

THE GARNET HEART

When Mr. and Mrs. Challam and their two-year old daughter, Linda, moved to Prescott, a neighbor, Mrs. North, told them that Lilly Mae Westerink was a fine baby-sitter.

"She lives at the other end of town," Mrs. North explained, "but she doesn't mind taking the street car and I've been told she's very dependable though she's only fourteen."

Mrs. Challam asked Mrs. North if she thought she could trust a fourteen-year old girl with a baby as lively as Linda.

"Mercy, yes," said Mrs. North. That child is a born baby-sitter. She loves babies of all ages, especially babies old enough to walk and talk so that she can give them attention. If you ask me I'd much rather have a younger girl who really enjoys entertaining the kiddies than some sophisticated eighteen-year old who is so bored she can hardly wait till they're in bed. Her mother tells me Lilly plays with all the little ones in the block

every day when she gets home from school just because she thinks it's fun. She's a nice youngster, not Taffy about boys like so many girls her age. Or clothes---not a bit interested---likes to wear jeans and play around with cats and dogs and babies. Her mother wonders if she'll always be like that but I tell her Lilly's just taking a longer time to grow up than most girls. It'll come. If you ask me I think it's a good thing. Anyway, you might try her once and see how you like her."

Mrs. Challam did try Lilly Mae. Lilly's voice over the phone sounded subdued and low. It impressed Mrs. Challam. She liked young girls. Mrs. Challam herself was still in

her twenties, a handsome woman with a pale skin and dark hair and a smooth sweet way of speaking. She responded with warmth to everything that gave her the least little chance. So it was no wonder that she liked Lilly Mae at once. Mrs. North hadn't described Lilly to her and she was surprised and pleased when she saw that Lilly was a slim tall blonde. She liked to have attractive people about her. Each time she saw Lilly she found details to admire that had escaped her notice before. Her hair, for instance. It was soft and almost taffy--colored but it wasn't till she saw it under the lighted lamp that she realized there were unusual red lights in it that were almost startling.

Because Lilly was so fair, the pink flush in her cheeks seemed pinker than it really was and her eyes had a trick of seeming to change from blue to violet so that Mrs. Challam was constantly surprised and enchanted when she talked to her. It hardly mattered that she never saw Lilly dressed up. She thought she looked perfectly charming in her rolled-up faded jeans, natural and easy and graceful. Apparently Mrs. North had been right. Lilly Mae was still a child who thought dresses and scarves and blouses and skirts and all the fripperies that make up young girls' wardrobes just a bore.

"Sweet little thing," Mrs. Challam thought to herself.

The first time she had Lilly come Mrs. Challam felt complete confidence in her. She and her husband were going out for dinner. Linda had been fed and Lilly arrived at six-thirty.

"Do come in, Lilly," Mrs. Challam said after giving her an instant's fleeting over-all glance and at once feeling relieved. Lilly smiled and entered without saying a word, was introduced to Mr. Challam who was reading a newspaper in the living room and then taken into the kitchen to see Linda who was still in her high chair trying unsuccessfully to pile wooden blocks up. Mrs. Challam said to the baby: "Look darling, this is Lilly. she's come to play with you. Can you say 'Lilly' darling?"

Linda pushed her blocks to the floor and turned her face a way. She was obviously not pleased. Mrs. Challam looked at Lilly as if to say: "Do something, so she'll like you." Mrs. Challam was in a hurry. She had still to finish dressing. Lilly hadn't looked at Mrs. Challam. She just laid her frayed red purse on the kitchen counter and picked up the blocks from the floor and with the baby's face still turned away from her Lilly piled the blocks carefully one on top of the other on the high chair tray so that they formed a tall tower a foot high. Then she said in a soft low voice: "Look, Linda."

Linda must have liked her voice for she turned her head and for an imperceptible moment surveyed the tower. The next instant she sent it toppling to the floor with a gesture that showed a faint hint of anger. All at once Lilly Mae laughed, a warm gay laugh, and got down on her

knees and scrambled around on the kitchen floor, grabbing blocks to the right and left of her with such quick kitten like motions that Linda bean a faint chuckling. Almost before Linda could blink her eyes the tower was built again and again it was toppled and again Lilly laughed and recovered the blocks with sudden elf-like movements. By this time Linda was laughing aloud with genuine pleasure at her complete mastery over this stranger. Mrs. Challam

smiled. She knew it was going to be fine. Slipping quietly to her bedroom she left them at their g^ame.

