

OTHERWISE PHYLLIS

By Meredith Nicholson



PHYLLIS

TO

ALBERT B. ANDERSON

A CITIZEN OF THE HOOSIER COMMONWEALTH
WHOSE ATTAINMENTS AS LAWYER AND JUDGE
HAVE ADDED TO THE FAME OF MONTGOMERY
THIS BOOK IS INSCRIBED
WITH SINCERE REGARD AND ADMIRATION

CONTENTS

- THE KIRKWOODS
- I. BREAK CAMP
 - II. THE MONTGOMERYS
OF MONTGOMERY
 - III. 98 BUCKEYE LANE
 - IV. A TRANSACTION IN
APPLES
 - V. THE OTHERWISENESS
OF PHYLLIS
 - VI. THE SMOKING-OUT
OF AMZI
 - VII. GHOSTS SEE THE
LIGHT AGAIN
 - VIII. LISTENING HILL
 - IX. ON AN ORCHARD
SLOPE
 - X. PHIL'S PARTY
 - XI. BROTHERS
 - XII. NAN BARTLETT'S

DECISION

- XIII. THE BEST INTERESTS
OF MONTGOMERY
- XIV. TURKEY RUN
- XV. LOIS
- XVI. MERRY CHRISTMAS
- XVII. PHIL'S PERPLEXITIES
- XVIII. AMZI IS
FLABBERGASTED
- XIX. PHIL MOVES TO
AMZI'S
- XX. BACK TO STOP SEVEN
- XXI. PHIL'S FISTS
- XXII. MR. WATERMAN'S
GREAT OPPORTUNITY
- XXIII. PLEASANT TIMES IN
MAIN STREET
- XXIV. THE FORSAKEN
GARDEN
- XXV. PHIL ENCOUNTERS
THE SHERIFF
- XXVI. A CALL IN BUCKEYE

LANE

XXVII. AMZI'S PERFIDY

OTHERWISE PHYLLIS

CHAPTER I

THE KIRKWOODS BREAK CAMP

"Stuff's all packed, Phil, and on the wagon. Camera safe on top and your suit-case tied to the tail-gate. Shall we march?"

"Not crazy about it, daddy. Why not linger another week? We can unlimber in a jiffy."

"It's a tempting proposition, old lady, but I haven't the nerve." Kirkwood dropped an armful of brush on the smouldering camp-fire and stood back as it crackled and flamed. There came suddenly a low whining in the trees and a gust of wind caught the sparks from the blazing twigs and flung them heavenward. He threw up his arm and turned his hand to feel the wind. "The weather's at the changing point; there's rain in that!"

"Well, we haven't been soaked for some time," replied Phil. "We've been awfully respectable."

"Respectable," laughed her father. "We don't know what the word means! We're unmitigated vagabonds, you and I, Phil. If I didn't know that you like this sort of thing as well as I do, I shouldn't let you come. But your aunts are on my trail."

"Oh, one's aunts! Oh, one's three aunts!" murmured Phil.

"Not so lightly to be scorned! When I was in town yesterday your Aunt Kate held me up for a scolding in the post-office. I'd no sooner climbed up to my den than your Aunt Josie dropped in to ask what I had done with you; and while I was waiting for you to

buy shoes at Fisher's your Aunt Fanny strolled by and gave me another overhauling. It's a question whether they don't bring legal process to take you away from me. What's a father more or less among three anxious aunts! As near as I can make out, Aunt Fanny's anxiety is chiefly for your complexion. She says you look like an Indian. And she implied that I am one."

"One of her subtle compliments. I've always thought Indians were nice."

It was clear that this father and daughter were on the best of terms, and that admiration was of the essence of their relationship. Phil stooped, picked up a pebble and flung it with the unconscious grace of a boy far down the creek. Her Aunt Fanny's solicitude for her complexion was or was not warranted; it depended on one's standard in such matters. Phil was apparently not alarmed about the state of her complexion.

