

*Little  
Blue Hat*



***Martha  
Ostenso***

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# Little Blue Hat

*Can a new personality be put on like clothes?  
Jenny wondered, as she decided to try a thrilling  
experiment*

By MARTHA OSTENSO

S HE had just known there was something, Jenny triumphed bitterly—something different about Al. She had known it when he had stayed in the city instead of coming home from commencement two days ago with his parents and herself. She had known it when practically all Carthia gathered at the depot this afternoon to welcome him. Then, later, during the chicken dinner his mother had prepared for him, while Brita and Karl Fosberg beamed proudly upon their son—the greatest half-back in the history of intercollegiate football—Jenny had been doubly sure of it because of Al’s evasive look whenever his father referred to the handsome place awaiting him in the Fosberg Lumber and Supplies Company.

And now here they were, she and Al, the beauty of the summer evening on the river bank falling into ruins about them! Tree shadows lay flat and painted upon the darkening, rosy glass of the river; red-winged blackbirds made the air liquid with song, and hundreds of cliff swallows wove swift magic against the sky; but to Jenny all was wintry disillusionment.

“I had hoped,” said Al in loud and biting reproach, “that you would understand! That was why I wanted to tell you about it first—before I spoke to the folks.”

“Understand?” Jenny echoed derisively, wishing for the first time that she need not tilt back her head to glare up into his light-lashed blue eyes, and wishing also that she could keep her mind off his blond curly hair that was still damp from his shower. “If there’s anything I don’t understand, I’d like you to point it out to me. You stayed in the city on the pretext of getting this big contract for your father’s business. All right—you got it, and your father’s tickled to death, thinking that it’s going to start you off with a bang

in Fosberg and Company, so Karl can begin to think of retiring. But what you really did was to lap up a lot of flattering talk about yourself, and what a hit you'd make in St. James Street."

"Flattering?" Al's tone was dangerous, and as he towered above her she perceived why his shoulders had spelled doom, season after football season, to every opposing team. She braced herself, swept back her short, straight black hair, and made her eyes flash undaunted. "Just what do you mean by 'flattering'?"

Jenny stamped her sensibly-heeled shoe into the sand, regrettably without sound effect.

"You know quite well what I mean. This man Erlich made you think you're too good for Carthia."

"All right," Al admitted readily. "Maybe I am. You heard mother apologise at dinner to-day for getting a 'hired girl.' A hired girl. My lord. That's just the size of Carthia. Dad had to force her to get somebody to 'wash up,' because it was a disgrace for the Fosbergs not to have a servant when the yard is taking in almost ten thousand a year! You heard that, didn't you?"

"Yes, I heard it. And I know your mother would rather do her own work, because she's well, and she has always done it. What's wrong with that?"

Al looked at her in exasperation. "What's wrong with it? Now you're just being"—he fumbled, and found the word—"perverse. I told you that's just the size of this town, and if I stay here I'll be that size. Carthia is one-horse, and it'll never——"

"It's not one-horse! Since you were born it has almost doubled in size."

"Oh I'm not as big as that!" said Al.

Jenny refused to laugh.

"And what's more," she went on determinedly, "small towns need young blood like you to make them grow. If all the young men go to cities and lose themselves——"

"Lose themselves?" Al caught up the words in outrage. "What do you mean by that? I don't intend to lose myself. Not with the introductions I've got to people in the city—people who count. It isn't as if they hadn't heard of me already."

“Oh!” Jenny turned upon him, small but intensely blazing. “So that’s what you’re depending on—your football fame. I was afraid all this hero business would go to your head after a while. You’re a bigger fool than I ever thought you were, Al Fosberg!”

His gaze narrowed. “So—you’ve always thought me a fool, eh?”

“I didn’t say that. This man Erlich has talked you into this idea—got you thinking all you have to do is dawn on St. James Street or some place, and they’ll shower money on you.”

“HE didn’t talk me into it. I’ve had the idea for a long time. He’s recommending me to a firm who can use me to sell their bonds, but——”

“What do you know about bonds?”