Lilly Mae loved to come to the Challams and never missed a chance. All her other baby-sitting jobs were in her own neighborhood where people didn't have new houses and interesting things in them, where she was paid grudgingly sometimes and where the women often said, if they had no change, "That extra dime I'll count for next time when you come." Mr. Challam always overpaid her. She used to protest at first, shyly trying to refuse the extra quarter she felt she had not earned, but she soon got used to his generosity and besides, he had said to her once, laughing, "Now Lilly, if you're not satisfied with what we give you we'll get another baby-sitter." She just said, "O.K. and thanks."

She loved the baby Linda too and used to wish her other babies could be made to smell as sweet and fragrant. Somehow, they never did. Their mothers never cared whether she put them to bed dirty or clean, but Mrs. Challam used to remind Lilly to be sure to give Linda her bath at night. As if Lilly could forget. It was one of her greatest pleasures. Just being in that blue tiled bathroom where everything shone bright and clean made her happy. The sparkling chrome fixtures, the lights that flowed into frosted tubes of glass, the crackling blue shower curtain with swans floating up and down over the plastic, bottles of cologne and bath salts perfuming the air and glistening in their fancy containers—all these things were like a new world opening up to her. She used to picture Mrs. Challam, whom she had grown to admire, coming into this bathroom in a chiffon negligee (Lilly Mae had seen it hanging in her dressing room), drawing water in the tub, throwing in a handful of the lavender bath salts and a few drops of cologne, brushing her lark hair with the lucite-handled brush in front of the mirror. Once Lilly Mae wondered what it would be like to take a bath in this bathroom and for a fleeting tremulous moment it occurred to her that she could do it and no-one would ever know. She shivered and the air seemed to grow suddenly cold.

"No," she said to herself, "I'd smell. I'd smell of soap and bath salts and they'd know." And she dismissed it from her mind as one of those crazy notions we all get at one time or another.

Mrs. Challam's clothes were another fascination. Never had Lilly Mae seen such a variety of beautiful dresses belong to one woman. Her intimate knowledge of the contents of Mrs.

Challam's bedroom closet was legitimate. A few weeks before, when Mrs. Challam was in a great hurry, she had Lilly hand over Linda to her father while she helped her dress. Mrs. Challam had said, "Lilly, be a good girl and get my red velvet from the closet and down on the shoe rack you'll find a pair of black pumps, the ones with the rhinestone buckles. I'm afraid you'll have to button all these buttons on this dress. I never can reach them alone."

Lilly had jumped quickly to open the closet door Mrs. Challam smiled inwardly when she heard Lilly's "Oh, Mrs. Challam so many dresses all they're ail so lovely!" she was buttoning the dress. Mrs. Challam said "Lilly, when you're through fin that blue wool with the embroidery on the sleeves and tell me if you think it's too old for me. Somehow, I'm never comfortable in it." Lilly's face glowed. She passed her hands carefully over the row of dresses hanging on their satin quilted hangers till she came to the blue wool. Examining it critically, she looked from it to Mrs. Challam, trying to picture her in it. Then, brushing her hair from her forehead, she said, "I think it's just right, Mrs. Challam, not a bit too old. Why, it's as young looking as the clothes girls my age wear." And immediately she could have bitten her tongue out. She blushed and felt terribly ashamed for that innocent remark. Would Mrs. Challam think she had meant "if you think it's too old give it

to me?" But Mrs. Challam appeared not to be thinking of that. She said gaily, "Well, maybe you're right. In a way I do love the way it's made." Lilly's heart stopped beating so fast. Mrs. Challam was wonderful.

That evening, after Linda had been put to bed, Lilly Mae took another more detailed look at the clothes in the closet. Somehow, she felt it was perfectly all right since she had been initiated into their exciting mysteries earlier in the evening on the invitation of Mrs. Challam. What interested her now was the gay youthfulness of the clothes. Why, any of them could have been worn by a very young girl like herself. Mere was a row of skirts, plain wools, plaids, corduroy skirts, gabardine skirts. On the open shelf a dozen or more sweaters folded neatly, bright colors and pastels. Lilly Mae passed her hands over the soft fine wool.

"What would the girls in school think if they saw me in these sweaters and skirts?" she thought dreamily. Lots of them had things just as pretty—all those kids on the south side of town had plenty of clothes, maybe even more sweaters and skirts than were here. Margaret Mary Dawson, for instance, boasted once that she could wear a different outfit every day for three weeks without repeating once. Lilly Mae had two skirts and three sweaters.

