

THE BLYTHE GIRLS  
*Rose's*  
GREAT PROBLEM

by

LAURA LEE HOPE

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*Title:* Rose's Great Problem

*Date of first publication:* 1925

*Author:* Elizabeth M. Duffield Ward (as Laura Lee Hope)

*Date first posted:* Sep. 29, 2022

*Date last updated:* Sep. 29, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220966

This eBook was produced by: Stephen Hutcheson, Pat McCoy & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

THE BLYTHE GIRLS  
ROSE'S GREAT PROBLEM

OR

FACE TO FACE WITH A CRISIS

BY  
LAURA LEE HOPE

Author of "The Blythe Girls Series," "The Outdoor  
Girls Series," Etc.



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Printed in U. S. A.

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The Blythe Girls:  
Rose's Great Problem

# CHAPTER I

## HOMeward BOUND

“ROSE BLYTHE, if you don’t sit still, I’ll go out on the platform. You give me the fidgets!”

Margy Blythe regarded the back of her animated younger sister with a frowning gaze. It was half an hour since they had left the Pennsylvania Station in New York, outward bound on Long Island, and during that time Margy was quite sure Rose had not been still for a moment. Vivid and lovely was Rose with the bobbed golden hair and the hat that matched the blue of her eyes. To be sure, she wore a heavy winter coat, with the fur collar drawn well up about her piquant chin, but this in no wise hid her prettiness. Small wonder that, with bounding health and all the enthusiasms of youth, Rose found it hard to sit quietly and demurely in her seat, as any well-behaved young person should do. Besides—they were homeward bound!

“Don’t lecture me to-day, Margy Blythe,” said the younger girl. She half turned in her seat and wrinkled an impertinent nose at her sister. “I shan’t sit still if I don’t feel like it. Besides, Joe said I could do anything I wanted to-day. Didn’t you, Mr. Strainer Man?”

She looked coaxingly at the young fellow in the seat beside her. The latter grinned good-naturedly.

“Anything you say, Posie,” he agreed.

Lloyd Roberts, sitting beside Margy, chuckled enjoyably.

“Got him where you want him, eh, Rose?” he teased the girl in the blue hat. “To hear that boy talk you would never guess that he had toted pianos on his stalwart shoulders—”

“How many?” giggled Rose, as she dipped down in the candy box that Joe Morris had thoughtfully provided. “You talk as if he were an elephant or something. Here, Joe, have a candy!”

“You wound my feelings, then offer me a bribe,” complained Joe.

“I notice you took the biggest one in the box, just the same,” retorted Rose unfeelingly. “Anyway,” she added, as she passed the box of sweets back to Margy and Lloyd, “Joe never moved pianos, as you very well know. All he ever did was to stand around and boss the men who did the real work. Didn’t you, Strainer Man?”

“Now, you make me feel like a loafer!” protested Joe, mournfully munching on his candy.

“Poor Strainer Man!” murmured Rose, flashing him an impudent side glance. “Is him very much abused?”

Joe regarded her, one eyebrow quizzically upraised.

“I wish you would leave off calling me that fool name,” he said. “‘Strainer Man.’ Makes me feel like a tin can peddler!”

“I can’t help it. Really, Joe!” Rose assured him earnestly. “Why, every time I think of you, I see you just as you looked the first day we moved into the flat, standing there, with our old leaky strainer in your hand, holding it so tenderly—oh, please excuse me, Joe. I didn’t mean to laugh—truly I didn’t——”

While the two in the seat behind joined in Rose’s infectious merriment, Joe Morris regarded his tormentor with severity.

“Young lady, some day I am going to forget that you are nearly grown up,” he threatened, “and chastise you, as you deserve!”

“Oh, Joe,” said Rose, instantly serious and regarding him with mournful eyes, “I could forgive the threat, but never that phrase, ‘nearly grown up.’ I had so flattered myself it was ‘quite’.”

“You flattered yourself, all right!” Joe assured her, with emphasis, and then it was her turn to feign offense and gaze abstractedly from the window.

Behind them Lloyd Roberts turned to Margy with a chuckle.

“Rose and Joe are better than a circus,” he said. “Life is never dull when they are around to stage a good scrap.”

Margy smiled and nodded.

“Quite a contrast to—those two.” She gestured toward an absorbed young couple in a seat directly across the aisle from them. The two were deep in a conversation that seemed to render them oblivious of everything and everybody about them. “I don’t believe they ever quarrel about anything.”



“They seem to understand each other pretty well,” agreed Lloyd. “For all Hugh is a lawyer and prides himself upon being practical, I shouldn’t wonder if there is a good deal of the artist about him.”

“There’s a good deal of everything nice about Hugh,” returned Margy, and Lloyd looked surprised at her warmth.

“Like him as much as all that?” he asked. Margy met his teasing gaze frankly.

“Doesn’t everybody like Hugh?” she asked.

“I do, for one,” returned the young fellow, and lapsed into silence.

Meanwhile, the two under discussion were aroused from their absorbing conversation by the stopping of the train at a station.

Helen Blythe looked up, caught Margy’s gaze upon her and smiled.

“We’ll soon be there, now,” she said, and though Margy could not catch the words, she understood by the motion of her lips, and nodded.

Hugh Draper, looking at Helen, caught the faraway look in her eyes and thought he understood.

“Is it going to be a little hard, going home?” he asked gently. “Stir up old memories—and things like that?”

“Rather,” said Helen, and was silent so long that Hugh began to think he might have offended her in some way. Presently she turned to him, and, though her lips were tremulous, her eyes smiled.

“I suppose I shouldn’t miss mother so after all this time,” she said. “Especially since there isn’t a minute of the day when I don’t feel that she is with me, guiding me and helping me. But sometimes I would give everything I have—or am likely to have—just to touch her hand.”

“I know,” said Hugh, understandingly, and there fell a deep silence between them while the train rushed onward over shining rails bringing them ever nearer their destination.

The Blythe girls, accompanied by the three young fellows from the city whom they knew and liked best, were returning “home” for a short visit.

Their destination was Riverdale, a small Long Island town, where they had lived so happily until the death of their beloved parents, two years before this story opens.

Since it was now Saturday morning and Margy and Rose must return to the city in time to take up their work early Monday morning, their stay in Riverdale must necessarily be short.

The three sisters were to stay with Miss Jessica Jellicoe, a former neighbor of theirs, while the boys were to put up at the one hotel in town.

“It isn’t much of a hotel,” Rose had warned them, when they were making preparations for the trip. “But I don’t imagine you will have to take many meals there. Dear old Miss Jessica is the soul of hospitality and a marvelous cook. Just wait till you taste her flapjacks!”

“Um-yum, I’m for Miss Jellicoe, right from the start!” Joe had exclaimed, already eating flapjacks in imagination. “She won’t have a chance to overlook little Joe, not if he knows it!”

The season was late fall and there had already been a heavier fall of snow than is usual for that time of year. Only two days before there had been a rather severe snowstorm. The city streets had been quickly cleared of the fleecy covering, but the fields and roads of the country were still buried deep beneath it.

There would be good nutting in the woods, and the girls had planned to spend part of their time gathering the fruit of the trees.

“Maybe Miss Jessica will make us a nut cake, if we shell the nuts for her,” Helen had suggested, to which the boys had replied in chorus:

“Just watch us!”

Now they were drawing into the station at Riverdale, the dear familiar station, by whose little stucco, red-roofed waiting room their parents had stood so many times. Helen could almost see her mother, her slender, graceful, fair-haired mother, and her jolly, laughing father, waving to them, welcoming them home.

The train came to a grinding standstill and the vision faded as all such visions must fade, leaving nothing but a simple little station in a rural setting, a few, wintry looking persons waiting for the train and a vista beyond of bare trees and snow-covered houses.

“Which way?” asked Joe Morris. He had made his peace with Rose. The latter was rosy-cheeked and laughing and seemed ready for whatever fun might come her way.

“We turn to the right and follow the road,” said Helen, pulling her coat collar up tight about her throat.

“Then we keep on walking, and when our noses begin to feel frostbitten we know we are there,” added Rose, the irrepressible. “Joe Morris, if you drop that box of candy, I will never forgive you. It’s half full yet.”

“Stop squabbling and come on,” cried Margy, resolutely leading the way with Lloyd Roberts. “My feet are getting cold.”

“Sure it isn’t your nose?” asked Joe hopefully, and they laughed at him. “I was thinking of Miss Jessica’s flapjacks,” he explained. “My, but this weather does give a fellow an appetite!”

“I don’t need the weather to give me one,” laughed Hugh.

“You said it!” Lloyd Roberts agreed fervently. “Mine is of the ever-blooming variety!”

They passed through the main part of the town, which seemed very busy and bustling, considering the size of it, and soon found themselves out upon the open road.

It was a pretty road, and the woods on each side of it were so wild and picturesque that the boys were tempted to explore them, even before the sampling of Miss Jellicoe’s flapjacks.

“Ought to get plenty of nuts in these woods for any number of cakes,” observed Joe, as they turned a sharp bend in the road. “I vote we take a few handfuls to Miss Jessica, just as a gentle hint——”

“Look at that car!” Rose interrupted excitedly. “Doesn’t it act funny?”

They all agreed that the motor car, sliding and slithering toward them over the snow-covered road, certainly did “act funny.”

“It’s skidding!” cried Margy, suddenly clutching Lloyd Roberts by the sleeve. “And that ditch! Look, Lloyd—they are heading straight toward it!”

# CHAPTER II

## THE OPEN FIRE

A DEEP ditch extended along one side of the road and for it the rapidly driven car was heading. It seemed impossible at that moment but that the girls must witness a terrible accident.

Helen put a hand over her eyes, turned and started running back the way they had come. Margy and Rose shrank away, clinging together, eyes wide with horror, while the boys ran forward, shouting and gesticulating in a vain attempt to warn the occupants of the car of their danger.

It was too late. The car careened crazily, described a sickening semicircle in the snow of the road, and toppled drunkenly into the ditch.

The young men excitedly followed the car over the embankment while Margy and Rose still clung together in the center of the road, faint and sick with horror.

Helen had turned in her headlong flight and was slowly coming back to them.

“We had better go and see if we can’t help, too,” said Margy, in a husky voice, tugging at her sister’s hand. “Some one may be badly hurt.”

“It will be a miracle if some one isn’t,” observed Rose, recovering her powers of speech and action at the same moment. “Come along, girls, we may be of some use.”

When they reached the ditch and peered fearfully over, they were treated to a sight that made them gape with astonishment and relief.

The car, after its leap over the embankment, had turned upon its side. In this undignified position, with wheels turned upward, it looked peculiarly helpless and forlorn.

But the girls had no eyes for the car. They saw only the two men, victims of the accident, who had freed themselves from the wreck and were now standing in the snow, ruefully regarding the motor car.

“Take a team of horses to get this thing up on the road again,” the younger of the two men remarked.

“And then we have no way of knowing it will work,” his companion replied. “That was certainly a pretty piece of driving I did.”

“What seemed to be the matter?” asked Joe, who, with Hugh and Lloyd, were interested bystanders.

“Everything,” replied the older man disgustedly. “In the first place, I neglected to put the skid chains on this morning. In the second place, that hill over there is a good deal steeper than I reckoned on. When we once got going it wasn’t easy to stop. The tires might just about as well have tried to get a grip on the air, as this combination ice and snow.”

