

Fireman's Daughter

By Philip Clark

ILLUSTRATED BY C. C. BEALL

When a man feels ready and able to save the world, it's a bitter thing to have to put it off until he's eighteen

I DIDN'T have a thing on but this towel wrapped around my middle, and my feet were getting pretty tired from trying to stand with my heels a half inch off the floor so no one would notice. But there were only three other guys between me and the Navy doctor who was doing the examinations. And then this boatswain or quartermaster or whatever they call it with that kind of stripes came down the line checking up papers. He came to me and he said, "Where's your papers? For Pete's sake, don't you guys do *anything* like you're told to?"

I didn't say anything. Because he'd seen me plenty before, only not with all my clothes off. He was a big, red-necked, blimpy kind of guy, and he took a good look at me, and said, "Oh, gosh! You again!"

I still didn't say anything. Because what was the use? He just grabbed me by the back of the neck and marched me out of there. Fast, so it was very hard to hold the towel up, and a lot of big dopes in the line laughed. We went out of the examination room, and back to where I'd left my clothes. He stood over me while I got dressed, and he didn't say anything at all till I was tying my tie. Then he said, "Now look, bubber. Don't come in here again! Do you get it? Don't *come* here any more! Or shall I have it tattooed on you?"

I said, "All right. Only you don't have to get tough about it."

He said, "Maybe I don't have to, but I will. Now beat it. And stay beat!"

I said, very calm and sort of cold, "Thanks. Maybe I can do *you* a favor some time."

He didn't get it, of course. Because what I was thinking was that I was bound to get in sooner or later, and I'd probably get promoted a lot faster than him, the big dumbbell. I could just see him snapping out a salute and saying, "*Boatswain Something-or-Other reporting for duty, sir.*" And then the expression on his face when he saw who it was.

Only instead he was slamming the door of the recruiting station in back of me, and I was walking down the customshouse steps. Arlene was waiting for me at the bottom of the steps, and I guess she could tell right away what had happened. Arlene is the only person in the world who understands me even a little bit, and even she doesn't really understand. Not entirely. I guess nobody ever understands that way.

We walked down the street to get the bus, and Arlene said, "Don't feel so bad about it, Tommy. You didn't really think you could—well—*sneak* into the Navy, did you?"

I said, "Oh, the heck with it. It was worth a try, wasn't it?"

Because, of course, she couldn't see it the way I had. Just slipping into that line of guys waiting to be examined. And then the doctor giving me the thumps, and looking—well—sort of amazed. And saying, "Young man, you're in wonderful shape! Wonderful! If every recruit only came to us in the shape *you're* in—"

I was holding my feet out with my knees bent, trying to keep from spinning. And then I hit. Hard. It most knocked me cockeyed

And then maybe he'd have talked to Father. Even if I didn't have any darned consent papers. Guys have done it before. Younger than sixteen, even. But here we were waiting for the bus, and I looked at Arlene, and I could see she wasn't really sorry. She's awfully pretty with blue eyes and sort of soft blond hair, and I know it's not just because I'm in love with her, because I felt that way even back last summer, before I really fell for her. Only now I was kind of mad at her, because I could see she didn't really want me to get in. Not any more than Father and Mother. Even if she had come down with me to say goodby, in case they'd taken me right off. But it was too much trouble to fight about it.

THE bus came, and we got on, and a couple of soldiers from Fort Hanson got on, too. I could see them kind of giving Arlene a good looking over. They didn't get fresh or anything, but I could tell Arlene knew they were looking at her. A girl always does. It made me so mad I couldn't think of anything to say, all the way out to Alban Terrace, where we both live. We got off the bus and walked up the street to Arlene's house. It was awfully warm for so early in the year, and we sat on the steps for a while. Arlene said, "Maybe when you've finished school—maybe your father'll change his mind."

Only she didn't really mean it. She was just humoring me. I said, "Sure. And the way I'm flunking everything in sight, that's really something to look forward to."

Because how can you expect a guy to study with all this going on? It was beginning to get kind of dark, and we just sat there. That's another thing about Arlene. She doesn't *talk* all the time when you've got things to think about. A car came up the drive, and it was Arlene's father. I got up when he came up the steps, and I said, "Good evening, Mr. Bolton."

He said, "Uh—good evening—uh—Bobby."

Bobby! He thought I was Bobby Tarrant! He hadn't even looked at me. Nobody ever really looks at you long enough to see who you *are*. Not at my age, anyway. I was pretty burnt up. Mr. Bolton just marched right past, only he said, "Arlene, honey, you better come in. It's getting cold."

Just like that. Arlene said, "All right, Father. I'll be right in."

But she stayed with me a couple of minutes. I guess she knew how it'd make me feel if she just got up and trotted right after him. Just before the front door closed, I heard Mr. Bolton talking to Arlene's mother. He said, "Well, Muriel, I've finished the course! First duty tonight! I'm a full-fledged—"

Only right then the door closed. I said to Arlene, "Full-fledged what?"

"Fireman," she said, and sort of giggled. "Daddy's an auxiliary fireman, in civilian defense. He slides down the brass pole and everything. And he's

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