She had had them over a year now and the sweaters had been washed so many times they either looked faded or matted and oh, she just hated them all! It seemed to her that lately the girls had been looking at her awfully funny. You couldn't help but notice the way their eyes followed you up and down and then back up again. And the look they gave each other and those unnatural smiles that crept to their lips, and they way they smoothed down their own new sweaters over their waists as if it had just come over them how lovely they were. Funny, Lilly Mae seemed to notice these things happening all at once. Last year it didn't matter. Clothes were just something you had to pull on to go to school and could hardly wait to take off when you got home. Last year she wasn't interested in spending a penny of hers for dresses. Her baby-sitting money went into her savings account with a little left out each tithe for her dog fund. Lilly Mae had been saving for a cocker spaniel that cost twenty-five dollars. There were times when she thought she couldn't live another minute without a dog of her own but she was determined to get the spaniel and it took a long time to accumulate twenty-five dollars. She thought of now, as she stood among the dresses, and smiled and leaned her heal back against the wall, trying to imagine what it would be like to cuddle him close and maybe let him sleep at the foot of her bed.

Her hand reached out as if he were there but she found herself touching another sweater, pale pink with the feel of angora in it. How pretty that would be with a string of pearls, those short single strands all the girls were wearing now, or that little golden necklace Margaret Mary got for her birthday last week. She wondered what Mrs. Challam wore with her sweaters. Strange, she didn't remember seeing her with jewelry on.

Almost without thinking she left the closed, walked crier to the dressing table and opened the top drawer. Yes, there it was, a whole drawer full of jewelry, all separated in boxes---rings, bracelets, necklaces, wooden beads, pins, earrings. Lilly Mae had seen just such things before but still, she examined them and held a few of the sparkling pieces up to the light and put them back carefully.

Sack in the far corner of the drawer she saw a tattered little box which she opened mechanically. Inside, on a piece of white cotton, lay a garnet heart, glowing red, like drops of bright frozen blood. Lilly Mae had never seen garnets before. For a moment she just stared and looked at all the other jewelry in the drawer and then back at the garnet heart again. She seemed confused, as if she knew this must be something different, something rare, lost among the clutter of imitation pearls and glass cut to look like diamonds.

She wondered: "Is this real? It glows!" Holding it up to the light she noticed how, from it, there seemed to shoot a hundred bright rays. She had never seen anything like it. The garnets were a deep wine red, clustered together in the form of a heart with a little loop of gold at the top as if it were meant to be worn on a chain. She held it up to her bosom and looked into the mirror. For a long time she held it there and it seemed to her as if her own heart under the garnet heart beat faster.

Then she laid it back on the cotton in the little torn pasteboard box. That box troubled her. It looked battered and cheap, not meant to hold a garnet heart as precious as this. Suddenly she laughed, a kind of bitter, cynical laugh that clouded her dream for a moment.

"Maybe this is cheap dime-store stuff. How do I know? I've never seen anything real except in jewelry store windows and I've never seen anything like this before."

Lilly Mae closed the box and put it back where it had been and shut the drawer violently. The jewelry made a tinkling sound inside as she did this so she opened it again and shut it gently. It was as if the garnet heart had reproved her.

"I shouldn't have opened that drawer," she thought to herself. "I shouldn't be snooping. It's not right." And she tried to comfort herself with the thought that Mrs. Challam would understand.

"I could just say to her, Mrs. Challam, I opened your drawer and looked at your jewelry' and I know she'd say 'Did you think it was pretty, Lilly?'" But somehow somehow, she knew she'd never say it. Besides, there was no need to.

After that she thought often about the garnet heart, trying to understand what there was about it that held for her such a strange fascination. Was it because it was so different, like no other piece of jewelry she had ever seen, or because it was a deep fantastic red, a color that for some reason sent dreams of royalty and extravagant pleasures floating through her brain? Whether it had any real value, did not, for the moment, concern Lilly. It was simply there, a symbol of something she could not name. It made her feel uncertain and troubled when she was away from it. But when she had it in her hand she always experienced a kind of immediate thrill that was followed in some dark inexplicable way by a feeling of sadness. She wondered, if Mrs. Challam would ever wear it. In her heart she hoped she would not. There is something forever lost if a magic spell is once broken.

