



"Sophy," he said, "I have found the lost key of Hynds House"

By the Author of "Slippy McGee"

A WOMAN NAMED SMITH



By MARIE CONWAY OEWLER



To
ELIZABETH HEYWARD OEMLER

Sometimes my Little Girl.

When you were yet an Awful Baby,
And bawled o' bed-time, I said "Maybe
It is not best to spank or scold her:
Suppose a fairy-tale were told her?"
And gave you then, to my undoing,
The wolf Red Riding-Hood pursuing;
Sang Mother Goose her artless rhyming;
Showed Jack the Magic Beanstalk climbing;
Three Little Pigs were so appealing,
You set up sympathetic squealing!
Then, Bitsybet, you had your mother —
You bawled until I told another!

The Awful Baby's gone. Here lately
You bear your little self sedately.
You've shed your rompers; you want dresses
Prinked out with frillies; fluff your tresses;
Delight your daddy, aunts, and mother;
And sisterly set straight your brother.
Your bib-and-tucker days abolished,
Your manners and your nails are polished.
One baby trait remains, thank glory!
You're still a glutton for a story.
Still, Bitsybet, you beg another:
So here's one for you from

YOUR MOTHER.

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[illustrations: *frontispiece key plan*]

CHARACTERS

Sophy: *A woman named Smith.*

Alicia Gaines: *Flower o' the Peach.*

Nicholas Jelnik: *Peacocks and Ivory.*

Doctor Richard Geddes: *Cœur-de-Lion.*

The Author: *Himself.*

The Secretary: *A Pleasant Person.*

Miss Emmeline Phelps-Parsons: *of Boston, Massachusetts.*

Miss Martha Hopkins: *"Clothed in White Samite."*

Judge Gatchell: *The Law.*

Schmetz and Riedriech: *Workmen and Visionaries.*

The Jinnee: *A Son of the Prophet.*

Sophonisba Scarlett: *"The Scarlett Witch."*

The Hynds of Hynds House.

Paying Guests.

The People of Hynds ville, South Carolina.

Mary Magdalen; Queen-of-Sheeba; Fernolia: *Important Persons.*

Boris: *A Russian Wolfhound.*

The Black Family: *A Witch's Cat's Kittens.*

Beautiful Dog: *Last but not Least.*

A WOMAN NAMED SMITH

CHAPTER I

THE SCARLETT WITCH DEPARTS

If it had been humanly possible for Great-Aunt Sophronisba Scarlett to lug her place in Hyndsville, South Carolina, along with her into the next world, plump it squarely in the middle of the Elysian Fields, plaster it over with "No Trespassing" signs, and then settle herself down to a blissful eternity of serving writs upon the angels for flying over her fences without permission, and setting the saved by the ears in general, she would have done so and felt that heaven was almost as desirable a place as South Carolina. But as even she couldn't impose her will upon the next world, and there was nobody in this one she hated less than she did me—possibly because she had never laid eyes on me—she willed me Hynds House and what was left of the Hynds fortune; tying this string to her bequest: I must occupy Hynds House within six months, and I couldn't rent it, or attempt to sell it, without forfeiture of the entire estate.

I can fancy the ancient beldam sniggering sardonically the while she figured to herself the chagrined astonishment, the helpless wrath, of her watchfully waiting neighbors, when they should discover that historic Hynds House, dating from the beginning of things Carolinian, had passed into the unpedigreed hands of a woman named Smith. I can fancy her balefully exact perception of the attitude so radically conservative a community must needs assume toward such an intruder as myself, foisted upon it, so to speak, by an enemy who never failed to turn the trick.

Because I'm not a Hynds, at all. Great Aunt Sophronisba was my aunt not by blood but by marriage; she having, when she was no longer what is known as a spring chicken, met my Great-Uncle

Johnny Scarlett and scandalized all Hyndsville by marrying him out of hand.

I have heard that she was insanely in love with him, and I believe it; nothing short of an over-mastering passion could have induced one of the haughty Hynds to marry a person with such family connections as his. For my father, George Smith, was a ruddy English ship-chandler who pitched upon Boston for a home, and lived with his family in the rooms above his shop; and my grandmother Smith dropped her "aitches" with the cheerful ease of one to the manner born, bless her stout old Cockney heart! I can remember her hearing me my spelling-lesson of a night, her spectacles far down on her old button of a nose, her white curls bobbing from under her cap.

"What! Carn't spell 'saloon'? Listen, then, Miss: There's a hess and a hay and a hell and two hoes and a henn! Now, then, d 'ye spell it!"

Not that Mrs. Johnny ever accepted us. It was borne in upon the Smiths that undesirable in-laws are outlaws. This despite the fact that my mother's pink-and-white English face was a gentler copy of what her uncle's had been in his youth; and that when I came along, some years after the dear old man's death, I was named Sophronisba at Mrs. Johnny's urgent request.

After Great-Uncle Johnny died, as if the last tie which bound her to ordinary humanity had snapped, his widow retired into a seclusion from which she emerged only to sue somebody. She said the world was being turned topsyturvy by people who were allowed to misbehave to their betters, and who needed to be taught a lesson and their proper place; and that so long as she retained her faculties, she would do her duty in that respect, please God!

She did her duty so well in that respect that the Hynds fortune, which even civil war and reconstruction hadn't been able altogether to wreck, dwindled to a mere fifteen thousand dollars; and she wasn't on speaking terms with anybody but Judge Gatchell, her lawyer. She would have quarreled with him, too, had she dared.