Al dug at his pockets, and set his teeth. “I don’t happen to know much, but I can learn, can’t I? The place is full of rich women who’d be flattered to death to have their affairs handled by——” He paused, surprised to find himself dangling on a rhetorical limb.

“By big, handsome brutes like you, I suppose!” Jenny supplied deftly. “Erlich told you that, didn’t he? He told you just how you could use those rich women so that you’d be a big hit in no time. That’s your idea. And it makes me laugh.”

Al was instantly pained. “Well, what’s wrong with the idea?”

“Everything’s wrong with it,” she said vehemently. “You’re not that sort, for one thing. If you stayed here long enough to learn something about business——”

His intruding laugh was hollow. How could he ever expect Jenny to understand such things, anyhow? “If I stayed here long enough, I’d become just like the rest of the yokels. You simply don’t get the idea, Jenny. I’ve got to capitalise on what I’ve got—right now, before they forget all about me.”

“And what have you got?” She placed her hands on her slight hips and deliberately measured his six-foot-two with a disdainful dark eye. “You’ve got a tremendous opinion of yourself, an idea that a whole city is palpitating to welcome you, a vague letter of recommendation to a man in St. James Street, and five hundred dollars in the bank which your father gave you when you turned twenty-one, two years ago.” Her mood changed and became almost tearful. “Al—you aren’t that kind. I know it—inside myself.

You're too generous, too honest, too decent. Right now you're dazzled by the prospect of the city and big money. You want to get away from us!"

"Us? Didn't I say," Al blustered, "that I wanted you to marry me and come along?"

"Come along!" Jenny laughed at the sad naivete of it. "Oh, Al! Why not be honest? You don't really want me to come along—in my fourteen-dollar clothes—and my smalltown ways——"

"Stop talking like that!" Al cried desperately, and caught her into his arms. For a moment, hoping against hope that all was well, Jenny let him kiss her, but then reality interposed itself and she drew away, trembling and looking up at him with searching, stricken eyes.

"You must answer me, Al! I wouldn't be any asset, would I?"

She waited breathlessly and watched him redden with indignation.

"It's not—it's not that, Jenny! You could be dressed up . . ."

Tears filled Jenny's eyes. She knew suddenly that right up to this very moment a dim hope of compromise between them had lurked in her mind—she might actually have gone with him, got a job of some kind herself to help out until he would be making enough. But in five small, crushing words, he had failed her!

"Oh!" she cried. "Go back to Montreal and stay there, I never want to see you again!"

She flew away up the bank and along the path, and Al, stumbling futilely after her, conceived for the first time in his life a poetic notion: Jenny was like a swallow cutting a glinting arc across the evening light. But suddenly he caught himself up in mortification. What was he doing, pursuing a girl who thought what Jenny evidently thought of him, a girl who would not encourage him to make the most of himself, who, in fact, sought to belittle him in his own esteem? He would go his way alone, proudly, unaided . . .

In the small privacy of her own room at home, Jenny wept. She thought of herself unsparingly, of her unimportance, and of Al as one forever lost to her because she was not important enough.

It had always been a wonder to Carthia that she, little Jenny Weld who taught history and geography in the public school, and who was so plain in her dress that her friends called her "Jenny Wren," should have held the reins on the heart of the mighty and spectacular Albert Fosberg. But then, very few knew the circumstances. Since bells rang and whistles blew at a

grand local festival, when she and Al had been respectively three and six years old, Jenny had been Al's "girl." She had become Al's "girl" then because in an exuberance of spirits he had punched her in the eye and Jenny, too surprised and indignant to do anything else, had retaliated by ramming her head into his small middle and knocking the wind completely out of him. Al's awe of Jenny had never diminished since that day—not even during his college career while Jenny taught history and geography to restless youngsters in the fourth grade.

But what, Jenny asked desolately, did all that matter now?

