you're right!"

She was right. It was better than a motion picture. She would have been sorry for the innocent loafers if she had had time.

But she had scarcely gotten the words out of her mouth, when Billie had whirled and gone into action.

He took the two young men nearest him, put an immense fist around each neck, and bopped their heads together. Then he started after the others, his old Southern blood aroused.

Thelma followed him at a gallop to the end of the block. But it was unbelievable, how the big man could travel! If the loafers fled like scared rabbits, certainly he followed like some species of a giant hound.

Twenty minutes later, he came walking back, his tie out, collar open, and his balloon chest rising and falling rapidly.

Thelma arose from the curb where she had been sitting. Her lipstick had smeared over his teeth and face in her excitement; her hair was disheveled, her tiny hat was askew on the back of her head.

"My hero—" she began. But the words were flat. So flat that she felt like crying.

He looked down over his heaving chest at her. "I would have caught them if they hadn't jumped on a passing truck. The idea! I'd of taught those bums a thing or two!"

Thelma bit her lower lip, started again, "My hero!"

"What?" He stared. "What's the matter with you?"

She waved a little Zazu Pitts despairing gesture. "Oh, well, never mind now Billie. Let's go home."

Billie spent the night at a small hotel, as was his custom and accompanied Thelma to church the next morning. And around noon, as usual, he started back to College Station, via Sally's Stand.

The thought of her excellent cooking stirred him, and he waved eagerly at every approaching automobile. It was the much traveled highway which led to Houston, and it was not long before a cotton truck picked him up.

He settled down on the seat in the rattling cab, and wondered if he truly loved Thelma. He did not know exactly. But he did know that Thelma had made it plain to him that she expected a proposal very soon. He might as well go ahead and marry her, since he had gone with her this long. Or should he? He gave vent to a troubled sigh, and tried to concentrate on the food ahead of him.

Thirty minutes later, he settled down at the lunch counter with a smile of anticipation. The fairly large lunch room was filled with oil field workeds and stray travelers.

The memory of Thelma's frequent frowns faded when he saw Sally. She was a princess—no—a Valkyrie, a Valkyrie of the cook-stove!

Hello, Bill," she said, "I was wondering if you . . ."

Harsh, snarling voices cut into her words. As she left her sentence uncompleted, there was a silence. Then a rising, hysterical voice began cursing.

Billie wheeler, rising to his feet. Two men, leaning over the table that separated them, were glaring at each other and growing insults. He started toward them, saying, "You al listen heah. . . ."

Then Sally pushed him aside. Shoved him as easily as if he was just another mere man. "I can take care of this, Bill."

"Now both of you get out of here," she said coolly. "Get out. Go outside if you want to fight. And don't come back!" Seizing the men's arms, she jerked them to the door and pushed them out.

"Gosh, what a girl!" Chuckled Billie.

Then a man in oil-stained overalls started toward her. Billie did not stop to think that the man might have just wanted to leave the restaurant. His first thought was to protect Sally. He reached out and seized the man.

Somebody yelled, "Lookit the Boy Scout!"

Somebody threw a bottle of pepper sauce.

Billie ducked, and a man jumped on his back. Billie grinned as he threw him off at two charging farmers. This was going to be fun.

It was fun, but it was soon over. Customers spilled through the door and windows. Two left by the back door, running. Then there was a hollow, peaceful silence.

Billie sat down on a stool, completely astonished.

After a short interval, Sally returned from the kitchen, bearing two plates stacked high with food. She placed them on the counter, with the proper silver and glasses of water. Then she came around, sat down beside him, and said, "Let's eat."

He gazed at her wonderingly. Below one eye was a large purple mark. Her knuckles were skinned. Strands of fine, shining yellow hair blew about her pleasant, unconcerned face.

"By golly," gulped Billie, "You were fighting! Really fighting! I thought it was your waiters who were knocking those men down!"

"Uh . . ." mumbled a voice in the distance, "Have—us—h—has everybody gone?"

Through a side window peered the two slender youths who worked as Sally's waiters. They were big-eyed, now, and their faces were drained of all color.

Billie chuckled. He felt completely and gloriously happy. Here was a girl who didn't need anyone to fight for her. She could take care of herself. She was a real man's girl!"

"Uh . . . Uh." stuttered one of the mols. "I-Is everything all r-right n-now?"

"Right?" boomed Billie. "Everything's perfect!" He leaned over and kissed Sally. Kissed her hard, on one cheek.

"Don't rush," she said without looking up from her plate. "But when you finish your lunch, we'll go right on from there."