

THE MYSTERIOUS WAY

BY SAMUEL W. TAYLOR

ILLUSTRATED BY EARL BLOSSOM

The Story:

When old MORONI SKINNER came down from heaven to straighten out his shiftless, happy-go-lucky grandson, JACKSON SKINNER WHITETOP, he took a good look around the Mormon community in which he had lived. He found Jackson as lazy as ever, his house gone to ruin, his affairs in a mess. He found that HENRY BROWN, the storekeeper and sheep rancher who had taken over Jackson's sheep while Jackson was away in the Army, had been quietly defrauding him (and the income-tax people) ever since. Henry was unscrupulous in more ways than one: He was about to marry KATE JENSEN, BISHOP WALDO JENSEN'S daughter, even though he was the father of ANITA SMITH'S illegitimate child. Anita was the youngest daughter of old NEPHI SMITH, an apostate whose six girls had brought him nothing but shame, and Henry refused to do right by her; no one in the valley knew his secret. Jackson had been halfheartedly courting BEULAH HESS, who was also being courted by NED HOLT, Henry's shepherd and unwilling partner in crime.

Old Moroni materialized in a vision to MILO FERGUSON, Henry's helper in the store, and berated him for having apostatized after the death of his wife ABBIE. More important, he also appeared to Jackson and gave him a good talking-to and told him to marry Katie. Then, having completed his earthly mission, he returned to heaven.

II

JACKSON was not a little awed. Grandpa Skinner was gone, just gone. Here one instant, gone the next. The wire loop of the door was still hooked over the nail. Overhead the mice were scurrying about. A chicken cackled outside. Jackson looked at himself wonderingly in the piece of mirror fastened to the wall. In a way, his face resembled Grandpa Skinner's. It was squarish, with steady eyes and a firm jaw; he hadn't noticed the resemblance before. He wondered if he could live up to the promise of that face. And then he chided himself. Of course he could; he'd had a visitation, hadn't he? There was nothing to worry about. It would all come true. "Katie Jensen," he said dreamily. "Mrs. Katie Whitetop. Mrs. Jackson Whitetop." It was sure good to know there was nothing to worry about. If it was going to happen, then it would. He cast himself happily upon the bed to wait for it.

The bed had seen better days. The old oak frame was held together by a bit of baling wire and a nail here and there, and except for his bemused state Jackson never would have flung himself upon it with such abandoned ecstasy. It uttered a loud scream and collapsed, and Jackson fought clear, rubbing the back of his head where the oak headboard had hit him.

"Well, all right, Grandpa," he muttered. "I can take a hint."

He shaved, put on his best boots, a fresh pair of levis, a clean shirt, and his big hat. Then he took off the hat

because it hurt the bump on his head. Then he put the hat back on because he thought maybe he needed a reminder, for a little while. He roped his buckboard team in the meadow, hitched up and drove south along the valley road, whistling happily.

At the store, old Milo Ferguson was sitting on the porch smoking a cigar furiously. "Out early this morning, Jack," Milo said in the manner of one uttering a truth with hidden meanings. "For you."

"Got considerable to do today." Jackson got out the makings. "Where's Henry?"

"He's gallivanting around getting ready to leave for Salt Lake in the morning. Why?"

"If you see him before I do, tell him I'd like to settle up. Figure on getting married up."

"Don't say?" Milo observed casually, squinting one eye.

"Yep. Figure on getting hitched to Katie Jensen."

To Jackson's surprise, Milo evinced no surprise at all. "H'm; don't say?" Milo observed. "Nice girl."

"Can't kick," admitted Jackson. His cigarette rolled, he pushed back his hat to lick the paper, and the lump on his head twinged him. He blinked guiltily at the cigarette; been a long time since he'd given a thought to the Word of Wisdom, but the throb of his head was surely a sign. Reluctantly, he poured the tobacco from the paper back into the sack, jerked the string tight and put the sack in his shirt pocket. Milo's sharp old eyes missed nothing. "Seeing you," Jackson said, continuing down the road.

"H'm," Milo mused. "So old Moroni told him to marry Katie, huh? Where do I come in?" He couldn't figure it out. Certainly he wouldn't have had that visitation unless it meant something. Heavenly spirits didn't appear to just anybody, especially apostates, for no good reason. . . .

When Jackson pulled in at the Jensen place, Katie and the old hand, Wishful, were crossing the yard toward the stables. Jackson's eye softened. His little wife! Cute as a button in levis, riding boots and a hickory shirt. He waved. "Hi!"

"Hi, yourself," Katie said. Wishful nodded. Jackson hopped over the wheel to follow them.

"Well, Brother Jackson," the bishop's voice said. Jackson looked about for the bishop, and spotted the eyes peering from their dark pouches from beneath the car standing in the yard.

"Looks like you're busy, sir."

"Always busy. Just checking the car over for the trip." There was the metallic clang of a slipping wrench. "You misbegotten son of perdition!" the bishop cried. "Barked my knuckle. What's on your mind?"