“The question before the jury now seems to be, ‘where do we go from here——’”

“And how?” interposed Joe, with a grin.

“Exactly!” agreed the older man dryly.

They made a tour of the capsized automobile while the girls watched with interest from the embankment. They evidently decided that nothing could be done without help from a garage in town, for they returned presently and clambered up the steep incline to the level of the road.

Here the two strangers introduced themselves and were introduced in turn to the girls. The older of the two men was a Mr. Sidney Roth. The younger made himself known as Chester Drew of New York.

“We are going to a friend’s house not very far from here,” said Helen to the two men. “If you care to come with us, Miss Jellicoe will make you a cup of hot tea—”

“And you can telephone the garage from there, too,” Rose chimed in.

Chester Drew, who had never taken his eyes from Rose’s face since the introduction, seemed inclined to accept the invitation, but Mr. Roth shook his head decidedly.

“We are very much obliged to you, young ladies,” he said. “But we really must get back to town immediately. We will stop at the garage, send some one out here to rescue the car, and then take the next train to New York.”

“It is lucky you weren’t badly injured.” Margy spoke for the first time. “When we saw you go over the embankment we were afraid to look.”

“Fools’ luck,” replied Chester Drew, grinning. “You just can’t kill some people!”

After one more discouraged look at the wrecked car in the ditch, their new acquaintances took leave of the young folks and continued down the snow-covered road in the direction of the town.

“I wish they had come on with us to Miss Jessica’s,” worried Helen. “Even though no bones were broken, those two must have been shaken up pretty badly.”

“I wish they had been shaken up more—especially that young fellow. It would do him good,” grumbled Joe.

Rose looked up at him inquiringly.

“What’s the matter now, Strainer Man?” she asked flippantly. “What’s the big grouch?”

“Did you see how that—what’s-his-name—Chester Drew looked at you?” asked Joe accusingly. “I bet he thinks he met you somewhere before.”

“Maybe he did,” said Rose calmly. “Probably a lot of people will meet me, one way or another, before I die, Joey. You’ve got to sort of get used to it.”

“Well, he’d better not look at you that way, if he values his life,” retorted Joe, glowering.

“A cat can look at a king!” giggled Rose, adding wickedly: “Besides he had awfully nice blue eyes; didn’t you notice them?”

“I don’t like this party,” objected Joe plaintively, while the others joined in Rose’s merriment. “I want to go home!”

“Too late now,” Helen told him, laughing. “Here’s Miss Jellicoe’s house, and if I am not very much mistaken there is the little lady herself standing in the doorway. You couldn’t escape from her now, if you wanted to.”

“Um-yum!” said Joe longingly. “Do I smell flapjacks?”

They had come to a little white house set far back from the road and one could guess that, in the summer time, roses rioted over it and made gay the old-fashioned garden in front.

There was a picket fence about the place and a broad pathway led up to the hospitably opened front door. This path had been scrupulously cleared of snow and the cozy invitation of it was not to be ignored.

The young folks swarmed up it now, led by Helen. Miss Jellicoe, looking more than ever like a little pink-checked old lady stepped out of a story book, welcomed them prettily, drawing them into the spacious comfort of the living room.

Books lined three sides of this apartment and on the fourth was a great open fireplace. In this a fire crackled and roared, recklessly shooting sparks up the broad chimney.

There was a laughing and informal introduction of the boys, whom Miss Jellicoe immediately took under her wing. Then the girls, divested of hats and wraps, turned their hands to the welcome warmth of the blaze.

“It is almost like—being home again,” said Helen, half to herself and half aloud.

Hugh heard the murmured words and turned to her. What he saw in her eyes caused him to drop his own to the leaping flame of the fire. That look had not been meant for him or any one else to read.

Rose it was who dropped a hint of Joe’s yearning after flapjacks and Rose, too, who, later, helped the kindly little hostess stir up the delectable batter for the treat.

They made a great time of lunch, spreading the table in the living room before the open fire, consuming flapjacks and maple syrup as though they had eaten nothing for at least a week previous to this occasion.

A delightful meal with the fire crackling and snapping in sympathy with their merriment, and the cheeks of Miss Jellicoe growing bright with pleasure as compliments were showered upon her and her flapjacks.

A pleasant meal, indeed, and one whose memory lingered so persistently after the eating of it that the young people grew lazy and lounged about the fire chatting and laughing while Joe Morris recounted funny stories that kept them in continual gales of merriment.

It remained for Margy to jog them out of their laziness by suggesting that they carry out the plan they had made on the train and spend the later hours of the afternoon nutting in the woods.

“Do come on,” she urged. “If we sit over this fire any longer, we’ll be scorched a rich brown.”

“Yes!” cried Rose, springing out of her seat. “Let’s get to the woods and gather those nuts we talked so much about.”

It took considerable persuasion to induce the other lazy ones to leave the comfort of the fire for the nipping air of the out-of-doors.

However, they were finally won over and started out, armed with baskets that were rather discouragingly large.

“It would take all the rest of to-day and part of to-morrow to fill these baskets,” Joe protested. “Haven’t you got something smaller, Miss Jellicoe?”

“Give him a strainer, Miss Jessica,” suggested Rose, her eyes dancing. “He just dotes on ’em—the older they are and the more holes they have in them, the better!”

Miss Jessica Jellicoe looked so surprised at this that an explanation was necessary. In the midst of the recital of his rescue of the dilapidated family strainer from the moving van, Joe strode indignantly from the room and from the house.

At the noise of the door slamming behind him, Miss Jessica looked slightly startled.

“He isn’t angry, is he?” she queried anxiously. “He won’t think we were making fun of him?”

“He won’t think—he’ll know!” answered Rose, with a chuckle. The next moment she threw her arms about the little old lady in a warm hug.

“Don’t worry about Joe, Miss Jessica, dear,” she adjured. “I’ve never known him to get truly angry. He only thinks he does!”

They urged Miss Jellicoe to go with them on their nutting expedition, but she refused with a gentle little chuckle.

“My nutting days are over,” she told them, waving good-bye to them from the doorway. “I prefer my fire in weather like this.”

“I’ll say she’s sensible, at that,” said Lloyd, as he hefted his basket experimentally. “Say, but it’s getting cold!”



# CHAPTER III

## NUTTING

IT was indeed getting cold. And some of that chill seemed to enter the heart of Helen Blythe as she looked across at the old homestead that once had been a home—her home.

A rambling old house it was. Small enough and modest enough to start with, various wings had been added to the original structure; and since all of these were one story, the effect was as unique as it was homelike and pleasant.

Dreary and forlorn it looked now, with the snow banked high about its porches, the windows staring out, blank and dead upon the wintry scene.

It was necessary for the young folks to pass the Blythe homestead on their way to the woods and their nutting expedition. Helen had known this, but had not expected herself to be so strongly affected by this, the first glimpse they had had of their former home since she and her sisters had deserted it to seek their fortunes in New York City.

That Margy and Rose shared her emotion she could see by the way, after one comprehensive glance, their eyes turned from the old place and sought the open road.

Rose came close to her and slipped a hand within her arm.

“Looks rather lonesome, Nell,” she whispered. “Wouldn’t you just like to—slip inside and—look around a little?”

Helen shook her head, her lips tremulous.

“Some day,” she said, so softly that Rose could scarcely catch the words, “we may come back. Who knows?”

For the rest of the afternoon the three sisters were unusually thoughtful. Even the delight of nut-gathering lost some of its thrill when they remembered how, in the old days, they had come into these woods and stood beneath these very trees in company with their sweet, smiling mother and the father who was always jolly and full of fun. They had been a real family

then; not just three struggling girls striving to make their way in a world that seemed to take much and give little.

It was their mother who had left the first big gap in the family circle. Their father had followed soon after—it seemed he could not live without the inspiration of his wife’s presence—leaving to his three girls nothing but an inadequate life insurance.

The Blythes had never owned the old homestead. For all those years they had merely rented the place and, now that the parents were gone, the unsympathetic landlord seemed doubly insistent that the exorbitant rent be paid on the spot.

Dismayed by the rapidity with which their small capital was disappearing, the three Blythe girls had cast about desperately for some means of making a living.

Thinking—and rightly—that their earning capacity would be greater and the field broader in the city than in a small town like Riverdale, they had taken the last of the insurance money and moved to New York, as related in the first volume of this series, entitled, “The Blythe Girls: Helen, Margy and Rose.”

In New York they had established themselves in a small uptown apartment, which, for all its inconveniences, commanded a startlingly large rent.

Helen, who had inherited her mother’s artistic ability, had continued her drawing and painting. After several setbacks she had finally procured some modestly paid work, coloring sketches. Later she had sold two original pictures and had been given orders for more work of this sort.

Margy had decided on a business career, knowing already a little typewriting and stenography. She had procured a position as social secretary to a Miss Dorcas Pepper, an eccentric old lady whose disposition went well with her name.

Margy had some trouble with Rex Pepper, who had several times tried to force his attentions upon her. Aside from this, however, she had found her position agreeable. Attending night school several nights a week in order to perfect her business education, Margy felt herself steadily gaining ground in her chosen work.

Rose, having no knowledge of stenography or office methods, and even less liking for them, and none whatever of Helen’s artistic talent, had decided to take a “job” in one of the department stores.

This, after encountering many difficulties, she had finally accomplished. As clerk behind the millinery trimmings counter in the Lossar-Martin department store, she had already seen a good deal of life and encountered a great many experiences—not all of them pleasant.

Helen, the oldest of the trio, was fair haired, dreamy-eyed—almost startlingly like her mother both in temperament and looks.

Margy was two years younger than Helen who was nineteen. Margy was the brunette of the family. She had dark hair and eyes and an olive complexion just touched with the rose of perfect health. Margy was level-headed and rather mature for her years and cared more for her career than for young folks of her own age and the fun of parties and dances that so interested her sisters.

Rose was the baby of the family, being “just turned” sixteen. In appearance the younger girl was very like Helen, except that her coloring was more vivid. Rose was keenly interested in the people and things about her. Life to her was a far more absorbing play than anything the stage had to offer her.

The three young men who had accompanied the Blythe girls on their trip to Riverdale were all acquaintances they had made since they had moved to New York.

Joe Morris, office manager for the Reynolds Moving Company, had attended to the moving of their effects to the little uptown apartment and, by his kindness and consideration, had earned their genuine liking.

Through Joe, Margy had met Lloyd Roberts and, since that first meeting, the latter had been in almost constant attendance upon her. Margy liked Lloyd very much, but she liked her work at Miss Pepper’s so much better that whole days frequently passed when she did not spare the young man a thought.

Hugh Draper lived on the first floor of the apartment house in which the Blythe girls had taken refuge. He was a young lawyer, and had had occasion to help the girls more than once.

One service was to help apprehend the man who had several times invaded the girls’ apartment in search of money he believed to be hidden in furniture shipped to Margy by her aunt, as related in the second volume of this series, called, “The Blythe Girls: Margy’s Queer Inheritance.”

The queer inheritance consisted of five Liberty Bonds of five hundred dollars each, and this money, coming to her in a lump sum, had given Margy

all the sensations of an heiress.