That was in the winter. When spring came Lilly Mae had saved for her own personal use, a little over eighteen dollars. Her mother said, "Pretty soon you'll have enough, Lilly, to get our dog," and Lilly realized she had not thought of the cocker spaniel for nearly a month. Instead she had been planning other things.

"Mama, I need some new clothes. All the kids are beginning to wear cotton skirts and white blouses to school and I haven't a decent thing in my closet!"

"Don't say decent", Lilly--it's not true. Your clothes are must as decent as they've ever been. If you mean new, that's different. But I sure thought your last year's skirts would do another season. You haven't outgrown them or anything."

"Oh Mama, they're horrid! Besides, I haven't a single circle skirt to my name and kids like Doris have three and four, all different colors, and if she can afford it we ought to be able to. Besides, I've saved eighteen dollars and I'm going to buy myself some de--I mean some new things!"

Lilly's face had grown flushed and Mrs. Westerink looked at her daughter in a new way, surprised and puzzled. Suddenly it occurred to her that Lilly was extraordinarily pretty--funny how she had never bought much about it. Her hair, so shiny gold, such red lips,

"Lilly, do you have lipstick on?"

Lilly looked up, startled.

"Yes." She knew she would cry in a minute if her mother said anything more unpleasant. But Mrs. Westerink only smiled.

"Well, you chose a good color. It's very becoming, Lilly, but don't overdo it."

Lilly relaxed. A quick wave of lightsome happiness passed for an instant over her.

"Ma ma, can I?"

"Can you what?"

"Buy some things with my money I saved?"

"It's Your money, Lilly. But what about your dog?"

"Oh well, it can wait. Bedsides, I'd much rather have the skirts just now." She smiled a little happy smile, the way she used to smile in her sleep, as a baby, Mrs. Westerink remembered.

Now the old routine of Lilly's school lays changed. She got up earlier in the morning and went to bed later. Her mother, seeing her bedroom light on after ten, would open her daughter's door quietly and say, "Still up, Lilly?" Usually Lilly would be standing before her mirror putting her hair up in pink plastic curlers. She had infinite patience to do that every night, Mrs. Westerink thought, and why, when her hair had a lovely natural wave of its own?

"Do you really think it looks better curled up like that?" her mother asked her. "It used to look so pretty lust as it was--natural."

"Oh Mama, my hair has been simply terrible lately. I can't do anything with it. And I wish I could get it trained into a page boy. Barby's hair looks darling every day even when it rains. She said she'd give me a permanent sometime. It only costs a dollar, Mama, and she has all the curlers and things."

"But, honey, your hair is curly. Don't spoil it with a permanent. Anybody can have one those."

"Oh, honestly, Mama, can't you see! I just look awful this way!"

Lilly Mae stood glaring at herself in the mirror, her eyes blazing bright blue, her lips pouting and angry. Through the mirror she could see the reflection of her mother, standing quiet and unruffled in the corner of the room. She was impatient with her mother, irritated by her calk

placidity, her tiresome look of resignation, and all unaware that the half buried smile on her mother's lips sprang from sudden wonder and understanding that this was another being emerging from the old scarred skin of childhood into the bright plumage of living youth.

Mornings too had now become a maddening whirl of tending to things that suddenly emerged important and demanding. It was nothing unusual to find Lilly Mae at six o'clock, long before breakfast was started, pulling out the ironing board and frantically pressing a blouse or a scarf or a skirt, moaning aloud about the awful combination of colors she had to wear that day because her white blouse was in the wash and her red skirt had a rip. Gone were the days when a hidden safety pin anchored a buttonless belt and was felt to be just as good or even better. Now there were crises over buttons or the lack of shoe polish or loss of a comb. And sudden wild last minute decisions to change everything she had on for something different.

"Hurry, Lilly! You'll miss the bus!"

And Lilly, kissing her mother lightly so as not to smear her lipstick, would cry, "Bye now!" and be off, leaving behind her a trail of nervous agitation that would settle like sandy dust stirred up in a light wind, over her mother's thoughts.

