

FILLMORE PARKER

A LITTLE QUESTION IN
LADIES' RIGHTS

Parker Fillmore

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PART ONE

MARGERY was sitting under the cherry tree with a certain air of expectancy. She seemed to be waiting for something or some one. Willie Jones's head popped over the back fence and Willie Jones himself, a tin pail in one hand, dropped into the Blair yard and made for the cherry tree. But Margery still gazed earnestly, tensely, into nothing. Willie Jones, evidently, was not the object of her thoughts.

"What's the matter, Margery?"

"Nothing. I'm just waiting."

"What for?"

There was no reason for telling Willie Jones, but, by the same token, there was no reason for not telling him. So Margery answered frankly:

"I et a whole bagful of bananas and now Effie says I'm going to be sick and thr'up. So I'm just waiting."

"Whew! How many was they, Margery?"

"I don't know, but a good many."

"Think you might have shared with a fella."

"Well, you see, Willie, I didn't know anything about them. None of us did. I thought I smelled something good in the pantry, and when Effie went upstairs I sneaked in to see. Sure enough, there was a bag of bananas, real soft and sweet, don't you know. I et one and then I et another and, before I knew it, they were all gone. Then Effie caught me as I was coming out."

"Will she tell on you?"

"No, I don't think she'll tell on me. But she says I'm going to be awful sick. I was once before. So I'm just waiting."

"Aw, you're not going to be sick, Margery. That's only Effie's bluff. Listen: I'm going out blackberrying. There are just dead loads of great big ripe ones on the graveyard patch. My mother'll give me ten cents if I bring her back two quarts."

Margery looked at the tin pail longingly. She, too, would go blackberrying, but she realized that home was the best place for sick folk.

"Aw, come on," Willie urged. "You're not going to be sick. I bet anything you're not."

Confidence begets confidence, and, looking at Willie Jones's tin pail, Margery began to wonder whether, after all, Effie's prophecy might not prove a false one.

"I tell you what, Willie: Wait a minute and I'll ask Effie."

"Why do you got to ask her?"

"Because mother's not home. Besides, if I do get sick, I'll want Effie to take care of me."

This last was too sound a reason for Willie to gainsay, so Margery called Effie to the kitchen door.

"Blackberryin'! And in the sun!" Effie repeated, when Margery had delivered herself. "Well, I guess not! Here you are just stuffed full of ripe bananas and you want a-go out trampin' in the sun! Not much! You stay right where you are, me lady, and take care o' yourself."

"You see," Margery explained to Willie Jones.

"Aw, rats!" that young gentleman exclaimed, turning a hostile front toward the kitchen door.

"Come on, Margery. What do you care what Effie says? She's nuthin' but an old hired girl! I wouldn't let any old hired girl boss me around!"

"Any old —*what?*" gasped Effie, her face turning red and her eyes opening wide with horror.

"Any old hired girl!" Willie Jones repeated defiantly. "Ain't she nuthin' but an old hired girl, Margery?"

It was a question Margery had never before considered. To her Effie had always been merely Effie – merely the person who cooked and sewed and swept and waited on table and combed your hair and buttoned your dress and did all the thousand and one things about the house that had to be done and always were done. She was merely Effie and, come to think of it, she must be the hired girl, for in every house in the neighborhood the person who did the things or a few of the things that Effie did was undoubtedly the hired girl. And if you are a thing, what's the sense pretending you aren't? Margery did not wish to offend Effie, but facts is facts.

"Of course Effie's our hired girl."

For a moment Effie looked hurt enough for tears.

"Oh, Margery, how can you? And after all the years I've took care of you and loved you! You don't mean it, do you? You're not going to call your poor old Effie such an ugly name, are you?"

"Well, I don't see why you talk that way, Effie. You are a hired girl, aren't you?"

"Of course she's a hired girl," Willie Jones insisted. "And I'd just like to see any old hired girl of ours telling me what I dast do and what I dassent. Come on, Margery, we can't wait all day."

"Any old hired girl!" shouted Effie. She was angry now, so angry that Margery and Willie Jones retreated a few steps in case of personal violence. "So I'm like any old hired girl, am I? I'm only one of them good-for-nuthin' tramps that go traipsin' about from house to house and never keep a place for more than two weeks, am I? I'm a dirty, careless, ignur'nt hussy that's out all night and sleepy and lazy all day, am I? In other words, I'm a hired girl! Well, it's just what Tom's been tellin' me all along, and I didn't believe him. 'Nonsense,' says he, 'they don't care nuthin' for you. To them yir only a hired girl,' says he. 'Now come over to my place and I'll make you the housekeeper,' says he, 'and all you'll have to do is give your orders to the servants.' And every time I says to Tom, 'No, Tom,' I says, 'I'm not ready yet. I've been with these children since before they was born and I can't leave 'em yet. But thank you just the same,' I says. And Tom says, 'Effie, yir a born fool! What do you think them children care for you?' he says. 'Only what they can get out of you,' he says. And," concluded Effie, her voice again choked with tears, "I am a fool and Tom's right. They don't care nuthin' for me and I'm only the hired girl!"

"Who's Tom, I'd like to know?" Willie Jones demanded offensively.

"Who's Tom?" echoed Effie. It was plain that insult was being added to injury. "Why, Tom, me young friend, is Thomas McGinniss, Conthtractor *and* Builder, that built the house yir living in and every house on your street. And it's ten to one, me young gent, that yir own dad is still payin' his monthly installments to Tom McGinniss, brother of Effie the Hired Girl."