All this had happened so recently that the thought of it still thrilled her. She had not yet decided definitely just what she was going to do with her great wealth.

Lloyd Roberts, stuffing a large chestnut into his basket, was even now referring to this fortune.

“Where’s that Speedex I thought you were going to buy with your inheritance, Margy?” he giped, mentioning a new and expensive make of car just on the market. “I’m waiting for a ride in it.”

“Then you can wait a little longer,” said Margy, with a laugh. “When I get twenty-five thousand instead of that many hundreds, I’ll begin to think about a Speedex.”

“Isn’t she the stingy thing?” Rose made a face at her sister, then turned a rueful eye upon her half-filled basket. “I have enough for half a cake,” she said. “How about the rest of you?”

“We have more than enough if we pool our profits,” Margy decided. “My feet are getting cold and so’s my nose. Let’s go home.”

“Oh, you flapjacks, and, oh, you fire!” said Joe longingly, adding in a quavering tenor voice: “I hear you calling me—”

“Stop! The neighbors will think we’re an insane asylum out for an airing,” protested Rose. “Do stop, Joe; it sets my teeth on edge.”

The others laughed while Joe bent upon the flippant one a look of profound sorrow.

“The insults I take from that girl are something scandalous,” he said plaintively. “Some time the worm will turn.”

“Joe Morris picturing himself as a worm! Since when this unusual modesty, dear boy?” giped Rose.

“Not modesty,” replied the youth. “Only consideration for you, Posie. If I pictured myself as a dragon—as I should—who would turn and gobble you up—”

“Oh, oh!” giggled Rose. “Joe as a dragon is even funnier than Joe as a worm!”

There was more light-hearted bickering back and forth until Margy rebelled and insisted that they stop such “silly nonsense.”

On the way back to Miss Jellicoe's it was again necessary to pass the old homestead. When they were just opposite it, Helen paused suddenly and laid an eager hand upon Hugh's arm.

"Do you know what I'm going to do?" she said, eyes suddenly alight. "I'm going to paint it!"

# CHAPTER IV

## UP EARLY

IT was the next morning before Helen had a chance to put into practice her sudden determination to sketch the old homestead.

She had told no one but Hugh of her desire and almost before daylight she was up, dressed, and out, her sketching materials tucked snugly under her arm.

On this peaceful Sunday morning it was with a feeling of reverence that she approached the old place, looking dim and ghostly in the early light. Standing out vaguely against the indeterminate background of a wintry sky, it seemed far more dreary and forsaken than it had on the previous afternoon, when the sun, glistening upon the snow, had, in a measure, dispelled the atmosphere of gloom.

“I must wait for the sun. It would never do to paint it as it is now,” thought Helen.

She entered the snow-covered grounds, not by the familiar front gate, but by the almost equally familiar gap in the side fence.

That gap, Helen remembered, with a catch at her heart, had been a source of annoyance to her mother for a great many months, in the old days, but her father, with his easy, good-natured habit of putting off everything that could possibly be put off till to-morrow had always been going to “get round to it” and, of course, never had.

“Dear Dad! Dear Mother!” thought Helen, and hastily brushed a hand across her eyes.

She cleared an old stump of snow and sat down to await the coming of the sun.

Then suddenly her eyes, fixed sadly upon her old home, began to glisten and shine with a sudden inspiration. All at once there seemed to her something beautiful, something awe-inspiring and impelling in the one-tone grayness of that wintry, early morning scene.

“If I can get it down—just as it is—before I lose it,” she breathed, and began hastily to sketch, her hand trembling with eagerness, yet certain of stroke, her breath caught before the beauty of the thing she was trying to create.

She had finished, sketching rapidly and surely, when a shadow fell across her work and she glanced up to see Hugh Draper standing close to her.

She smiled, her lips tremulous, and, with a gesture of trust, handed the sketch over to him.

Hugh took the drawing and gravely studied it for a moment.

“How do you do it?” he said, at last, in his eyes the admiration that never failed to spur her on to greater effort. “You get atmosphere better than any one I ever knew. That is not a picture—it’s a place.”

“You are always such a help, Hugh,” said Helen, carefully putting the sketch away and rising stiffly to her feet. “Do you know,” as though the thought had just come to her, “I am very cold.”

“You have been here too long, sitting in one position,” said Hugh, instantly anxious. “You should have been more warmly wrapped.”

“I had on my winter coat,” said Helen, smiling at him. She liked Hugh when he was solicitous of her. It was so nice to have some one really care whether she caught cold or not! “Anyway,” she added briskly, as the stiffness began to leave her cramped limbs and the blood once more commenced to circulate freely, “one cup of Miss Jessica’s coffee will make me feel like new.”

“She is a wonderful little old lady,” said Hugh heartily. “I’d like my mother to meet her sometime.”

“Where are you going?” asked Helen, in surprise as, at Miss Jellicoe’s gate, Hugh lifted his hat and made as though to continue on his way.

“To the hotel,” said Hugh, surprised in his turn. “Having slept there—more or less!—I took it for granted we would breakfast there also.”

“Nonsense! You will do nothing of the sort,” Helen broke in. “Miss Jessica would be eternally insulted if she thought you were so much as thinking of such a thing. Where are the other boys?”

“Still asleep, I guess,” replied Hugh. “They were dead to the world when I left. Glad I had a notion for an early morning stroll,” he added, “since I

found what I did!"

Something in his tone deepened the color in Helen's cheeks and caused her to turn quickly toward the house. Even as she turned the front door flew open and Lloyd Roberts stood in the doorway.

"You runaways!" he teased. "Come in and explain yourselves."

"And get some of these here delectable bacon and eggs," said Joe, over his shoulder.

Helen laughed up at Hugh as they hastened to obey the invitation.

"I guess we needn't worry about them," she said. "They seem to be able to take care of themselves."

It seemed that, like Hugh, Joe and Lloyd had not found the hotel beds any too comfortable. This being the case, they had risen betimes and repaired to Miss Jellicoe's—with the hope, no doubt, that more flapjacks and maple syrup would be speedily forthcoming.

They found Margy and Rose still asleep, though Miss Jessica was already in her spotless kitchen, busily preparing breakfast. It had remained for Joe and Lloyd to make so much noise and racket below stairs that the two girls were forced to abandon slumber and investigate.

It was then that Helen's absence was discovered and this, coupled to the mysterious disappearance of Hugh, gave rise to much laughing speculation.

So it was natural that when the missing couple at last appeared they should be treated to much good-humored teasing. But in spite of all the cross-questioning, Helen refused to say where she had been or for what purpose, never once mentioning the picture of the old homestead that lay safely in her bag.

And this fact filled Hugh with an absurd happiness, because he was allowed to share a secret with the girl he so much admired.

Later that afternoon, when it was almost time to think of departure, Helen came to Hugh and told him in a whisper that she wanted to slip over to the old homestead again for a few moments.

"There are a few details I'm not sure of," she told him. "I can fill in a good deal from memory, but there are one or two things I want to see again. Would you mind very much keeping the rest of them away from the old homestead until I can get back? I want to be alone there for a little while."



Hugh promised readily enough, though he had hoped she was going to ask him to go along.

He had his reward, however, when, an hour later, Helen returned, face flushed and eyes shining, to whisper to him eagerly that she “had it now” and would be able to finish the picture at leisure when she returned to the city.

“Don’t dare tell anybody!” she said, and he had just time to shake his head before the rest swarmed in upon them.

“Better hurry, laggards,” Rose cried gayly. “The train leaves in twenty minutes, and we have just time to catch it, barring accidents like a broken leg—”

“Or a broken back,” added Joe, looking upon her with tolerant amusement. “Well, Miss Jessica Jellicoe,” turning to their hostess, who was laughing merrily with them, “this is your last chance to see the wild and wicked city. How about it? Aren’t you coming along?”

Miss Jellicoe shook her head, patting him gently on the arm. She had taken a great notion to this harum-scarum Joe, though he did sometimes scandalize her, and was sorry to part with him. As a matter of fact, she was sorry to part with any of the young folks. If she had had her way, her lonesome old house would have been continually filled with the laughter of youth.

“She is coming to see us very soon, anyway,” said Helen, putting an arm about Miss Jellicoe and gently kissing her. “Aren’t you, dear?”

Miss Jessica drew the fresh young face down and kissed it.

“If you want me, my dear!” she said simply.

Why was it, thought the girls a short time later, that they should feel so homesick going “home.” Was it the memory of Miss Jessica, waving to them from the doorway—Miss Jessica, who had been their mother’s dearest friend? Or was it the memory of the old homestead standing there, deserted and forlorn, its porches banked with snow? Or was it, perhaps, a little of both?

The city apartment seemed stuffy and unhomelike when they reached it several hours later. They had stopped on the way and had their supper in a modest little restaurant, though no one had seemed very hungry.

The boys had reluctantly left them at the door, and now they were alone.

Rose flung off her pretty hat. Going over to the window, she leaned her head against the pane, gazing down at the lights in the street below.

“I know you will think me silly,” she said, in a muffled voice. “But I feel like turning around and going right back again!”

# CHAPTER V

## IN DANGER

IN spite of the fact that their visit to Miss Jessica Jellicoe had temporarily spoiled them for the city, the Blythe girls soon settled down into the routine of work again.

After all, there was a bustle and stir in the city, the feeling of great things afoot, that the country lacked. And by this time the girls were well started on the various roads of their ambition. There was an incomparable thrill in the making of money, the fascinating sensation of independence.

Helen got out the rough sketch she had made of the old homestead—the sketch that neither of her sisters had yet seen—and set swiftly about the work of filling in the details that were stored in her memory.

Mr. Bullard, the owner of the art shop where she had disposed of her other two original pictures, would soon be expecting a new one, and she could afford to lose no time.

Mr. Bullard had got for her fifty dollars from his customer for the second of her two pictures, and she wondered if the price would be the same on the third.

He had hinted that he might get more if her work were as good as he expected it to be. That was one reason why she was anxious to make this picture an even greater success than the ones that had gone before. It was only one reason, however. For, although Helen was forced to consider the financial side of the transaction, her art, for its own sake, always came first in her mind and heart.

She would not show the picture to the girls, she decided, until it was finished. It would be lovely to surprise them—and they were always so enthusiastic.

Meanwhile, Rose went back to the Lossar-Martin department store, where she regaled Birdie North and Annabelle Black, her two close chums at the place, with accounts of her week-end in the country.

“I never was much for the country, myself,” said Annabelle Black. “But the way you describe those flapjacks sure does lend zest to my appetite, Posie. S’pose you could get me an invite to Miss Jessica’s sometime?”

“Easy,” returned Rose.

“Oh, I’d love it,” sighed Birdie North. “The city does make one tired sometimes.”

“Say, girlie, that’s the first slang I ever knew you to use,” Annabelle told her, with a delighted grin. “You’re coming right along. You will be real human before you know it.”

“I didn’t mean it for slang,” Birdie protested, with a touch of spirit. “I meant to be taken literally.”

“Say, Posie, is she calling me names, or something?” asked Annabelle plaintively. “Half the time I don’t know what she is talking about.”

“Probably it’s just as well,” laughed Rose, with a wicked wink at Birdie. “You don’t miss much!”

Meanwhile, Margy’s all-absorbing problem was, “what was she to do with her Liberty Bonds?”