No-one at school, looking at Lilly, would have guessed at those perturbations of the morning. Lilly's charming composure, which intrigued adults like Mrs. Challam, was even more easy and natural now that she had spent her money on new skirts. She felt self-assured the first few days, while they were still a novelty and a surprise to the girls. Several of her friends made quite a point of exclaiming, "Lilly! What a darling skirt!" And it seemed to Lilly that they looked at her with remarkable attention all at once which her own eyes enhanced her importance and made her want to laugh aloud with joy. That would have surprised them too much so she would smile lightly as if it were a matter of no great importance and murmur, "Oh, thank you." Even after the novelty of her new things had worn off more or less, she had a feeling that they were including her by degrees into their closed enchanted circle. Invitations to her to join in their walk to the drug store after school left her breathless with happiness. Despair came too, thrusting its cold sharp darts into her bosom, when she heard them discussing a meeting at the movies for the following Saturday, taking it for granted that she wasn't interested, though she stood almost in their midst, so that she marvelled that her longing to be noticed did not cry itself out like a nightmarish dream and shock them with its violence.

She was no good at thrusting herself forward, demanding her rights with them, though she had seen such miracles accomplished by less attractive girls and had envied them their vulgar courage and success. With her it must be another way. Lilly Mae suddenly longed to be one of them as she had never longed for anything in her life. Those new cotton skirts and the blue blouse she had bought with her own money---what a wonderful difference they had made to the girls! She liked to recall their casual admiring

glances those first few days when her clothes were new. Lilly Mae felt different too, like a stranger to herself, a stranger she fell in love with at first sight. It was exciting to her to know she was being noticed. And it would have been pure bliss to be taken in completely, without reservations, and without the knowledge that their concessions to her were given warily and a bit grudgingly.

She felt certain she could conquer them in the end, given time and a little more money. The great defect of her character, Lilly reasoned, was her shyness, her inability to express herself with a flare, her lack of a kind of boldness that seemed characteristic of the girls who made friends. Physically she felt she was equal to any of them. Lilly Mae knew now that she was pretty. She felt some of them even envied her her willowy slimness, her soft yellow hair, her

pink and white complexion. A few had openly complimented her and she always felt a surge of happiness beneath her embarrassment at not knowing how to reply.

At home she was restless and longed to escape, accepting every offer to sit with children, hoarding her growing treasure of dimes and quarters till they could buy the next adornment for her body, adornments that would open the gates a little wider, so that finally she could squeeze through into that glittering other-world to which she felt she really belonged.

Mrs. Challam continued to call Lilly, often two and three times a week, and Lilly accepted with alacrity. She loved being part of that household with its atmosphere of ease and beauty. Mrs. Challam was like a symbol

to her of all that she would someday like to be. Occasionally Lilly came now dressed in her school clothes and was filled with pride to hear Mrs. Challam say, as she stood in the doorway, "My, Lilly, you look so pretty today. What an attractive dress." And she blushed wildly when Mr. Challam asked her if the boys began to besiege her.

"Oh no," she replied, "I don't like boys." and then she conceded hesitantly, "But I have lots of girl friends."

"Well, you just wait, Lilly, the boys will wake up one of these days."

And there Lilly would be again, flitting about the pretty rooms with Linda in her arms, looking about to see if there were some dishes in the kitchen that she could wash up to surprise Mrs. Challam, dusting off her dressing table and setting things in order.

Each time she came she looked at the garnet heart. It was like a ritual now, performed regularly as soon as Linda was put to bed. Without that momentary glance at the bright gleaming jewel she felt she couldn't settle down to her books or even to the magazines that lay about in the living room. Always she turned to the fashions and studied them carefully. Most of them were too fantastically extreme for her but she liked to look at them and dream.

She was turning the pages absentmindedly one night when an idea formed in her brain all at once and without any plan or reason.

"I could wear the garnet heart to school---just
Once!"

She felt startled, then excited; a wave of panic swept through her for an instant and then she smiled as it subsided.

What would the girls say? She saw them rushing up to her, friendly and amiable, exclaiming brightly, fingering the necklace with soft admiring hands, then smiling at her with open hearts. She thought of them with wistful desire, believing intensely that once they admitted her they would cling to her as they did to each other, with no letting go, with no forgetting.

She was convinced that wearing the garnet heart just once, without telling anyone how she came to have it, could not be such a wrong. There it lay, day after day,

week after week, in its tattered box, untouched, unworn, unnoticed. She had made careful note of that, placing the box in a certain position each time she looked at the jewel. In order to observe with intense concentration the next time whether it had been handled in her absence. It had never been moved. It pained her faintly to know she lacked the courage to ask Mrs. Challam about it. She knew she could never admit to her that she had seen it.

"I should never have opened that drawer in the first place. It was wicked of me---and I'll never do such a thing again."