Jackson wondered how badly the bishop had barked his knuckle, and whether it was better to wait until he was in a happier mood or take a chance that the pain had humbled him. He took a chance. "Well, sir, I

come to explain about this morning."

"I'm sure it was just a slip of the tongue, Brother Jackson." The bishop sucked at his knuckle. With help the way it was these days, he couldn't afford to stand on dignity. And he needed a man around the place while he was in Salt Lake. Needed another man steady; Wishful was getting old. "Ready to start work?"

"Well, not exactly. Can I have a word with you in private?"

A DROP of oil fell in the bishop's eye. He rubbed the eye with the barked knuckle. "Speak up, Brother Jackson! I haven't got all day!"

"Well, sir," Jackson said reluctantly; it certainly was the wrong psychological moment. "I guess what I said this morning was sort of a premonition. After you'd left, my grandfather appeared to me."

"Premonition? Fiddlesticks! You're not worthy of it."

"I know; but my grandfather appeared to me."

"Appeared to you? Which one?"

"Grandfather Skinner."

"Old Moroni Skinner? What did he say?"

"He told me to marry Katie." The bishop looked at Jackson for a long moment, then began worming from under the car. He got up, slapped the dust from his coveralls, stripped them off, folded them, and set them on a front fender. "Come inside."

The bishop's wife was rolling out biscuits in the kitchen. "Sure a baker today, Jack."

"Going to be," Jackson said.

The bishop began washing up in the sink. Sister Jensen said, "Guess you'll be to the dance tonight, Jack."

"Wouldn't miss it."

"Bring Beulah Hess, I suppose?"

"Don't suppose so, Sister Jensen."

"Don't let that shepherd beat your time, Jack."

"I'm not worried about Ned Holt. I'm taking another girl—Katie."

From the sink came a loud spluttering sound from the bishop. Sister Jensen cut a series of biscuits with the rim of a tin can. "You're pretty sure about it."

"Yes'm."

"Come into my office, Brother Jackson," the bishop said sharply, and led the way, wiping his hands on a towel as he went. The office was off the dining room. The bishop sat in the swivel chair at the roll-top desk and indicated a chair for Jackson. The bishop wiped his face and the back of his neck carefully with the towel, studying Jackson steadily. "Brother Jackson, when did you last pay your tithing?"

"Tithing? I guess you'd have the record of that, sir."

"I've got the records, but you ain't on them."

"Well, I guess I never have paid none, sir."

"And I haven't seen hide nor hair of you at church since you got back. Or before you went, either."

"No, sir."

The bishop surveyed the tobacco tag dangling on the yellow string from Jackson's shirt pocket. "And you don't obey the Word of Wisdom."

"I reckon I've been a little lax," Jackson admitted.

The bishop scrubbed his hair with the damp towel, and began combing. He was feeling master of the situation. This visitation business was a problem. It was the sacred privilege of any worthy Saint to receive a visitation; that was part of the gospel. Trouble was that some abused the privilege. All you had was a person's word for a thing like that. You had to draw a line between the genuine, the hysterical, the wishful and the mistaken. Not to mention the pure fabrications.

"Brother Jackson, I've been bishop out here longer than you've been alive. I've lived the gospel as best I could and I've tried to be worthy. But I've never had a visitation in my life, or so much as a prompting. And there's been some high church officials who never had a visitation, neither. Just why do you suppose an angel would appear to you?"

"It beats me, Bishop."

THE bishop took a small mirror from a drawer, looked at his oil-smudged eye, and rubbed at it with a corner of the towel. "Too many people in this church go around claiming to have talked with spirits. Mind you, I'm not a skeptic. I believe in visitations. It would be the greatest thing in my life if I had one myself. But I don't think everybody's worthy. I'm not. And we don't need 'em like we used to. Joseph said that himself. Or I guess it was Brigham—yes, it was Brigham. After Joseph passed on, Brigham Young got up and told the people there'd been too many visitations and he figured he could get along a spell on what was stored up ahead." "But that was long ago," Jackson pointed out. "Maybe we're running short."

"Take Sister Ormand—a good, devout, God-fearing woman, even if she is a terrible gossip and a terrible pest in fast meeting—I'm speaking confidentially, you understand. Hear her tell it, God Almighty don't have nothing more to do, nothing else on His mind, than to supply her with messengers from heaven to tell her she'd better wear her rubbers because it's going to rain, or to show her where she put down her glasses, or to give her a new block design for a quilt. I wish everybody had Sister Ormand's faith," the bishop said, regarding Jackson pointedly. "But I feel that she's—well, you might say she's prone to exaggerate common sense and a hunch into something bigger. Me, I figure the good Lord's got something else on His mind, what with the world in the shape it's in, than to bother with Sister Ormand's glasses." The bishop put the towel on the desk and the mirror in the drawer. "Brother Jackson, I'm going to speak frank. You're a great disappointment

(Continued on page 36)

CONTINUING THE STORY OF A REMARKABLE COURTSHIP

She was trying not to limp, when Jackson rattled alongside in the buckboard. "Well, hello, Katie Jensen," he said. "Going far?"