Finally Hugh suggested a safety deposit box as the safest place to stow her wealth. After much consideration and lengthy and weighty conversations with her sisters, Margy finally decided to accept this suggestion.

She rented a box and one morning packed the notes away in her hand bag preparatory to putting them where no thief could possibly get hold of them.

“I haven’t had a real night’s sleep since we found them,” she told Helen, as the latter followed her to the door of their apartment. “I think once they are in the safe deposit box I shall sleep for a week to make up.”

“Don’t you think I had better go with you?” Helen asked anxiously. “With all that fortune in your pocketbook and so many pickpockets abroad \_\_\_”

“Nonsense!” said Margy, laughing. “You will be writing a moving picture scenario next thing we know, Helen dear. There may be pickpockets abroad, but none of them knows that I am carrying twenty-five hundred dollars around in my purse. Good-bye, dear. Don’t work too hard.”

Helen was uneasy about Margy and the Liberty Bonds, and it was a long time after her sister left before she could really get down to her work. If she

had known what was happening to Margy!

This is how it came to pass.

Margy had taken the subway to the station nearest the bank where she was to leave her bonds. The train was crowded and she was forced to stand.

She thought little of this, for it was by no means the first time she had been caught in a subway crush. However, she was soon conscious that the young man next to her was crowding her a little more than was necessary.

She moved back as far as she could—which was no great distance—and instinctively hugged her bag closer to her. All at once the responsibility for the safety of that twenty-five hundred dollars seemed a tremendous thing.

She wished fervently that she had waited until after the rush hour to carry downtown Aunt Margy's bonds. She ventured to look up at the young fellow who was crowding so closely against her and received in return a leer and an impudent wink.

Margy was at a loss what to do. She was boiling with rage, and yet her one recourse was to pretend not to notice the obnoxious stranger.

They stopped at a station and the young man moved away; only to crowd closer as the train began to move again.

It was then that Margy became possessed of the certainty that this man was after the contents of her bag. She remembered, with a thrill of fright, that she had opened her bag to get out a handkerchief when she had first entered the train. She could not be sure, but she thought the young fellow had been standing at her elbow at that time. Could he have seen, or guessed at, the contents of her purse?

Once she thought she felt a hand steal furtively beneath her arm, and quickly shifted the purse to the other hand.

Margy knew that in a couple of minutes more they would reach the station. It was just possible that the fellow intended to try to snatch the bag from her and then make off in the crowd before she could raise a hue and cry.

Desperately she looked about her for help.

If the crowd had not been so thick she might have slipped toward the front of the car. But, packed in as they were, it was a practical impossibility to move more than a foot in either direction.

The nearness of the man was becoming unbearable. Margy felt sure, from the alertness of his bearing, that she had surmised his intention correctly.

There was a fatherly looking, middle-aged man standing close to her. Margy wondered if she might not confide in him and ask him to hold her bag.

The next moment her practical sense told her that this was impossible. The man would think that her imagination had run away with her.

They were nearing the station. The man bent nearer to her. Margy clutched her bag fiercely. He should not get it from her without a struggle!

# CHAPTER VI

## STARTLING NEWS

“HEY, you! Haven’t you got any sense?”

The voice was familiar, and with a feeling of intense relief Margy glanced up and saw Dale Elton standing close to her.

Dale Elton was a young reporter on the *Evening Star*. He and Margy had met on several occasions and the two were very great friends.

Margy was about to speak and explain the situation when she saw that Dale was in no need whatever of explanations. He had boarded the train at the last station, and since then had been busily engaged in getting near enough to Margy and her unpleasant companion to tell the latter what he thought of him.

He did so now—and with vehemence enough to arouse the interest of his fellow passengers.

Though the fellow at first seemed tempted to show fight, Dale very soon convinced him that discretion was by far the better part of valor, as far as he was concerned.

They had stopped at the station, and when the young reporter advised him in no uncertain terms to remove himself from the immediate vicinity, the obnoxious stranger took the advice.

He elbowed his way quickly through the crowd and reached the platform, to be swallowed up immediately.

“That’s the way we do it,” said Dale, smiling amiably upon the relieved Margy. “You certainly have to hand it to us fellows.”

“I certainly intend to!” said Margy, and thrust her bag into his hands. “Please keep it until we get to the next station. I’ll explain later.”

Dale Elton looked from her to the bag and back again.

“I ain’t in need of no charity, lady,” he said whimsically. “But if you insist—”

“Oh, you needn’t worry,” Margy told him. “I’m not making you a present of it. If you must know, that bag contains Aunt Margy Blythe’s inheritance.”

The young reporter emitted a low whistle that was swallowed up in the thunder of the subway train.

“Not so loud, not so loud,” he cautioned. “Some one may be listening in on this radio set.”

“I’m not afraid, now that I have a strong man to protect me,” returned Margy demurely, with the flash of a dimple Dale had not known she possessed.

“Don’t take that tone with me, young lady,” he said, with a grin. “It won’t go. I know you too well.”

“You might pretend you liked it, anyway,” laughed Margy. The train slowed down for the station, and as Margy turned to elbow her way toward the nearest exit, holding out her hand for her bag, Dale shook his head.

“You don’t get rid of me so easily,” he told her. “I’m coming too.”

When they reached the platform Dale commented on the fact that Margy had kept hold of his sleeve during their push through the car.

“You don’t trust me,” he complained. “You were afraid I was going to run off with your fortune!”

“Quite true,” chuckled Margy. “Marvelous how you guess my inmost thoughts, Mr. Dale Elton.”

“Oof—that’s an awful one,” said Dale good-naturedly. “Where do we go from here?” he asked, as they reached the street.

Margy indicated the bank in whose safe deposit vaults, provided they encountered no other difficulties, she hoped to deposit her fortune.

“But you won’t need to come with me,” she told him. “I am quite safe now.”

“In other words—here’s your hat, what’s your hurry,” said Dale, with a sigh. “Oh, well, I should expect no better treatment.”

With a mixture of amusement and vexation, Margy caught his sleeve as he was in the act of turning disconsolately on his heel.

“Don’t be so silly,” she said. “I was only trying to save you time and trouble.”



“Really?” said Dale, turning back with alacrity and beaming upon her. “How I did deceive myself! I thought for one dreadful moment that you were trying to get rid of me!”

They went together to the bank and saw the Liberty Bonds safely deposited.

“Makes you feel sort of contented,” Margy confided, as they turned away. “Just a little something put aside for a rainy day.”

“That would account for quite a number of rainy days, I should imagine,” Dale agreed. “But say,” he added, as they neared the subway station, “let’s walk down a few blocks. I have something important to say to you.”

“Well—” Margy hesitated.

“Come on. You’re not in a terrible hurry, are you?”

“Depends on what you call terrible,” retorted Margy, letting herself be led along, nevertheless. “I have a number of things to do for Miss Pepper today, besides the usual number of letters to answer and club data to catalogue. She is depending on me to get her out of one club meeting so that she may attend another—and all this without offending either. If you have ever tried it, you know how simple it is!”

“Sounds pretty complex to me,” said Dale. “But it was about Miss Pepper that I wanted to talk to you, Miss Pepper and that rascally nephew of hers.”

Margy looked interested—as, indeed, she always was, in anything that affected her employer.

“May I inquire just why you call Rex Pepper rascally?” she asked.

“Because no other name fits the fellow so well,” said Dale with, for him, unusual severity. “I love that boy the way a rat loves poison.”

“You aren’t very complimentary to yourself,” observed Margy. “But what particular thing has Rex done now?” she added quickly. “Has he really been trying to poison anybody?”

“He may try that next,” said Dale Elton, and, though he spoke lightly, Margy sensed an undercurrent of seriousness in his words. “Now listen, Margy,” he said and instantly dropped his light manner. “That chap is bound someday or other that he will get control of Miss Pepper’s money—”

“Dale,” cried Margy, incredulously, “do you know what you are saying?”

“You bet I do,” retorted Dale vigorously. “This nephew of hers seems to think his aunt too eccentric to handle her own money.”

“It *is* her money just the same,” cried Margy indignantly. “And she really does a lot of good with it.”

“That’s just the thing he objects to,” Dale pointed out. “You see if she didn’t donate so much to charity, there would be a considerably larger amount for Mr. Rex Pepper to squander on himself.”

“Fine chance he has of ever getting his hands on it,” said Margy scornfully.

“He may have a better chance than you think,” said Dale, so seriously that Margy shot a quick glance at him.

“Do you mean that you think it is possible that Rex Pepper may be able to get his aunt’s money away from her?” she demanded.

“I think that when a young fellow has his wits about him—and whatever else you may say against Rex Pepper, you have to admit he is nobody’s fool!—he can do a great many things—especially when his opponent is an old woman who knows very little about business.”

“Miss Pepper is nobody’s fool, either,” retorted Margy quickly.

“No, she is keen enough, in her way,” Dale admitted. “But she is eccentric, and, more than that, extremely likely to be off her guard as far as her nephew is concerned. One does not suspect one’s near relatives of having designs upon one’s fortune, as a rule.”

Margy looked troubled. She had forgotten that she was in a hurry. They had already walked past the nearest subway station, and she seemed not to have noticed it.

This was serious, if the young reporter had correctly represented the facts, and she knew Dale Elton well enough to believe that, aside from belonging to a profession that drew its inspiration from facts, the reporter was himself an extremely logical and truthful young man. She knew that he would not willingly exaggerate the facts of the case.

“Just what is he trying to do?” she asked, after a moment of reflection.

“That’s what I am not yet sure of,” he told her. “And that,” he added, with his amiable grin, “is, also, where you come in.”

“I!” echoed Margy surprised. “Why, what can I do?”

“Being on the spot, a very great deal,” Dale assured her. “You can keep an eye on Rex Pepper and see that he doesn’t pull any funny stuff.”

Margy looked seriously alarmed, as, in fact, she was.

“But I hardly see him, Dale,” she protested. “How am I going to keep my eye on him when at most he comes to the house not more than once a week?”

“Once a week!” repeated Dale, and Margy thought he looked disappointed. “I had an idea he came oftener than that. Was quite a fixture at the house, in fact.”

Margy shook her head and realized at the same moment how much time this conversation, interesting as it undoubtedly was, was costing her.

“I must get back,” she said. “Miss Pepper never forgives any one for being late, you know.”

“But you will keep an eye on young Pepper?” Dale pleaded, as he obediently escorted her to the nearest subway entrance. “When he is at the house, I mean?”

Margy nodded.

“I don’t see what harm that would do.”

“On the contrary, it may do a great deal of good,” Elton told her. “Think what a ripping good story it will make,” he added, in his eyes the dreamy look of the star reporter who scents a news item of unusual worth. “Can’t you just see it? Front page, headliner and everything.”

Margy turned to him pleadingly.

“Dale, you never would put anything about this in the paper! Oh, Dale! For Miss Pepper’s sake.”

“Margy Blythe, you are a blight upon my genius,” said the young fellow mournfully. “In the words of the sage, I would remark, ‘Stung again!’”

# CHAPTER VII

## THE NEW FLOORWALKER

IN the days that followed Margy thought a great deal about Dale Elton's revelations concerning her employer, Miss Dorcas Pepper.