Still she felt she must finish this adventure, see it

out to the end, round out her triumph. No-one need ever know. No-one will be hurt. The deep delicious mystery of it all intrigued her for a moment and she felt almost free of guilt. To-

day was Tuesday. She was asked to come Thursday evening and Friday evening. Thursday night she could slip it out of its box, wear it to school the next day and return it to its drawer Friday night. How simple.

"I know she wouldn't mind she knew. I know it. I know It," Lilly Mae said to herself off and on during that Tuesday evening. "I can string it on a little black velvet ribbon I have. It will glitter and shine and everyone will notice it. I know she wouldn't mind."

Thursday night at nine o'clock, an hour before she expected the Challam to come home, Lilly Mae turned on the light in the bedroom and opened the dresser drawer. Snatching the little box up in her hands, without noticing this time the angle at which it had been placed, she pulled off the lid. The square of cotton stared blankly at her. The garnet heart was gone. There was nothing but the square of white cotton. An overpowering panic swept through her as she searched the back of the drawer. She raked through the jewelry with her fingers and noticed how they trembled. It was nowhere. It was gone!

The first moment of wondering seemed to Lilly Mae unbearably long. She thought she must be dreaming and the dream was slowly weaving itself into a nightmare, with her heart beating wildly and her thoughts crisscrossing in her head in a mad uncanny dance.

"But it was here! It's always been here. And now it's gone. It's been stolen! And I didn't steal it. I didn't! I didn't! Only they'll think I did. Even Mrs. Challam will think I did!"

The thought was intolerable to Lilly Mae. She felt herself growing weak and sick inside. Closing the drawer on the empty box, she turned out the bedroom light and walked to the living room where she stood bewildered and stunned. After a while she sank down into a chair and bent over and stared at the carpet, trying to reason, to figure it out. Silt it was like trying, maddeningly, to fit a mistaken piece into a jigsaw puzzle. The pattern was wrong--

"Lilly, are you sick?" She looked up when she heard the voice of Mrs. Challam. "You look so pale.

Lilly jerked herself in out of the chair and smiled a little quivering smile.

"Oh---I just am not feeling very good today. Maybe something I ate. But I'll be all right." She couldn't look at Mrs. Challam, not tonight. It would have been like exposing an open wound to a touch. It would have to heal over a bit first. So she ran into the hall to snatch her sweater from the hook and said, "I'll just et to bed."

"Mr. Challam will take you, Lilly. Get a good night's sleep and I'll see you tomorrow." Lilly murmured "good-night" and led to the car.

All those days that followed Lilly Mae felt haunted. She talked silently to herself as she had never done before---arguing, pleading, convincing herself and always ending inconsolable and weary and full of pity for herself. Day after day her reasoning followed the same lines: But who took it? Mrs. Challam took it, of course. But why? Was she afraid I'd take it, so she hid it? But she didn't know I wanted to wear it. Or did she? Could she tell? How could she know? If she took it out why

didn't she wear it? No--she didn't take it. It was stolen. And I didn't steal it. No-body else goes into that house so I stole it, she'll think. But I didn't---I didn't---I just looked at it. That isn't stealing:

And still her grief stayed with her. It seemed the only important thing in her life now---her grief and hiding her grief. It was hard to hide it from her mother who felt her moods though she seldom questioned Lilly Mae. It was not so hard with the girls who were too preoccupied with themselves and began to notice her less and less as she withdrew from them, aloof and almost bitter, not caring now whether they befriended her, hoping to be ignored. It was hardest of

all to hide her grief from Mrs. Challam who had now become the pivot of her whole existence.

She came to them as often as ever, striving now to be casual, straining to suppress her intense searching of Mrs. Challam's face or voice for signs of mistrust or suspicion. The tension loaded itself upon her till she felt heavy with dark sorrow. Always, always she would go in search of the garnet heart when the house was empty of all but herself and Linda. Each time her heart quickened with the hope that it would be there, back in its nest of cotton, shining deeply in the corner of the drawer. Never, never would she look at it again, she promised herself, if she could see it just once more, safe and real. Lilly Mae shuddered at the remembrance of how she had dared to handle it, how she had cherished it and now would have no more of it, ever again.

She longed for summer, for school to be over. She longed for part of herself to be free in spite of the secret burden she felt she must carry with her forever. Her money was accumulating but there were no more requests for skirts or blouses and her mother felt pleased that

Lilly was really not being foolish and extravagant and unreasonable as she had been early in the spring.