To the minister, who bearded her for her soul's sake every now and then, she spoke in words brief and curt:

"You here again? Wanted to see me, hey? Well, you've done it. Now get out!"

And in the meantime the years passed and my own immediate family passed with them; but still the gaunt old woman lived on in her gaunt old house, becoming in time a myth to me, and to Hyndsville as well; where they referred to her, succinctly, as "the Scarlet Witch." I heard from her directly only once, and that was the year she sent me a red flannel petticoat for a Christmas present. After that, as if she'd done her worst, she ignored me altogether.

My mother had wanted me to be a school-teacher, in her eyes the acme of respectability. But as it happens, there are two things I wouldn't be: one's a school-teacher, the other a minister's wife. If I had to marry the average minister, I should infallibly hate all church-goers; if I had to teach the average school-child and wrestle with the average school-board, I should end by burning joss-sticks to Herod.

So I disappointed my mother by becoming a typist. After her death I secured a foothold in a New York house—I'd always wanted to live in New York—and went up, step by step, from what may be called a rookie in the outside office, to private secretary to the Head. And I'd been a business woman for all of seventeen years when Great-Aunt Sophronisba Scarlett departed at the age of ninety-eight years and eleven months, and willed that I should take up my life in the house where she had dropped hers.

"Oh, Sophy!" cried Alicia Gaines, the one person in the world who didn't call me Miss Smith. "Oh, Sophy, it's like a fairy-story come true! Think of falling heir to an old, old, old lady's old, old, old house, in South Carolina! I hope there's a big old door with a fan-light, and a Greeky front with white pillars, and a big old hall, and a big old garden—"

"And an old stove that smokes and old windows that rattle and an old roof that leaks, and maybe big, big old rats that squeak o' nights," I said darkly. For the first rapture of the astonishing news was beginning to wear thin, and doubt was appearing in spots.

"Sophy Smith! Why, if such a wonderful, beautiful, unexpected thing had happened to *me*—" Alicia's blue eyes misted. I have

known her since the day she was born, next door to us in Boston, and she is the only person I have ever seen who can cry and look pretty while she's doing it; also, she can cry and laugh at the same time, being Irish. Some foolish people, who have been deceived by Alicia Gaines's baby stare and complexion, have said she hasn't sense enough to get in out of a shower of rain. This is, of course, a libel. But what's the odds, when every male being in sight would rush to her aid with an umbrella?

After her mother's death I fell heir to Alicia, who, like me, was an only child, and without relatives. Lately, I'd gotten her into our filing-department. She didn't belong in a business office, she whose proper background should have been an adoring husband and the latest thing in pink-and-white babies.

"But somebody's got to think of stoves and roofs and rats and such, or there'd be no living in any old house," I reminded her, practically. "My dear girl, don't you realize that this thing isn't all beer and skittles?"

Alicia wrinkled her white forehead.

"Consider me, a hardy late-summer plant forced to uproot and transplant myself to a soil which may not in the least agree with me. Why, this means changing all my fixed habits, to trot off to live in an old house that is probably haunted by the cross-grained ghost of a lady of ninety-nine!"

"If I were a ghost, you'd be the very last person on earth I'd want to tackle, Sophy," remarked Alicia, dimpling. "And as for that new soil, why, you'll bloom in it! You – well, Sophy dear, up to now you have been root-bound; you've never had a chance to grow, much less to blossom. Now you can do both."

I who was confidential secretary to the Head, looked at the girl who was admittedly the worst file-clerk on record; and she looked back at me, nodding her bright head with young wisdom.

"I hope," she said, wistfully, "that there'll be all sorts of lovely things in your house, Sophy, – old mirrors, old books, old pictures, old furniture, old china. Lord send you'll find an attic! All my life I've day-dreamed of finding an attic that's been shut up and forgotten for ages and ages, and discovering all sorts of lovely things in all

sorts of hiding-places. When I think my day-dream may come true for you, Sophy, it almost reconciles me to the pain of parting from you; though what on earth I'm to do without you, goodness only knows!" She was sitting on my bed, kimonoed, slippers, and braided. And now she looked at me with a suddenly quivering chin.

"Alicia," said I, "ever since I discovered that there's no mistake about that lawyer's letter—that Hynds House is unaccountably, but undoubtedly mine and I've got to live in it if I want to keep it—it has been borne in upon me that you are just about the worst file-clerk on earth. You're a navy-blue failure in a business office. Business isn't your *motif*. Now, will you resign the job you fill execrably, and accept one you can fill beyond all praise—come South with me, share half-and-half whatever comes, and help make that old house a happy home for us both?"

"Don't joke." Her lips went white. "Please, please, Sophy dear, don't joke like that! I—well, I just couldn't bear it."

"I never joke," I said indignantly. "You little goose, did you imagine for one minute that I contemplated leaving you here by yourself, any more than I contemplate going down there by myself, if I can help it? Stop to think for a moment, Alicia. You have been like a little sister to me, ever since you were born. And—I'm alone, except for you—and not in my first youth—and not beautiful—and not gifted."

At that she hurled herself off my bed and cried upon my shoulder, with her slim arms around my neck. Those young arms were beginning to make me feel wistful. If things had been different—if I had been lovely like the Scarletts, instead of looking like the Smiths—there might have been—

Well, I don't look like the Scarletts; so there wasn't. The best I could do was to drop a kiss on Alicia's forehead, where the bright young hair begins to break into curls.

And that is how, neither of us having the faintest notion of what was in store for us, Alicia Gaines and I turned our backs upon New York and set our faces toward Hynds House.