Although she had encountered difficulties with this eccentric old lady during the first few weeks of her social secretaryship, Margy had since grown very fond of her—and had grown proportionately to dislike her nephew, Rex Pepper.

She wondered, while getting the club data in shape and straightening out Miss Pepper's numerous and mixed-up engagements for the day, just what Dale had meant by his insinuations.

He had had something more definite in mind than he had been willing to confide to her—that much she had felt instinctively.

Rex Pepper must certainly have taken some definite steps against his aunt or Dale Elton would not have been so hot on the trail, nor so enthusiastic over the headline, first-page news item the story would make.

Well, he, Dale Elton, had solicited her help, had asked her to "keep an eye on Rex Pepper." This much she would do, at least, she decided. There was a distinct thrill in the thought that she was about to turn amateur detective.

"With emphasis on the amateur," she told herself modestly. "Never mind, it will be a new line for me, anyway. And they do say a change of work is play. Good gracious, here comes the criminal now!"

She liked the word "criminal." It made everything seem dark and mysterious. Which might go to prove that Margy Blythe might have made a first class journalist if she had not decided on a business career!

She had been right about the approach of Rex Pepper. He came down the stairs heavily and stood in the doorway of the library, regarding her.

Margy's head was demurely bent above her pad. She was very busy, indeed.

“Would I be bothering you very much, if I asked a word of you?”

Margy was struck by the serious note in his voice. When Rex Pepper spoke to her, it was generally in a light, bantering tone that she had come to know and dislike immensely.

Now she glanced up, her brow furrowed as though in concentrated thought.

“I am busy,” she said curtly. “But I can spare you a minute.”

Rex Pepper smiled in that superior, amused way he had developed recently.

“Very kind of you, I’m sure,” he drawled, coming over and swinging one of the chairs about so that he might face her. “What I have to say is confidential,” he explained, in answer to Margy’s look of surprise. “I want to speak to you about my aunt.”

Margy’s heart began to thump rather wildly beneath the starched front of her white shirt waist. Was he about to reveal to her now what Dale Elton wanted to know? Was he, of his own accord, about to reveal his nefarious schemes?

“I am worried about her,” Rex Pepper continued, and Margy wondered how any one could look so smug and hypocritical as he did at that moment. “It seems to me she is not very well. Overworked all summer—”

“Miss Pepper doesn’t know the meaning of overwork,” Margy interrupted curtly. “She is only unhappy and restless when not doing something.”

“That’s just my point,” agreed Miss Pepper’s nephew, with such apparent ingenuousness that Margy wondered if Dale Elton might, after all, have been mistaken. “That very fact seems to me to show that her nerves are stimulated above normal.”

“I think Miss Pepper has the finest nervous system I ever saw,” Margy remarked dryly. “I have always prided myself on having a pretty good one, but if I tried to do the things in a week that she accomplishes in a day, I know I should be a complete wreck!”

Rex Pepper frowned. It was easy to see that this was not at all what he had expected, or hoped for.

“Then you do not agree with me that your employer needs a good vacation?” he asked, looking straight at her for the first time since the

beginning of their conversation.

“I certainly do not. I think it would be the worst thing in the world for her,” said Margy shortly, and turned back to her work.

Rex Pepper hesitated, looking, in a baffled sort of way, at her bent head and flying fingers. He got up, stuffed his hands into his pockets and whistled softly under his breath, still looking at her.

He had never been able to understand this girl—this social secretary of his aunt’s. Most girls, even those in his own set, were very nice to Rex Pepper, well-off in his own right and presumptive heir to the Pepper fortune.

And that a business girl like Margy with her way to make in the world should refuse his advances was unthinkable.

She was pretty too—one of the prettiest girls he had ever met, with the rich rose and ivory of her skin and her shining dark hair.

He stood looking down at her so long that Margy stirred impatiently and glanced up at him.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” she asked politely—oh, far too politely.

Rex Pepper hesitated, then turned abruptly on his heel.

“No, thank you!” he said, and left the room.

For some time Margy gazed thoughtfully at the spot where he had been.

“Now just what was it he hoped that I’d admit about Miss Pepper?” she wondered, turning her attention once more to her notes. “Dale will be interested to know that he has spoken to me at all about his aunt. Just the same, I could wish that he had said something a little more definite.”

And while Margy was in the process of turning detective in behalf of her employer, Rose was having her own adventure at the Lossar-Martin store.

She arrived at the store that morning to find the girls excited over the advent of a new floorwalker in the department.

They were gathered in little knots about the millinery trimmings department when Rose joined them.

Annabelle Black, black-haired, black-eyed and handsome, reached out a masterful hand and drew her into their midst. Miss O’Brien, the head of the department, had either not yet arrived or was in conference with the new

floorwalker. The girls did not much care which, as long as they were granted a brief reprieve from her presence.

The clerks under her all disliked Miss O'Brien, and they had ample reason for disliking her. There was not one of them but had felt the lash of her tongue, not once, but many times. The lady was one of those unpleasant beings who seem to take a special delight in finding fault with those under their supervision.

In this she had been ably supported by the two floorwalkers who had recently presided over that department. The first of the two, Herbert Shomberg, had succeeded in making Rose's life miserable for her. In the end he had tried to throw upon her suspicion of purloining goods from her own counter—a crime of which he himself had been later accused and convicted.

Herbert Shomberg's successor, Henry Goos, had been little better. A slave driver by nature, he had found himself in a position to exercise this characteristic and had done so without mercy. He had driven the girls almost past endurance. But, just when fragile Birdie North had seemed about to break under the strain and Rose was in hourly fear of losing her position, Joe Morris had brought certain facts to the attention of the manager of the department, Mr. Beadle, with the result that Mr. Goos had been asked by the management for his resignation.

It was natural that with the misdeeds of these two former tyrants still fresh in their memory, the girls should look forward to the coming of a new one with a great deal of interest and not a little trepidation.

"Here he comes!" cried Rose suddenly, in the midst of the girls' chatter. "And Miss O'Brien is with him. Quick, girls! Better scatter!"

The girls needed no further hint. By the time Miss O'Brien and her companion had taken a dozen steps into the department from Mr. Beadle's office, every one was in her assigned place, virtuously ready for the serious work of the day.

When the floorwalker turned toward her Rose gave vent to a surprised exclamation. She stifled it quickly, but the alert and ever-watchful Annabelle Black had heard and was looking at her curiously.

"Why the movie stuff?" she asked, in her jargon of slang. "Blanche Tweet never registered surprise better than that! What caught on, Posie?"

"Why, I know him—the floorwalker!" said Rose, beneath her breath. "At least, I met him once, not so very long ago! His name is Chester Drew."

# CHAPTER VIII

## MYSTERY

At the sound of the name Chester Drew something strange and incomprehensible happened to Birdie North.

Birdie's eyes opened in a startled way. Her face that was usually dead white, turned a swift scarlet. She glanced at Rose in a frightened way—then at Chester Drew.

“It is—oh, it is!” she muttered, under her breath, and staggered a little and gripped the edge of the counter as though to keep herself from falling.

Annabelle did not notice Birdie's trepidation. But Rose, who loved the frail girl and had been deeply interested in her welfare from the day they had met, saw the change in her and went swiftly to her.

“Birdie! What is the matter, dear? What is it?” she asked in an anxious whisper.

“Nothing!”

Birdie was arranging merchandise on her counter with fingers that trembled. Now she pushed Rose from her, gently but urgently.

“Miss O'Brien will see!” she whispered. “Careful, Posie, they are coming this way.”

Rose saw that the new floorwalker and the department head were indeed coming straight toward her counter and returned to her place.

Miss O'Brien and Chester Drew, the new floorwalker, stopped a short distance away, and, after a murmured consultation, Miss O'Brien turned and walked swiftly in the direction of the east building.

Chester Drew looked comprehensively about him, his keen gaze taking in every detail. In the course of time his gaze came to rest upon Rose.

He looked puzzled for a moment, then smiled delightedly and immediately came forward.



Rose noticed that Birdie North seemed to shrink still further into herself, keeping at the extreme end of her counter and as far away from Rose as possible.

“Now, what can be the matter with her?” she thought, and turned to look into the handsome, smiling eyes of Chester Drew.

“Miss Blythe!” he said, and there was no mistaking the pleasure in his voice as he extended a hand across the counter. “Now I know why I had the feeling that you and I had met before—that day my car took a dive into the ditch.”

“I felt sure I had seen you, too,” Rose confessed. “But I can’t see yet just how—”

“It was when I came in here looking for a position,” he explained. “I remember taking a pretty good look about the place, and I saw you. ‘Most any one would, you know!’”

There was something so likable about the smile with which he said this that Rose could not possibly take offense at his very openly expressed admiration.

She smiled back; and when Rose smiled that way it was apt to take the beholder’s breath away. It had that effect now upon Chester Drew, who was a rather impressionable young man, as well as an exceedingly nice one.

Beyond him, Rose could see that the other girls were staring at her enviously, wondering, no doubt, how she had managed to place herself on such friendly terms with the new floorwalker on such short acquaintance.

Rose brought forward Annabelle Black, who was lingering quite close to her, and introduced the black-haired girl to Chester Drew.

Annabelle immediately proceeded to try all her wiles on the new floorwalker. But though Chester Drew was very pleasant to her, it was easy to see that he was more strongly attracted to Rose. For the time being, at least, he had no eyes for any one else.

Birdie, mouselike in her far corner, had completely escaped the new floorwalker’s attention. Rose would have introduced her long before, as she had Annabelle, had not Birdie’s eyes sent frantic signals to her, pleading with her not to do so.

But now, just as Chester Drew was turning away, his eyes happened to rest on Birdie. He started, and looked more closely at her.

Conscious of his regard, Birdie's pallor once more gave place to a scarlet flush. Pretending to arrange some feathers on the counter, she did not lift her eyes from her work.

The young man grew suddenly stern. His nice gray eyes lost their laughing look, his lips set in a grim line. He turned to Annabelle and Rose, nodded curtly, and walked away.

"Now, what do you know about that?" cried Annabelle, with unfeigned curiosity. "That boy has a bee in his bonnet, as sure as my name begins with Ann. What caused that change of heart, Posie, do you think?"

"You mean 'change of front,' don't you?" asked Rose, anxious to keep the downright Annabelle from noticing Birdie's strange manner. "Perhaps he saw Miss O'Brien coming—"

"P'raps he saw your grandmother!" retorted Annabelle loftily. "It's a long time since anybody pulled wool over the eyes of little Annabelle, girlie, and don't you forget it. I may be foolish, but I'm not blind. What do you suppose," lowering her voice, but not sufficiently to prevent the words from carrying to Birdie's corner, "made him act so different when he saw our little friend? Seems like him and Birdie must have loved and lost in dear, dead days gone by."

"Do be careful, Annabelle!" cried Rose sharply, for she had noticed Birdie flinch beneath the careless jocularly of the words. "Don't you know she can hear you?"

"Humph, my voice must have some carrying quality," snorted Annabelle. "Honest, I ain't got a megaphone concealed up my sleeve, neither. But say, girlie," forgetting her temporary exasperation, Annabelle-like, "you seemed to make a hit with our new floor pounder. Wish I had your secret!"

"He seems awfully nice, anyway," returned Rose absently, her thoughts still with Birdie North. "An improvement on the other two."