Mrs. Challam felt Lilly was not getting enough sleep.

"You look tired, Lilly. Are you sure you care to come two nights this week---on school nights? I can get Mrs. Rupp to come, you know." Lilly's heart almost turned over when she heard this. Automatically her face brightened and she heard herself saying in a hollow enthusiastic voice: "Oh, I'm not a bit tired, really. I'd love to come--that is, if you want me to."

"Of course I want you to Lilly, you know that. Linda hates anyone but you. But I don't want to wear you out. If you're sure your mother doesn't mind—Lilly was bewildered. She didn't know what to think.

Many weeks later, on a Saturday afternoon Lilly Mae and Linda were sunning themselves on the back lawn. It was a delicate spring day, full of the warmth and tenderness of a new green season, with the sky bright as a pearl and cloudless. Sitting in the sun Lilly Mae felt the torpor of her body. It was almost pleasant to feel the bright warm rays playing about her neck and arms, to be insensible to everything but the luxuriant mellowness of the day. Even the unhappiness within her seemed to grow dim, as if it were weary with being strained so much, worn out with reasoning and misuse. She was tired of her unhappiness. It nagged at her often, like a pain that comes and goes and again insists on being remembered so that she was never truly free of it except in rare moments like this when it suddenly became uninteresting or too dreary to contemplate. The sun was enough. It warmed her body and loosened the tightness of her heart.

When she heard the car come up the driveway she picked Linda up in her arms and rushed to meet Mrs. Challam.

"Oh Lilly, You'll have to help me with these packages---look, I've dropped something."

Lilly gathered up some of the boxes and took them to the kitchen, then ran out again, still holding Linda, to relieve her of more.

"You must have done a lot of shopping, Mrs. Challam."

"I did---and so many errands off my mind. How was Linda? You've got her looking very pretty, Lilly, nice and clean and fresh. Did she nap long?"

Lilly nodded and smiled. She dropped the last load of packages on the table.

"Can I help you some more now---or shall I go?" She seemed eager to be off. "I'll put Linda in her high chair."

"Yes, I'm home for good now," Mrs. Challam said, whirling to the high chair and kissing Linda on the cheek. "Here darling is a duck for you. And Oh Lilly, before you go--see what I had done for Linda---when she's older."

Out of her purse she drew a white box and opened it. She was so laughing and gay about everything she did. Now she seemed quite excited. Out of the new white box she drew the garnet heart. Through the loop was strung a golden chain.

"Isn't it lovely, Lilly? I finally got the chains---

it's been on my mind for months. This heart is an old family heirloom---oh, maybe over a hundred years old and it's been passed down from mother to daughter for ever so long and now I'm saving it for Linda, to give to her when she's sixteen---quite grown up. I got it when I was sixteen and I've always loved it, beyond anything else I've ever had. Isn't it perfectly beautiful!"

She held it up to Lilly who gathered it in her hands gently. Mrs. Challam smiled when she saw Lilly's eyes. They were so bright and full of wonder at that lovely jewel. Lilly held it in her hand for a long moment and gazed at it, afraid to look up. She felt the tears springing to her eyes and her heart beating wildly and still, she was so marvellously happy and full of rapture she wanted to cry her joy to the world. All her pain and sorrow dropped from her like a cloak, leaving her fresh and free and untarnished, and happy---happy---happy: No-one would ever know this had been the happiest moment of her life.

"Oh, Mrs. Challam! I've never seen anything so beautiful! I---it's the most beautiful thing I ever saw---really it is! I hope you'll wear it sometime. And Linda---won't she love it---when she's older?"

Lilly was breathless. She was still holding the garnet heart in her hand. Now she held it out to Mrs. Challam who looked at her flushed cheeks and saw that Lilly's hands were trembling.

"But Mrs. Challam---" Lilly almost whispered, "why don't you---Mrs. Challam, don't wait till Linda's sixteen. Please. Why don't you---give it to her when she's fourteen? Won't you, please, Mrs. Challam---when she's fourteen instead of sixteen?"

Lilly looked so intensely earnest, so gravely fervent, that Mrs. Challam's senses quickened to her mood and she responded with warmth and love towards Lilly. She suddenly understood that this was important to Lilly, just now the most important thing in the world..

Yes. Lilly, I will. I'll give it to her when she's fourteen. I promise. I promise faithfully."

Olga Stepanek
330 South 37th Street
Lincoln, Nebraska.