She left Carthia the next day to take charge of a girls' camp on one of the lakes to the north. She did not see Al before she went and she did not telephone him. She waited, her mind spinning with doubt and fear, for Al to call her. When at last she powdered her nose in the small bathroom of her parents' house and mopped her eyes with a hand towel, she looked bleakly at herself and admitted the truth: Al wanted to go off to the city without her!

**A**T the girls' camp during the summer she heard nothing of him except when Doctor Meade, who came now and then to check the health of the campers, brought her the news that Al Fosberg had gone to Montreal and had straightway formed an excellent connection. Even Karl and Brita, wounded at first by his desertion of the lumber yard, seemed delighted now with the progress he was making.

Jenny smiled bravely at Doctor Meade, told him she had known Al would make good, then crept into her tent and covered her head with her pillow and sobbed.

In September she went drearily back to teaching the altitude of Mount Everest and the date of the Battle of Waterloo to fourteen-year-olds who would, the day after examinations, promptly forget both. Without Al life had become a drab void. Her gaiety at Carthia parties deceived no one who knew her. Presently she became aware with intense humiliation that people discreetly refrained from mentioning Al in her presence.

**B**UT at Dora Williams' Hallowe'en party, Stubby Renseler, who was a little obtuse, anyhow, forgot himself and merrily read aloud excerpts from Al's last letter in which he referred with titillating obliqueness, with airy negligence, to house parties, champagne,

glittering women, polo and private yachts. Jenny felt ill. She went home early and to bed.

It was the next morning, while she was listlessly thumbing through an atlas during study period and looking with melancholy familiarity at the colored maps of the world she had never seen, that the savage resolution sprang full-fledged out of her brain. By dint of rigid economy, stern rejection of all small luxuries, she could save enough out of her salary during the school term to go on that tour of Europe next summer with the four high-school teachers who had been planning their trip for several years.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Misses Gerald, Finesilver, Drogseth, Burns and Weld had viewed the wonders of Ireland, Scotland, England, Germany, Italy and France, and now, after six weeks, they were about to entrain at Paris for Cherbourg and home. The Misses Gerald, Finesilver, Drogseth and Burns had had a perfectly gorgeous time; they had left their mark upon the Blarney Stone, the Coliseum, the Arc de Triomphe. They were all over forty—and laughingly admitted it. But Jenny Weld had not had a perfectly gorgeous time because, not over twenty-one, she had not cared whether or not she left her mark upon the Blarney Stone or upon any of the other symbols of an older culture.

It was for these pointed reasons that she informed her fellow travellers at the last minute that she intended to remain another week in Paris to study certain antique maps of the world—which she had no confidence even existed—in the Louvre.

Before the boat train left Paris, she had an hour to saunter through by-streets off the Champs Elysees which the eagle-eyed four had overlooked. It was on one of these—and she would never recall the name of it—that she saw in a shop window the little blue hat.

Rapidly she converted francs into dollars, and gasped to discover that, no matter how you wore it, the hat would still cost twenty-two fifty. But it was a hat to end all hats! After further calculation, she found that she would barely reach home with a mere night's stop in Montreal, if the little blue hat were indeed to be hers. But it already was hers! It beckoned to her with gay recognition, with a gallant salute of its ridiculous feather, through the window of the shop.



The hat, when she stepped from the gangway to the deck, was not only a sensation, she felt definitely, it was a crisis. The sophisticated, older-looking man in careless tweeds, lounging at the rail, noticed it; noticed, no doubt, how it exposed her lofty clear forehead, her widow's peak, and yet contrived with its glossy coq to ambuscade her left eye. Also, the tall, younger man, whose clothes bespoke Bond Street, stared with frank, with piquing interest.

It began with the hat. It was too bad, she thought, that she could not wear it every minute she was out of the cabin which she shared with a stone-deaf, elderly dragon from Cobourg. She lived up to the hat, however. She did subtle things to her face, to her hair. She made much of her two evening gowns by stitching them in at her already trivial waistline. The hat, its daring, its nonchalance, accompanied her in spirit even while she was dancing—and dancing had always been Jenny's chief accomplishment, even in her plain days, before the hat.