Effie turned haughtily away, then paused to add: "If either of yez ever again have anything to say to Effie, when ye ring Mr. Thomas McGinniss's doorbell, ye had better mind yir manners and ask for Miss McGinniss."

Effie slammed the kitchen door and Willie Jones showed how deeply impressed he was by putting his thumb on the end of his nose and wiggling his fingers in a manner that Margery had often been told was highly improper.

"Well, come on," he said briskly. "It's time for us to be moving or we never will get two quarts picked."

So off they started, a good half hour's tramp in the sun. The blackberry patch was in a far unused corner of the graveyard, adjoining a plot of unconsecrated ground where, as Willie and Margery had often heard, only murderers were buried. There was, of course, the usual *No Trespassing* sign to meet and pass, the wire fence to slip under, and a short stretch of clay and rubble which ended suddenly in a thick brake of blackberry bushes. Once in the patch all that was necessary was to keep a sharp eye on the gravedigger's house, which stood on a knoll beyond, in plain sight, but far enough away to give one a good chance of escape in case of detection.

"Now, I'll let you hold the pail, Margery, and I'll pick into my hat. Jiminy! They haven't been picked over to-day at all. We'll get our two quarts easy."

"H'm," murmured Margery, tentatively. There was a little matter upon which she had been speculating ever since they had left home. "Are – are you going to give me half the money?"

"What money?"

"Why, don't you know, the money your mother's going to pay you for these berries."

"Oh."

The *Oh* was all Willie had to answer.

"Well, are you?"

"Are I what?"

"Are you going to give me half the money?"

"Well, I – I hadn't thought about it," Willie admitted.

Margery felt perfectly sure of this and sure likewise that he never would think of it unless she herself insisted on her rights.

"Then just think about it now. Here I am picking berries for you as fast as I can. I haven't et one. Now if you go sell these berries, you ought to give me half, oughtn't you?"

"I dunno but what I ought."

A timid creature would have rested content with this, but Margery had had too many dealings with the other sex to put undue confidence in any concession so vaguely expressed, so grudgingly admitted. It was rather a hard thing to do – she knew beforehand Willie Jones would hate her for it – but a nickel is a nickel, and now or never, she realized, was the moment to demand a definite promise.

"Well, then, will you?"

Willie seemed not to hear.

"Will you?" Margery repeated, stopping her picking to make her question more emphatic.

Willie looked up apprehensively toward the gravedigger's house.

"If you don't stop arguing and go ahead picking we won't either of us have anything," he burst out querulously.

It was hard indeed not to act upon a suggestion so plainly expected to be of benefit to them both. Fortunately, Margery knew that if she had but character to persist a little longer she would probably gain her end. So, by a great effort of will, she continued idle and reiterated tiresomely:

"Well, will you?"

"Will I? Why, of course I will!" Willie raised his voice and screwed up his face into a tight little knot of impatience and disgust. "Haven't I been telling you that for half an hour? You are the dumbest ox sometimes! Why, do you suppose I'd ask you to help me if I hadn't expected to share with you? You must think I'm an awful tightwad!"

Margery bent her head humbly under this tirade. She had nothing more to say, no defense to utter. By her unwomanly persistence she had very clearly lost whatever admiration and respect Willie Jones might once have felt for her. But – but – but she was in for half the profits!.. Women are so prone nowadays to prefer some petty material gain to the grand old-fashioned whatchemaycallit.

"I think we're going to get our two full quarts," Margery remarked amiably. Of course she was amiable. She had every reason to be amiable.

Willie Jones, who by this time had fallen silent, made no comment.

"Don't you think so?" Margery pursued sweetly.

"Huh!" grunted Willie Jones.

When the tin pail was about full an accident happened to Margery. She stepped into something soft and clayey, and the next instant, seeing what it was, she started off by leaps and bounds, crying out the shrill warning: "Run, Willie, run! Bumble bees! I stepped on a bumble bee nest!"

A young gravedigger – if it be correct to call the offspring of an old gravedigger a young gravedigger – caught sight of the poachers just at this moment, and, shouting out, "Hey, there! You!"

started toward them down the knoll. The incredible speed with which the poachers fled seemed to give the young gravedigger an erroneous idea of the fear that his presence inspired. There was small likelihood of his overtaking them before they reached the safety of the other side of the fence, but they seemed to him so little to realize this that, for the mere pleasure of pursuit, the young gravedigger pounded on, brandishing his arms and roaring his threats. By the time Margery and Willie made the fence they had so far outdistanced the bees that Willie had courage to face about and shout back defiance to all threats and to show his contempt for the whole race of gravediggers by pointing his thumb to his nose and wriggling his fingers in that same derisive and, it must be conceded, effective manner already mentioned. Although still at a considerable distance, the young gravedigger caught the full meaning of the insult and almost exploded with rage.

"You – you little – " he began. But he did not finish. They saw him stop suddenly, look up, and then, flinging his arms over his head, rush madly back the way he had just come.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" Willie Jones shouted, hopping up and down in the intensity of his enjoyment. "Margery, do you see him? The bees are after him! Jiminy! Jiminy! *Jiminy!*"

Willie Jones lay down on the ground and rolled and kicked and plucked up handfuls of grass in an effort to work off the exuberance of his joy.

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