"Suppose we wait for the moon," Kirkwood suggested. "It will be with us in an hour, and we can loaf along and still reach town by eleven. Only a little while ago we had to get you to bed by eight, and it used to bother me a lot about your duds; but we've outgrown that trouble. I guess—"

He paused abruptly and began to whistle softly to himself. Phil was familiar with this trick of her father's. She knew the processes of his mind and the range of his memories well enough to supply the conclusion of such sentences as the one that had resolved itself into a doleful whistle. As he was an excellent amateur musician, the lugubrious tone of his whistling was the subject of many jokes between them.

The walls of a miniature cañon rose on either side of the creek, and the light of the wind-blown camp-fire flitted across the face of the shelving rock, or scampered up to the edge of the overhanging cliff, where it flashed fitfully against the sky. The creek splashed and foamed through its rough, boulder-filled channel, knowing that soon it would be free of the dark defile and moving with dignity between shores of corn toward the Wabash. The cliffs that enclosed Turkey Run represented some wild whim of the giant ice plow as it had redivided and marked this quarter of the world. The two tents in which the Kirkwoods had lodged for a month had been pitched in a grassy cleft of the more accessible shore, but these and other paraphernalia of the camp were now packed for transportation in a one-horse wagon. As a fiercer assault of the wind shook the vale, the horse whinnied and pawed impatiently.

"Cheer up, Billo! We're going soon!" called Phil.

Kirkwood stood by the fire, staring silently into the flames. Phil, having reassured Billo, drew a little away from her father. In earlier times when moods of abstraction fell upon him, she had sought to rouse him; but latterly she had learned the wisdom and kindness of silence. She knew that this annual autumnal gypsying held for him the keenest delight and, in another and baffling phase, a poignancy on which, as she had grown to womanhood, it had seemed impious to allow her imagination to play. She watched him now with the pity that was woven into her love for him: his tall figure and the slightly stooped shoulders; the round felt hat that crowned his thick, close-cut hair, the dejection that seemed expressed in so many trifles at such moments,—as in his manner of dropping his hands loosely into the pockets of his corduroy coat, and standing immovable. Without taking his eyes from the fire he sat down presently on a log and she saw him fumbling for his pipe

and tobacco. He bent to thrust a chip into the fire with the deliberation that marked his movements in these moods. Now and then he took the pipe from his mouth, and she knew the look that had come into his gray eyes, though she saw only the profile of his bearded face as the firelight limned it.

Now, as at other such times, on summer evenings in the little garden at home, or on winter nights before the fire in their sitting-room, she felt that he should be left to himself; that his spirit traversed realms beyond boundaries she might not cross; and that in a little while his reverie would end and he would rise and fling up his long arms and ask whether it was breakfast-time or time to go to bed.

Phil Kirkwood was eighteen, a slim, brown, graceful creature, with a habit of carrying her chin a little high; a young person who seemed to be enjoying flights into the realm of reverie at times, and then, before you were aware of it, was off, away out of sight and difficult to catch with hand or eye. As a child this abruptness had been amusing; now that she was eighteen her aunts had begun to be distressed by it. Her critics were driven to wild things for comparisons. She was as quick as a swallow; and yet a conscientious ornithologist would have likened her in her moments of contemplation to the thrush for demureness. And a robin hopping across a meadow, alert in all his mysterious senses, was not more alive than Phil in action. Her middle-aged aunts said she was impudent, but this did not mean impudent speech; it was Phil's silences that annoyed her aunts and sometimes embarrassed or dismayed other people. Her brown eye could be very steady and wholly respectful when, at the same time, there was a suspicious twitching of her thread-of-scarlet lips. The aunts were often outraged by her conduct. Individually and collectively they had

endeavored to correct her grievous faults, and she had received their instructions meekly. But what could one do with a mild brown eye that met the gaze of aunts so steadily and submissively, while her lips betrayed quite other emotions!