On the second night out, Tweeds—his name turned out, disappointingly, to be Smith—bent solemnly over Jenny at the rail, in the moonlight. She had something—he couldn't name it—but he knew he had been seeking it all his life. And his life had been an unhappy one. It's like that in England—abominably hard to get a divorce . . .

After her sad and rather frightened adieu to Tweeds, who showed a tendency to become masterful, Jenny kept to the ladies' writing-room for half a day of thought. She emerged with the conviction that romance, if she would only accept it, was immediately under her nose, small though her nose was. She emerged to run squarely into Bond Street, who had been seeking her, he said, from stem to stern.

Bond Street—he had been grotesquely christened Beaufort and his last name was Peek—was unmarried, at least by his own avowal. He wanted to talk to her, seriously.

Beaufort Peek talked to her seriously for three days, or almost until the ship raised Father Point. The burden of his conversation, however, was Beaufort Peek, and after some forty-eight hours of it Jenny became aware that it was indeed a burden.

All of which led up to the moment when, in the moonlit lee of a lifeboat, Beaufort dramatically prepared to kiss Jenny Weld; but at the same moment it occurred to Jenny that kissing was no doubt just another of his accomplishments, and that even accomplishments can become a little shopworn.

It was with a sense of miserable disillusionment that she escaped to her cabin, there to surrender herself wretchedly to the fact that she was still in love with Al Fosberg and always would be.

But the little blue hat restored her courage while she stood, elegantly aloof, watching the Customs inspector prod about at the Parfum Mechant and the pink garters she had bought in Paris. The little blue hat enabled her to gaze up in arch and smiling farewell at both Tweeds and Bond Street when they came by, one at a time.

Three minutes later she passed through the Customs gate and met the frozen blue eyes of Al Fosberg.

“Why, Al! What——”

“Your father wired me to meet the boat,” he replied severely. He was eyeing her hat—was it with surprise, with disapproval, with admiration? Her heart pounded in delicious uncertainty. “He didn’t think you should be allowed to run around Montreal alone——”

“Dad had his nerve!” Jenny flared. “It was terribly kind of you to come, of course—but quite unnecessary!” She glanced about haughtily at the porter’s truck which bore her three striped linen travelling cases. “If you’ll just take me to a taxi I can get to my hotel. There’s nothing you can——”

“Sorry,” Al retorted. “I promised to see you to an hotel and take you to your train in the morning. What’s more, you’re to dine with me to-night, whether you like it or not. I have my instructions.”

In the cab on the way to the hotel—a genteel one, for ladies—Al said very little. But Jenny was flippantly gay. It was really too precious of Al to have met the boat, when he must have been so busy!

As she talked she noticed with a vague shock that he was wearing the same blue serge suit he had worn on the night of their quarrel, last summer. But that probably meant nothing at all.

“I’ll call for you at seven,” said Al, after she had registered. “We’ll go to the Ritz, if that’s all right with you.”

“The Ritz?” said Jenny brightly. “Splendid. Until seven, then?”

L bowed and turned to go, when all at once she was filled with panic. Without the hat she could never be this new self—not in the company of Al Fosberg!

**A** “Oh, wait a minute, Al! I just thought. There’s a little place I heard of on the boat—what is it, anyhow?” She placed a finger to her lip. “Oh, dear—it’s on—St. Catherine Street, I think. Couldn’t we go there instead? They tell your fortune.”

The tea-room was enchanting, Jenny thought. The lights were the proper shade of amber to set off her hat in dark and glossy mystery.

Al was handsome in an Oxford grey, double-breasted suit, with maroon tie and maroon handkerchief correctly peeping forth. He was the debonair, the perfect host—as if they had met for the first time only to-day. And because she knew that he belonged to the city now while she was still little Jenny Weld of Carthia and the hat only a masquerade, she forced herself to smile dazzlingly and match every story of his colorful adventures with tales of her own daring on her travels.