"Yeah, so far as you can see now, from where you sit," drawled Annabelle. "But my advice to you is, Posie, don't count your chickens while they're still completely surrounded by shell. The way with this fellah, he's much too nice. Quietest man I ever knew turned out to be the worst actor in the end. Believe me, or not, he did everything but shoot up the town."

"I don't believe," said Rose with a chuckle, "that Mr. Drew carries firearms!" Then, as customers approached the counter, the girls set to work and forgot for a while all other matters.

While her sisters were having their own experiences and facing their own problems, Helen was busily at work on her painting.

The old homestead, being considerably different in character from anything she had done before, engrossed a great deal of her time and attention.

She finally came to the conclusion that she would never be able to finish the picture to her satisfaction in the time allotted to her by Mr. Bullard. There was only one thing else for her to do. Go to a park, select a simpler subject and one for which she did not need to depend on memory. She would be able to do this sketch in a comparatively short time, thus leaving her other picture, the likeness of the old homestead, until she should have time to give it the loving study she thought it deserved.

So, one day, leaving early in the morning, she repaired to Bronx Park. There had been a fresh fall of snow during the night and the trees and bushes of the park were weighed with the virgin covering.

Helen had little difficulty in selecting a subject. As a matter of fact, her chief difficulty was in choosing between a wealth of beautiful scenes.

For a blissful morning she sketched steadily, returning to the apartment in the early afternoon.

She had just gone to her room, and had not yet had time to take off her coat and hat, when a knock sounded at the hall door.

The color in Helen's already rosy cheeks deepened a bit, for she knew that that peculiar rat-tat-tat could belong to no one but Hugh Draper.

But what was Hugh doing at home at this time in the afternoon? She patted her hair into place and hurried to the door. She thought of his mother and wondered if she could be ill.

But her first glance at Hugh's face when he entered the hall of the apartment told her that he had come with no unpleasant news.

"I hope you don't mind my bothering you like this," he said. "But I simply had to get it off my chest!"

# CHAPTER IX

## HUGH'S NEWS

“It isn’t a mustard plaster, is it?” asked Helen, and looked so serious, asking it, that Hugh stared at her for a moment in blank amazement. Then he grinned.

“Something better than that,” he replied, masterfully taking her by the arm and leading her into the living room. “Lots, lots better.”

“Tell me, Hugh! Hurry!” Helen faced him, her eyes bright. “Don’t you see how excited you’re making me?”

“If you are half as excited as I am—”

Hugh began to pace the room, hands thrust deep in his pockets.

“See here, Helen, I’m not bothering you, am I—keeping you from your work?”

“If you are, I like being bothered,” Helen returned.

Hugh stopped before her, hands still in his pocket. He was trying hard to appear casual.

“I’ve got a big case, Helen; the biggest I’ve ever had a chance to handle.” He could not keep the tremor from his voice. “If I win it may mean—oh, it may mean—anything. I had to come and tell you.”

“Hugh! do you know how proud that makes me? It—oh, I am so wonderfully glad for you! How did it happen?”

“Only the Fates know!” Hugh spread his hands in a large gesture. “Just a tremendous stroke of luck, I guess. The big boss”—Hugh Draper practised law in the office of a celebrated firm of lawyers, Ross and Ruskin, by name. He had not yet thought himself strong enough to open his own office—“had to go out of town on another big case and—”

He paused for a moment and took another turn or two about the room.

“It all seems incredible, Helen!” He stopped before her again, his eyes shining. “I can’t really believe it yet. I had no idea Mr. Ross had confidence enough in me to let me handle a case like this. But that’s just what he’s done—handed it over to me, and no strings tied to it either. ‘I’ve been keeping an eye on you, Draper, and I know you can handle this thing as well as we can. How about it?’ Think of that! ‘How about it?’ he said!”

The young lawyer went over to the window and stood looking out, idly rattling the coins in his pocket.

Helen stood watching him for a moment, a tender little smile on her lips. Then she went over to the young fellow who had won his first round in the game of success and gently touched his arm.

Hugh turned to her, a quizzical smile on his lips, as though he were more than half ashamed of his outburst.

“Do you think I’m a kid?” he asked her.

“I think you’re—pretty nice,” she told him. “And this is just about the best thing that has ever happened to you, Hugh. Do you know, I never met your Mr. Ross, but I think he and I would be very good friends. We already agree on one point, you see. Oh, Hugh, how can I tell you how glad I am?”

“I thought maybe you’d be,” replied Hugh. And something caught in his throat and made him stare rather fixedly into the street again.

They had a gay time for a little while after that. Hugh must get back to the office, as he still had several things to attend to that afternoon, but he must take time to find how the old homestead was coming along and to admire Helen’s new sketch of the park scene.

Helen said she would make him tea if he could stay, but he declared that he had already overstayed his time limit.

“Got to get things ready for the big case,” he told her, hat in hand. “No more loafing now! If I should lose that case—”

“Hugh, don’t be foolish,” cried Helen quickly. “You couldn’t lose it!”

The young lawyer took a long breath and squared his shoulders.

“If *you* feel that way, maybe I can’t!” he said.

Helen watched him go; then turned back into the apartment. There was a smile on her lips as she closed the door.

She was glad, glad, that Hugh was to have this chance. But she, selfishly, perhaps, was still gladder that he had come to her with his good news.

If she crossed quickly over to the window she might see him as he passed on the other side of the street. She loved that new squared way he held his shoulders—the set of his head—

There came a sudden terrific crash from the street below. After the crash, a moment of dead silence, then a chorus of shrieks and groans and cries that caught at the heart.

Helen started forward, clutched at the window sill and peered down upon the turmoil in the street below. There must have been an accident—a fearful accident!

A blur spread before her eyes. She tried to clear it away and saw that it was steam on the window.

Impatiently she pushed up the sash and leaned far out.

Two automobiles had crashed into the store window on the opposite side of the street. That much she saw at a glance.

But what caught and held her horrified attention was the crowd of people that had gathered about an inert object on the sidewalk.

A thought struck Helen, wound itself like an icy hand about her heart.

Hugh had just gone out! Could that be Hugh?

# CHAPTER X

## TRAGEDY

WITHOUT pausing for hat or wraps, Helen flew from the apartment and stumbled down the interminable flights of stairs.

It was not Hugh! It could not be Hugh!

Over and over again she cried it to herself. If she said it often enough perhaps it would be true!

She reached the front entrance just as the door of the downstairs apartment opened and Hugh's mother appeared in the opening.

"Something dreadful has happened in the street. Do you think you had better go out just now, dear?" she asked of Helen.

With a heroic effort, the girl got herself in hand, choked back the words that were trembling on her lips:

"It may be your son out there on the sidewalk. That still form may be Hugh!"

Instead, she said, quite calmly and in almost her ordinary voice:

"I must go out; but I will try not to look."

Try not to look! When all her thoughts were concentrated in a fierce desire to get through that crowd somehow, anyhow, just so she satisfied herself that it was not Hugh!

As the girl ran across the street, from the distance came the clamor of an ambulance being rushed to the spot. Helen closed her ears to the sound of it, and ran more swiftly.

As she reached the opposite curb she saw that the crowd had grown denser about the scene of the accident. She wondered desperately if it would be possible to get through.

At her elbow stood a burly policeman who, armed with authority and a club, began shoving the curious from his path. Helen caught at his arm.

“Please,” she said faintly. “I want to see who—who is hurt. It may be a—friend.”

The officer glanced around at her impatiently; then took pity on her white face and trembling lips.

“Better keep close to me then, Miss, if you’re sure you want to see. May be a nasty mess,” he said.

The crowd opened before his authoritative approach—openly slowly and reluctantly and let them see what lay so still on the sidewalk.

“Hugh!” moaned Helen, and rushed forward, sinking to her knees beside the prostrate figure. Another woman was holding up his head, but Helen pushed her brusksly aside—did not seem to see her.

“Friend of yours, Miss?” asked the big policeman, then straightened up and looked behind him. “Here’s the ambulance.”

At the word Helen jerked up her head.

“Oh, no,” she cried. “His mother wouldn’t want him to go to the hospital. She lives just across the street. Please!”

The policeman nodded, not unkindly, and jerked a thumb toward the white-jacketed ambulance men who were making their way through the crowd.

“Tell that to them,” he advised. Then added, turning to one of the young surgeons: “There’s two inside the store. Pretty bad off I guess.”

The attendant nodded and went briskly inside the store. Another bent over Hugh.

Quickly he examined the wound in the young lawyer’s head.

“No fracture,” Helen heard him mutter to himself.

Then his legs—his poor legs—

Helen turned away her head, sobbing.

“Friend of yours, Miss?” The attendant spoke briskly.

Helen nodded dumbly.

“Live near here?”

“Just across the street. Is he—are his legs—badly hurt?”

“Crushed—the right leg worse.”



Helen pressed a hand tight upon her mouth. She would not cry again.

“You will take him home. We will not let him go to the hospital.”

“The hospital’s better, Miss. The surgeons can work better there.”

“No. Take him home,” replied the girl briefly.

The young attendant nodded and beckoned to two men who stood near with a stretcher.

“If you will show us the way, young lady.”

Then back through the staring, curious crowd, with Hugh on the swaying litter.

At the steps of the house, she waved them back.

“Let me go first,” she pleaded. “His mother—”

The attendant nodded.

“Better not waste any time. He needs attention badly.”

Then inside the house, knocking at Mrs. Draper’s door.

The lady came to the door, started back at sight of Helen’s white face and her reddened eyes.

“Hugh,” murmured Helen. She went forward quickly, putting an arm about the older woman. “Dear Mrs. Draper, I have no time to tell you anything but the truth. Hugh was hurt in that accident—”

“*Tell me the truth!*” cried Mrs. Draper, catching at her arm. “Is he—dead?”

“No, no!” cried Helen, sobbing. “Wait here and you shall see for yourself. Will you wait?”

Mrs. Draper nodded dumbly and stood like a figure turned to stone.

They brought Hugh in, white and motionless on the stretcher.

Mrs. Draper reached toward him once, said: “Hugh, my son; my dear son,” then drew herself together and led the way quietly, bravely into the room that was Hugh’s.

Helen did not follow—though she wanted, how she wanted, to be in there with Hugh. She sat straight and still in the dining room, hands clasped in her lap, ears straining for sounds from that other room while the hospital physician did his work.

Mrs. Draper came to her after an interminable waiting, looking very wan and pale, but wonderfully composed.

“Hugh is conscious. He is asking for you. Will you come?”

Would she come? Helen wondered how she kept her feet from flying into that room where Hugh was! But at the door she paused, her hand at her throat.

“You go in first!” she begged of Mrs. Draper, who had followed her.

The older woman nodded; opened the door.

Over her shoulder Helen could see Hugh lying there. His head was swathed in bandages and his eyes were closed.

The hospital surgeon who had attended him was packing away his instruments in his grip. He gave a quick glance at Helen as she entered; then nodded to Mrs. Draper and left the room.

The latter followed him, to receive instructions and to call up her own physician.

The door softly closed. Helen was alone with Hugh.

The young lawyer opened his eyes just then and saw her standing near the door. He smiled a little, wryly, and held out a hand to her. The girl went over to him quickly and took the hand in both her own. His fingers closed hard about hers.