Phil's clothes were another source of distress. She hated hats and in open weather rejected them altogether. A tam-o'-shanter was to her liking, and a boy's cap was even better. The uniform of the basketball team at high school suited her perfectly; and yet her unreasonable aunts had made a frightful row when she wore it as a street garb. She gave this up, partly to mollify the aunts, but rather more to save her father from the annoyance of their complaints. She clung, however, to her sweater,—on which a large "M" advertised her *alma mater* most indecorously,—and in spite of the aunts' vigilance she occasionally appeared at Center Church in tan shoes; which was not what one had a right to expect of a great-granddaughter of Amzi I, whose benevolent countenance, framed for adoration in the Sunday-School room, spoke for the conservative traditions of the town honored with his name.

Phil had no sense of style; her aunts were agreed on this. Her hair-ribbons rarely matched her stockings; and the stockings on agile legs like Phil's, that were constantly dancing in the eyes of all Montgomery, should, by all the canons of order and decency, present holeless surfaces to captious critics. That they frequently did not was a shame, a reproach, a disgrace, but no fault, we may be sure, of the anxious aunts. Manifestly Phil had no immediate intention of growing up. The idea of being a young lady did not interest her. In June of this particular year she had been graduated from the Montgomery High School, in a white dress and (noteworthy achievement of the combined aunts!) impeccable white shoes and stockings. Pink ribbons (pink being the class color)

had enhanced the decorative effect of the gown and a pink bow had given a becoming touch of grace to her head. Phil's hair—brown in shadow and gold in sunlight—was washed by Montgomery's house-to-house hairdresser whenever Aunt Fanny could corner Phil for the purpose.

Phil's general effect was of brownness. Midwinter never saw the passing of the tan from her cheek; her vigorous young fists were always brown; when permitted a choice she chose brown clothes: she was a brown girl.

Speaking of Phil's graduation, it should be mentioned that she had contributed a ten-minute oration to the commencement exercises, its subject being "The Dogs of Main Street." This was not conceded a place on the programme without a struggle. The topic was frivolous and without precedent; moreover, it was unlitrary—a heinous offense, difficult of condonation. To admit the dogs of Main Street to a high-school commencement, an affair of pomp and ceremony held in Hastings's Theater, was not less than shocking. It had seemed so to the principal, but he knew Phil; and knowing Phil he laughed when the English teacher protested that it would compromise her professional dignity to allow a student to discuss the vagrant canines of Main Street in a commencement essay. She had expected Phil to prepare a thesis on "What the Poets Have Meant to Me," and for this "The Dogs of Main Street" was no proper substitute. The superintendent of schools, scanning the programme before it went to the printer, shuddered; but it was not for naught that Phil's "people" were of Montgomery's elect.

Phil was, in fact, *a* Montgomery. Her great-grandfather, Amzi Montgomery, observing the unpopulous Hoosier landscape with a shrewd eye, had, in the year of grace 1829, opened a general store

on the exact spot now occupied by Montgomery's Bank, and the proper authorities a few years later called the name of the place Montgomery, which it remains to this day. This explains why the superintendent of schools overlooked the temerity of Amzi's great-granddaughter in electing the Main Street fauna as the subject of her commencement address rather than her indebtedness to the poets, though it may not be illuminative as to the holes in Phil's stockings. But on this point we shall be enlightened later.

Phil raised her head. There had come a lull in the whisper of the weather spirit in the sycamores, and she was aware of a sound that was not the noise of the creek among the boulders. It was a strain of music not of nature's making and Phil's healthy young curiosity was instantly aroused by it. Her father maintained his lonely vigil by the fire, quite oblivious of her and of all things. She caught another strain, and then began climbing the cliff.

The ascent was difficult, but she drew herself up swiftly, catching at bushes, seeking with accustomed feet the secure limestone ledges that promised safety, pausing to listen when bits of loosened stone fell behind her. Finally, catching the protruding roots of a great sycamore whose shadow had guided her, she gained the top. The moon, invisible in the vale, now greeted her as it rose superbly above a dark woodland across a wide stretch of intervening field. But there were nearer lights than those of star and moon, and their presence afforded her a thrill of surprise.