“And this fellow loafing around at the dock to-day,” Al teased, smiling, as he lighted a cigarette, “who was he?”

Jenny’s laugh bubbled. “Oh, you mean Beaufort! He’s really a dear. He had to go directly out of town to-day to some relatives, but he telephoned me this afternoon and urged me to stay over a few days.”

For more than an hour Jenny exerted herself in bettering any story he had to tell, remembering always to keep the coq feather drooped at just the right angle over her left eye. Suddenly she felt terribly tired and recalled that she must take a train to-morrow for Carthia—for oblivion.

The catastrophe occurred next morning when Jenny was getting into the taxicab in front of the hotel. A shrewd wind, with rain in it, nipped the little blue hat from her head and sent it sailing far out into the street where, before her horrified eyes, it was instantly demolished beneath the wheels of a speeding cab.

There was no time for tears. Her fine, straight hair, whipped about in the wind, became a thing not of beauty. And although she frantically combed it out on the way to the station, she knew that the moment she got out of the cab it would be hopelessly tossed again, and not for worlds would she permit Al Fosberg to see her like this!

He was at the train gate, but he was bending over something—she did not pause to learn what—and so he did not see her as she flashed through the gate, the porter following her.

JENNY found her seat, flung herself into it, and covered her face with her hands. She was hot and cold all over, too wretched even to cry. The train started. Started, she told herself abjectly, for the end of everything. She was brought erect by a rough movement, a crude commotion directly before her.

“Why didn’t you make that porter stow your stuff under the seat?” Al demanded. “I’d like to sit down.”

She stared, saw him kick her nice luggage beneath the Pullman seat. Breathing hard, Al placed himself defiantly opposite her.

“You went through that gate like a streak o’ light!” he said. “What was the idea?”

Jenny, remembering her loss, put her hands to her head. She looked, she knew, perfectly awful.

“I—I almost missed the train,” she quavered. “I saw you—bending over something near the gate when I came through, but I hadn’t time to——”

“The strap on my suitcase broke,” Al scowled, “and I didn’t have a lock on the blame thing. I had to tie it.”

“Your suitcase? But what—where are you going, Al?”

“Listen here,” he said with force, “you know darn well where I’m going! I spent all last night thinking about it—after that great show I put on for you yesterday.”

“Show?” Jenny sank back weakly.

“Yes. Don’t try to tell me you didn’t see through it. I hate this place,” he exploded. “I’ve just barely made a living out of it—and one new suit of clothes! That contract I got for dad before I left made more money than I could make in the city in five years. And it put Carthia on the map. I was a fool to leave. Any people I’ve met here have just tolerated me because they think I’m some kind of a freak. They don’t want to talk business with me—they’d rather talk football, and how I made that touchdown against Varsity in the last minute of the game. But—but——”

She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “But—what, Al?”

His eyes were a hot, tortured blue. “Well—that isn’t my real reason for hopping this train, Jenny. I’d have done it long ago if it hadn’t been for you.”

“Me?”

“You know what I mean. You remember how you sneered at me last year—the last time you talked to me. I wanted to show you. So I stuck it out for a whole year. And then last night I put on a show for you—exaggerated everything—even when I knew I wasn’t putting it over. The worst of it is I haven’t been able to forget you for a minute—not for a minute in——”

“Oh, Al!” Jenny bent forward.

“Why didn’t you speak to me just now, when you saw me at the gate?” Al demanded, seizing her arms and drawing her over to him. “Is this guy I saw yesterday—the one in the grey flannels—is he something important in your young life?”

Jenny raised wet, brilliant eyes. “Don’t be silly! He was—he was just my part of the show, Al. But—didn’t you notice? I haven’t got my hat!”

“What hat?” asked Al.

## THE END

### TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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A cover has been created for this ebook.

[The end of *Little Blue Hat* by Martha Ostenso]