“Helen—my case—”

“I know, Hugh. Poor Hugh!”

“Sit down a moment. I—don’t want you to go.”

He made an instinctive gesture as though to pull a chair nearer to the bed for her. A fierce spasm of pain convulsed his features. Helen cried out as though she felt the pain with him.

“Hugh, if you do that—if you try to move again—I will have to go away. Hugh, does it—is it—so very bad?”

Hugh said nothing for a moment; then opened eyes that were haggard with pain.

“I—don’t mind—that,” he said, speaking with difficulty. “I was thinking of my case—my big chance—”

“Hush!” said Helen, her hand against his mouth. “You must try not to think of that just now. Perhaps by the time the case comes up you will be well again.”

Hugh groaned.

“But there is data to be compiled, evidence to be looked into,” he said. “Witnesses to be examined—”

“Perhaps I could help a little later,” said Helen gently. “If I could go down to the office, explain to the members of the firm, get your papers—read them to you, perhaps.”

“Helen—would you—would you do that for me?”

“Much more than that,” replied Helen gently.

“But you are busy—you have your own work.”

“I will do my own work, too.”

She raised his head and smoothed the pillow down beneath it.

“Now try to rest,” she urged. “Everything is going to be *all right*.”

He took the soft hand that had smoothed the pillow beneath his head and pressed it to his face.

“You are good, Helen—good,” he muttered, eyes closing against the fierce wave of pain that swept him. “You—”

“Hush. Don’t wear yourself out. Your mother is coming back.”

Mrs. Draper opened the door, came over to the bed and stood looking down upon her son. She saw his hand clenched upon the counterpane, the grim set of his mouth that fought back the flood of agony. For a moment she hesitated, took his hand in hers and, leaning down, kissed it. Hugh’s eyes flickered a brief response, then Mrs. Draper nodded to Helen.

Together they left the room.

They did not speak until the door was closed between them and Hugh. Then Mrs. Draper motioned Helen to a seat. The face of the older woman was very pale, but she was wonderfully composed.

“The surgeon who was here,” she began, without preamble, “gave me very little hope, Helen. He says Hugh must have been caught between the two automobiles as they crashed together through the store window. He says it was a marvel Hugh wasn’t killed.”

“But he thinks now that he will get well?” Helen held her breath for the answer.

“He thinks he may get well.” Mrs. Draper spoke so softly Helen had to lean forward to catch the words. “But, oh, Helen, my boy, my poor boy may be a cripple for the rest of his life!”

# CHAPTER XI

## IN DELIRIUM

“A CRIPPLE for the rest of his life!”

Helen shrank back as though she had received a physical blow.

It was not possible—it could not be possible! Hugh, splendid, upstanding, brilliant Hugh, a cripple!

She hid her face in her hands, as though by that means to shut from her mind the appalling thought.

What would become of him, of his career, if that surgeon’s prediction were right? What would his mother do, this quiet woman sitting so stoically in the chair opposite her?

But the optimism in Helen, that instinctive reaching after sunshine and happiness inherited from her mother, began to assert itself.

Doctors were by no means infallible. Patients whom they had predicted would die in a few months had surprised and chagrined their physicians by living to a ripe old age.

She pointed this out to Mrs. Draper and the older woman smiled wistfully and gently patted her hand.

“You are right, dear. If we did not have hope, we should be poor indeed. Besides, Hugh is young and strong. He told you, I suppose,” she said after a momentary pause, “about his new case?”

Helen nodded.

“I told him I would read his briefs to him, or do anything else I could to help,” she said.

Mrs. Draper reached out and put an arm about her.

“You are a dear girl,” she said gently. “I had hoped—that some day—”

But what she had hoped Helen was not destined to know just then, for at that moment the doorbell pealed out a brisk impatient summons that would

not be denied.

“I called up our own doctor,” Mrs. Draper hurriedly explained. “I knew that I would feel safer if he examined Hugh.”

“Then I will go on up,” Helen said. “But if Hugh wants me, or if there is anything I can do for you, Mrs. Draper, will you be sure to let me know?”

Mrs. Draper nodded and opened the door for the physician.

As the dignified, white-haired surgeon entered, Helen slipped past him into the hall unnoticed.

She went slowly up the stairs, feeling strangely weak and shaken, now that the need for action and courage and consideration of others was at an end.

The apartment was dead and lonesome. She went about the preparations for supper spiritlessly. She could only think of Hugh in his agony downstairs, wanted only to be with Hugh so that she might aid him, might try to comfort him.

She was glad when the sound of a key in the lock announced that Rose had come home. Margy was not expected, for it was one of the nights she attended night school and she generally went directly to the school from Miss Pepper’s.

Rose came in jauntily. It had been a pleasant day at the store and she was full of interesting and unusual things to tell Helen. It was always great fun telling things to Helen, for she was an excellent listener and always heartily enjoyed the tid-bits of fun her sisters saved up for her.

Rose flung her hat on one chair, her coat on another, and treated Helen to a tremendous hug.

“My, but it’s good to be home, Nell. Yum—yum, that steak smells good! Plenty of onions? You have, bless your thoughtful heart. I say, Helen, old girl, what’s wrong?”

Rose took her sister by the shoulders and turned her round so that she must face the light.

“You’ve been crying, Nell,” she accused. “You—why, bless my heart, you’re doing it again!”

“The steak’s burning—”

“Oh, bother the steak!”

Rose reached over, and with one skillful flip of her hand, turned the gas off under the steak.

“Now come in here and tell your sister all about it!”

Protesting, Helen was carried off into the front room. Rose listened while Helen just touched on the calamitous events of the afternoon.

“Poor Hugh! Poor Hugh!” said Rose, over and over again. “Will he—will his legs be all right—after a while?”

Helen swallowed something hard in her throat.

“Rose, they say he may never—walk again—” Her voice broke and Rose looked at her sharply.

“Poor Nell, you look worn to death. Of course you had to be all alone when it happened. Come here and lie down, you poor dear, while I get dinner.”

“But I don’t want to lie down, and dinner is ready except the steak,” Helen protested wearily. “When I do my head whirls around and around like a top.”

“Well, *sit* down then,” amended Rose, allowing her sister to follow her into the kitchen. “You look about ready to drop!”

Even though she protested, Helen found it very comforting to have her young sister wait on her and fuss about her and see that she had enough to eat.

They spoke very little during the meal, for their thoughts were on Mrs. Draper and Hugh in the apartment below.

“I wonder what caused the accident,” said Rose, at last.

She had cleared off the meat and vegetables and had placed on the table the baked apples Helen had prepared for dessert.

“It seems strange,” she added, “for two automobiles to crash into a store like that. You could understand one of them running amuck. Did you hear how it happened?”

Helen shook her head indifferently. She was not curious as to how the accident had happened. It was enough for her to bear the terrible knowledge that it had happened.

“Was any one else hurt?”

With an effort Helen roused herself from her abstraction.

“Any one hurt?” she repeated vaguely. “Yes, I think so. I heard a policeman say something about two inside the store that needed attention.”

“The drivers of the cars, probably,” Rose announced, as she dug her spoon deep into the juicy heart of an apple. “One was on the wrong side of the road, no doubt, and they swerved together instead of in opposite directions. It’s a wonder people on the sidewalk weren’t hurt.”

“*Hugh* was!” said Helen, and there fell between the sisters a brooding silence that neither of them seemed inclined to break.

Later, when the dishes were washed and Rose was in bed, Helen slipped downstairs to knock at the door of the Drapers’ and inquire about the patient.

Mrs. Draper said that Hugh was sleeping just then, as the result of a sedative the doctor had given him.

“Doctor Brown is either more hopeful than the other doctor, or he is trying to cheer me a little,” she told Helen wearily. “He said that with rest and care there was at least an equal chance that Hugh might recover entirely. I don’t know, as I say, whether he really thought that or just meant to be kind.”

Helen said all the encouraging things she could think of and then went on upstairs, vaguely disappointed because she had not been able to see Hugh again that night.

If only Doctor Brown were right! He must be right! This thought was last in her mind before she dropped into a restless, troubled sleep.

As soon as she could the next morning, after getting breakfast for Rose and seeing her off, Helen went downstairs to see how the patient was.

Mrs. Draper, looking thinner and more worn than ever, met her at the door with the report that Hugh had been awake since four o’clock and in terrible pain.

“He has been asking for you. Come, Helen,” Mrs. Draper added, and, without further words, led the way quickly toward the sick room.

Hugh was haggard and his eyes seemed to have sunk deeper in their sockets during the pain-filled night. But he smiled at Helen and, held out a hand to her.



“It was good of you to come,” he said. “I hoped you would. You bring—all the—sunshine—with you.”

At the labored words something tightened about Helen’s heart. Every one had said that of her dear mother—that where she went the sunshine always followed. It must be true then, what her sisters said—that she was like their mother.

She took Hugh’s outstretched hand, but saw that already his mind had wandered from her. His eyes had closed and he was muttering vaguely, disconnectedly.

“He is delirious,” said Mrs. Draper, coming in softly and standing close beside the girl. “Helen, I am afraid!”

# CHAPTER XII

## THE ATTENTIONS OF CHESTER DREW

DOCTOR BROWN came in soon afterward.

The examination of his patient lasted a considerable time, and at the close of it his face was grave.

“You must have a nurse,” he told Mrs. Draper. “With that temperature your son must not be left for a moment, day or night.”

“I will nurse him, Doctor,” Mrs. Draper’s voice was pitiful in its bravery. But Doctor Brown shook his gray head more decidedly.

“I have reason to know that you are an excellent nurse, Mrs. Draper,” he told her, with the privileged familiarity of long acquaintance. “But even the most efficient nurse must rest sometimes. A nurse he must have. I will send one up in half an hour.”

He turned away, as though the matter was definitely settled—as, indeed, it was. If Hugh needed a nurse, he must have one, though Helen knew that the extra expense would severely tax the resources of Hugh and of his widowed mother.

Poor Hugh, who had been so tender of his mother, saving her all worry, who had, only yesterday, told her that they were on their way to fortune, lying there helpless, delirious in fever!

What would his future be now? Even though he recovered the use of his crushed legs, he would almost certainly lose this big case of his on which he had counted so much.

Helen thought of him as he had been the day before, so strong, so full of hope and enthusiasm. Until he became stronger, she would not even be able to help him by reading his briefs to him. And suppose—she shrank from the thought—the very worst should happen? Hugh, a helpless cripple, unable to walk, only half a man! Better that he had met his death yesterday than that!

Helen stayed with Mrs. Draper until the nurse arrived, then, feeling herself in the way and knowing that she had work of her own to do, went

upstairs.

A little before noon Mrs. Draper came to her and begged her to stay with Hugh a little while.

“He is calling for you incessantly,” the young man’s mother said. “The nurse says that his temperature is rising and wants me to beg you to come to him.”

“But he is delirious,” said Helen, as she locked her door and went with Mrs. Draper downstairs. “This morning he did not know me at all.”

Mrs. Draper nodded.

“The nurse says that he will know you, even in his delirium, and be quieted by the knowledge that you are near him.”

Mrs. Draper gave her a queer little side glance that Helen was at a loss to interpret. How could she have known, not ever having been in the position of this widowed mother, that Mrs. Draper was experiencing a twinge of jealousy at the realization that she was not sufficient to her son in this emergency?