Clearer now came the strains of music. Here was a combination of phenomena that informed the familiar region with strangeness. The music came from a barn, and she remembered that barn well as a huge, gloomy affair on the Holton farm. Satisfied of this, Phil turned, half-unconsciously, and glanced up at the sycamore. That

hoary old landmark defined a boundary, and a boundary which, on various accounts, it was incumbent upon the great-granddaughter of Amzi Montgomery I to observe. A dividing fence ran from the sycamore, straight toward the moon. It was a "stake-and-rider" fence, and the notches on the Holton side of it were filled with wild raspberry, elderberry, and weeds; but on the Montgomery side these interstices were free of such tangle. The fact that lights and music advertised the Holton farm to the eye and ear seemed to Phil a matter worthy of her attention. The corn was in the shock on the Montgomery side; the adjacent Holton field had lain fallow that year. The shocks of corn suggested to Phil's imagination the tents of an unsentined host or an abandoned camp; but she walked fearlessly toward the lights and music, bent upon investigation. The moon would not for some time creep high enough to light the valley and disturb her father's vigil by the camp-fire: there need be no haste, for even if he missed her he would not be alarmed.

The old Holton house and its outbuildings lay near the fence and Phil calculated that without leaving her ancestral acres she would be able to determine exactly the nature and extent of this unprecedented revelry in the Holton barn. She approached as near as possible and rested her arms on the rough top rail of the fence. There were doors on both sides of the lumbering old structure, and her tramp across the cornfield was rewarded by a comprehensive view of the scene within. The music ceased and she heard voices—gay, happy voices—greeting some late-comers whose automobile had just "chug-chugged" into the barnyard. She saw, beyond the brilliantly lighted interior, the motors and carriages that had conveyed the company to the dance; and she caught a glimpse of the farmhouse itself, where doubtless refreshments were even now in readiness. Phil was far enough away to be safe from observation

and yet near enough to identify many of the dancers. They were chiefly young people she had known all her life, and the strangers were presumably friends of the Holtons from Indianapolis and elsewhere.

The strains of a familiar waltz caused a quick reassembling of the dancers. The music tingled in Phil's blood. She kept time with head and hands, and then, swinging round, began dancing, humming the air as her figure swayed and bent to its cadences. By some whim the nearest corn-shock became the center of her attention. Round and round it she moved, with a child's abandon; and now that the moon's full glory lay upon the fields, her shadow danced mockingly with her. Fauns and nymphs tripped thus to wild music in the enchanted long ago when the world was young. Hers was the lightest, the most fantastic of irresponsible shadows. It was not the mere reflection of her body, but a prefigurement of her buoyant spirit, that had escaped from her control and tauntingly eluded capture. Her mind had never known a morbid moment; she had never feared the dark, without or within. And this was her private affair—a joke between her and the moon and the earth. It was for the moment all hers—earth and heaven, the mystery of the stars, the slumbering power of a beneficent land that only yesterday had vouchsafed its kindly fruits in reward of man's labor.

After a breathless interval a two-step followed, and Phil danced again, seizing a corn-stalk and holding it above her head with both hands like a wand. When the music ended she poised on tiptoe and flung the stalk far from her toward the barn as though it were a javelin. Then as she took a step toward the fence she was aware that some one had been watching her. It was, indeed, a nice question whether the flying stalk had not grazed the ear of a man

who stood on Holton soil, his arms resting on the rail just as hers had been ten minutes earlier, and near the same spot.

"Lo!" gasped Phil breathlessly.

"Lo!"

They surveyed each other calmly in the moonlight. The young man beyond the fence straightened and removed his hat. He had been watching her antics round the corn-shock and Phil resented it.

"What were you doing that for?" she demanded indignantly, her hands in her sweater pockets.

"Doing what, for instance?"

"Watching me. It wasn't fair."

"Oh, I liked your dancing; that was all."

"Oh!"

An "Oh" let fall with certain intonations is a serious impediment to conversation. The young gentleman seemed unable at this crucial instant to think of a fitting reply. Finding himself unequal to a response in her own key he merely said:—

"I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to. I came over here to sit on the fence and watch the party."

"Watch it! Why don't you go in and dance?"

He glanced down as though to suggest that if Phil were to scrutinize his raiment she might very readily understand why, instead of being among the dancers, he contented himself with watching them from a convenient fence corner. He carried a

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