Earl Plessen

TEACHER'S PET

BY WILLIAM PORTER

Extracurricular embarrassment of a school-ma'am with two problem children on her hands—both of them in love, one of them full grown



"What's located here?" Ellen said. A voice from the back of the room said loudly, "The Panama Canal!"

SHE saw the smoke coming from the chimney, and she sighed, because she knew George was waiting for her again.

All right, this morning, she told herself. Right this minute, and we'll get it straight. She had to have a little talk with George.

She slid off the pony, looped the reins over the stubby branch of the dead elm tree, and tied them loosely. She gave him an absent-minded pat on the nose and headed for the schoolhouse.

Again she noticed that the sign needed repainting. It was still legible, but fading. It read: PIETY HILL. DISTRICT NO. 3. She wiped her feet on the gunny sack outside the door; it was early March, and the earth was damp and clinging.

George was sweeping up the coal crumbs around the base of the stove when she came in.

"I was thinking maybe we wouldn't need a fire," she said. "It's getting warmer every day."

"It's March," George said. "You got to get the chill off. It's a great month for sickness."

George, from the looks of him, was going to grow to be six feet easy. He was only fifteen, but he didn't have far to go. He made a final flourish with the broom and then upended it against the wall.

"You don't have to start the fire," Ellen told him. "That's one of the things included in my twenty-two dollars a month."

"We got a cow dry, and that cuts down on the milking. I got lots of time," George said. His lower lip stuck out a little. Whenever George talked, he seemed to be prepared for instant contradiction. "I like to do it." He wasn't surly. He just wasn't open to argument.

Ellen took off her hat and coat and went to the back of the room, behind the green folding screen that closed off a corner. This was her private niche. It housed a pitcher and a basin, a small square mirror, a water glass and a bar of soap and a comb. She put her coat on the hanger.

George had been in love with her for several months now. Since Christmas, anyhow. She looked at herself in the mirror and rearranged a comb. George's mother thought it was funny. She was always talking about it, and she teased George about his girl friend at church and at the socials and everywhere. It wasn't funny at all to Ellen.

When she stepped out he was sitting on top of his desk, which was next to the stove. He extended a long arm and pointed. "Have a look," he said.

There was a butterfly sitting on the corner of her desk. It was a big monarch, four inches across the wings, full of the colors of summer, the sunlit bronze and black. George collected butterflies, and he had told her about this one before; it was one of his proudest possessions.

"Good for you," she said. "I'd intended to ask you to bring it, so they all could see. It's lovely. We'll have to be very careful of it."

George looked at the floor for a minute and ran his tongue over his upper lip.

"You can show it to them if you want to," he said, "but—pick it up. Look on the bottom."

There was a piece of paper pasted on the wood. Two strange words, carefully printed in ink: *Danaïis archippus*. And scrawled underneath: *You said you liked pretty things*. Slowly she put it back on the desk.

"George, you don't want to give this to me. I mustn't take it."

"Why?" he said, so quietly she could hardly hear him.

"Because." He was looking helplessly at her. "For Heaven's sake, George—"

SOMEBODY stamped vigorously on the porch outside. Then the door banged open and Annie Lavicek came in. Annie was thirteen, in the seventh, and the smartest of Ellen's nine pupils. Her blond hair was double-braided over her head; she was round-faced, chubby, and sharp-eyed.

"Well, good morning!" Ellen said. She felt a wave of relief, in spite of the better sense that told her she'd missed another chance to straighten George out. "Everybody seems to be early this morning."

"It's practically a half hour until school starts," George said indignantly. "What did you come here for, anyhow?"

"I just came," Annie said. She didn't look at him, she was looking thoughtfully at Ellen.

"Well, of all the crazy things!" George said. He was practically yelling at her.

"I guess I can come to school when I want to." Annie yelled right back at him, then she lowered her voice and suddenly became a lady: "Good morning, Miss Hale."

George slid off his desk and stamped to the back of the room.

"Silliest thing I ever heard of!" he roared.

"What are you so mad for, George Engel? What difference does it make to you what time I come to school?"

"That's about enough," Ellen said.

"So you can just keep quiet!" Annie threw the exclamation at the back of the room, and was promptly a lady again. "I'm sorry, Miss Hale. But it honestly doesn't make any difference to you—" She cocked an eyebrow and added innocently: "Does it?"

"Of course not."

"I didn't think it would," Annie said, and smiled. It wasn't the smile of a little girl. Ellen was mildly shocked. That was the kind of look one woman gives another woman—when they are both thinking about the same man. . . .

During the morning the sun went to work and really warmed things up; Ellen let the fire go out, and even opened a window. Spring floated right through the opening and half drowned them all. Ellen unpinned her watch and laid it on the desk, and the minute the hands hit a quarter of twelve she turned them loose.

"Fifteen minutes extra today," she said, and smiled apologetically. "Just because it's a nice day."

They cleared out in a hurry. Ellen stood up and threw her arms over her head and yawned. Then she noticed George, standing at the back.

"Don't you want to get outside?" she asked him. "On a day like *this*?"

Before he could answer, Annie came in, banging through the door, and (Continued on page 70)

ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID SHAW