Helen forgot her temporary bewilderment as she stepped again into the sick room. The nurse, a dark-haired, efficient-looking young woman, who was stirring something in a glass, looked up as she entered.

She looked from Helen to Mrs. Draper and motioned to the older woman to step back as Helen approached the bed.

Helen bent over the invalid, heard that he was muttering something over and over. She bent closer and found that it was her own name he was calling, restlessly, feverishly.

She dropped to her knees beside the bed and put her hand gently on his.

“Hugh! It is I—Helen,” she said gently. “Do you know me?”

Hugh turned his head and his fingers closed over hers in a grip that hurt. For a moment his eyes opened and fixed themselves intelligently, hungrily, upon her face.

“Helen, don’t go away! Say you won’t. I—want you—here.”

His eyes closed again, but the grip on her hand remained steady and firm.

“I won’t go away, Hugh,” she told him gently. “As long as you need me I will be right here.”

“Good—little—Helen!”

He sighed and seemed to relax in every muscle. The hand that held hers fell limply upon the covers.

The nurse came forward and bent over him.

“He is sleeping,” she said softly. “If he sleeps he may get well. You will not go away?” she asked of Helen.

The latter shook her head, her eyes full of tears.

“Not while I can help him,” she reiterated.

And, having given her promise, she wondered how she could keep it and still get her picture done in the time limit set by Mr. Bullard.

The answer, suggested by Rose when she came home that evening, was so simple that Helen wondered why she had not thought of it in the first place.

She could do her painting in Hugh’s room until the delirium passed and he was on the road to health again. There was a good light, and if she sat near the window she could see sufficiently well.

This plan she put in operation the next day, to the approval of the nurse and the grateful appreciation of Mrs. Draper. And as long as Hugh, by turning his head, could see her sitting there, he seemed content.

Meanwhile Rose was having her own experiences at the store, and not all of them were pleasant.

Chester Drew, the new floorwalker and the young man who had been introduced to them so dramatically on the Riverdale road, continued to form a striking contrast to his two predecessors, Herbert Shomberg and Henry Goos. Even the acid suggestions of Miss O’Brien in regard to stricter discipline in the department did not swerve him in his policy of genial leniency toward the girls under his charge.

Before the end of the first three days, there was not one of these same girls who did not like and trust him, and some of them were quite openly sentimental over him.

This being the case, it is perhaps not unnatural that a certain amount of jealousy should be aroused by Chester Drew’s persistent attentions to Rose.

Rose, for her part, received these attentions in the off-hand manner that was characteristic of her and the wonder and envy of all her mates.

“Some day you’ll wake up to realize your blessings, girlie, and then maybe it will be too late,” Annabelle warned her solemnly. “Take this new boss of ours now, for instance—one of the best lookers I ever laid eyes on. And I ought to be a pretty good judge, Posie, believe me, having seen one or two in my short but hectic life—as they say in the movies. A high stepper, too! And what do you do to him?”

“What do I?” asked Rose, laughing.

It was the early morning and the store held so few customers that time hung rather heavy on the hands of the clerks behind the counters. Annabelle had collected quite a bevy of bobbed-haired girls about her and was holding forth in her best style—something that would not have been permitted beneath the harsh rule of Shomborg and Goos. Birdie North, who always seemed to find something for her busy fingers to do, no matter what the time or season, had moved to the far end of the counter and seemed not to be listening to the conversation.

“What do I do?” Rose repeated, while Annabelle regarded her severely and the other girls looked on with varying degrees of amusement.

“You treat him like he was cross-eyed and pigeon-toed into the bargain,” replied Annabelle, pressing her sleek bobbed hair still closer to her shapely head. “As I said before, you don’t appreciate your blessings.”

“Hush—‘my blessing’ approaches,” cried Rose, in a loud and dramatic whisper, catching sight of Chester Drew over the heads of her audience. “Hie you hence, wenches, e’er he crush you with one glance from his eagle eye!”

The girls dispersed to the accompaniment of suppressed giggles.

“All I’ve got to say,” remarked Annabelle, a gleam of amusement in her dark eyes, “is that any one can take that tone with a fellow like Chester Drew, ain’t the lady I thought her.”

“Oh, Annabelle, take back them cruel words,” Rose begged her, grinning. “They pierce me to the quick—I mean to the heart!”

“Keep still, can’t you, dumb-bell?” said Annabelle amiably. “Don’t you see he’s headed this way?”

# CHAPTER XIII

## LOST FRIENDSHIP

ANNABELLE BLACK was not the only one who perceived that Mr. Chester Drew was headed toward the millinery trimmings counter.

Birdie North, though apparently busy with her work, had not for a moment taken her eyes from the handsome floorwalker.

Mr. Drew stopped several times in his progress across the floor. He said good-morning to every one, and even when he dropped a word or two of advice concerning the sales of the day before, his criticism was made in so genial and pleasant a manner that the girls felt grateful to him, rather than resentful.

As Annabelle had once remarked, in her expressive slang, "he had a gift."

Eventually Chester Drew reached the millinery trimmings counter and after a nod to Annabelle and a brief word of greeting to Birdie North, he leaned across the counter, giving his full attention to Rose.

Rose liked the new floorwalker very much indeed. In fact, it would have been difficult to find any excuse for not liking him. But she had found it in her heart to wish many times that he had been a trifle more discreet about showing his admiration for herself.

The jealousy, more or less assumed, of the other girls in the department, she would have minded not at all. It was the strange attitude of Birdie North that troubled and depressed her. Why should Birdie seem so to resent the growing intimacy between her and Chester Drew?

Certainly it could not be because Birdie herself liked the young fellow. The motive here, surely, could not be jealousy, since the girl had scarcely exchanged half a dozen words with the floorwalker since he had taken up his duties in the store.

And yet, there could be no doubt but what the friendship between herself and Chester Drew had made a change in Birdie. On the few occasions when

the two girls had been alone together, there had been a barrier between them, no less real, because it was intangible.

At first Rose had been more surprised than hurt, and wondered if there had been anything she had said or done that might possibly cause her friend offense.

She tried being unusually friendly to the girl, hoping to win her back to the old, loving relationship. For Rose was sincerely fond of Birdie North and of her patient, invalid mother.

When this method had failed, when still Birdie held aloof and refused the old intimacy, Rose went to her frankly and asked her what the matter was; told her generously that if, she, Rose had been at fault, she would do anything she could to make things right.

Birdie had not only refused to meet her friendly mood, but had answered so shortly and curtly that, for the first time, Rose was deeply hurt and offended.

From that time on the gap had widened slowly and inexorably between her and her old friend, a gap that Birdie was unwilling, and Rose unable, to bridge.

There were no longer pleasant evenings at the North apartment with Rose bringing little tempting surprises to the invalid, in the hope of brightening the weary monotony of her life.

Rose would do no more toward mending the situation. She felt that she had gone as far as she could and that if Birdie cared to resume the old relationship, it was for her to say so.

Still, this decision did not prevent Rose from worrying about Birdie and noticing how unusually thin and frail the girl began to look.

“Life was terribly unfair,” Rose told herself, as she regarded her own blooming face in the mirror. What had she done to deserve good fortune more than Birdie? Nothing! As a matter of fact, her sense of justice told her that Birdie worked harder, thought of herself less, sacrificed herself more than she, Rose Blythe, had ever done.

Yet, Birdie, because her health was bad and because she had been forced for years to bear a burden far too heavy for her slender shoulders, grew more thin and peaked daily, losing whatever looks she might have had under happier circumstances, while she, Rose Blythe, reveled in perfect health and the joy of life that perfect health brings.

But while she had no doubt that the whole thing was unfair, Rose had not the slightest idea in the world how she was going to make it less so.

And because of the strained relations between her and Birdie, Rose wished fervently on this particular morning that handsome, young Chester Drew would not lean quite so intimately across the counter toward her and that he would show his admiration for her with a little less frankness.

Still, she could not be short with Chester Drew for two very good reasons; first, because she liked him unusually well—almost as well as she liked Joe!—and second because it was practically impossible to be unpleasant to a young man who was amiability itself.

“There’s a good show on there,” she heard him saying, and resolutely drew her attention from Birdie, busily sorting merchandise at the other end of the counter. “I was wondering if we couldn’t take it in.”

Rose was about to refuse, for she had made a tentative engagement with Joe Morris for that evening, half-promising to go to the movies with him.

But at that moment Annabelle, passed behind her with a box, gave Rose a swift dig with an over-sharp elbow.

“Don’t be a dumb-bell!” she hissed.

Aware that Birdie North had overheard both the invitation and Annabelle’s whispered admonition; aware also that Birdie had stiffened suddenly and seemed to wait with caught breath for the answer, Rose turned sweetly to Chester Drew.

“It’s mighty nice of you to ask me,” she told him. “I’ve really been hoping I would get to see that show.”

Behind Chester Drew’s half-turned shoulder, Annabelle Black nodded her approval. But Rose had heard a sound from Birdie North like a gasp, or a stifled sob. The next moment she thought she must have been mistaken, for Birdie was going about her work in quite the usual way, her quiet little face devoid, as usual, of any emotion save strain and weariness.

During the afternoon Rose repented several times of having accepted the young floorwalker’s invitation. In the first place, she was not at all sure that Helen would approve of her going out to dinner and then to the theater with a man the eldest of the Blythe sisters did not know. Rose felt that she really should have had Chester Drew at their apartment before accepting his invitation for dinner and the theater.



In the second place, she had almost promised Joe to go with him to the movies that night, and she discovered suddenly that she really did hate to disappoint Joe. They always had such good times together.

However, they could go some other night—if Joe was not too cross with her.

She telephoned to Helen at the Drapers' apartment and gained a rather reluctant consent from her.

"I wish you had brought him up to the house first, Rose, and started from here," Helen said, and Rose felt that she did not approve. Rose felt rather a beast for worrying her just now, when she was so upset about poor Hugh. However, there was nothing to do now but go through with it.

As a matter of fact, Chester Drew proved such a charming host and gave Rose such a splendid time, that she soon forgot her slightly guilty conscience in whole-souled enjoyment of the evening.

When they reached the apartment, a little after twelve, Rose found Helen up and waiting for them.

It was a cold night and the older girl had prepared some hot cocoa and made a few sandwiches for them in case they were hungry. And they were hungry, for Rose had resolutely refused Drew's invitation to go to a quiet restaurant after the theater and have supper.

Leaving her escort in the front room, Rose followed her sister into the kitchen to help bring in the refreshments. Helen was looking very white and tired from her long vigil with Hugh and Rose was touched that she had remembered her and Chester Drew and provided for their comfort.

"Here, let me do that," she commanded, as Helen placed three cups upon the table and started to pour the cocoa into them. "You are dreadfully tired, Nell, and it was dear of you to wait up for us. Nell, were you worried about me?"

Helen put an arm about her pretty sister and hugged her.

"Not when I trust my little sister the way I do," she answered. "I don't believe you would do anything, any more than I would, Rose, that we would be ashamed to have mother know about."

The hand with which Rose poured the cocoa paused. Then she put down the pot and turned to her sister. Blue eyes met blue eyes in a steady, fearless gaze. Then—

“You have my word on that, Nell. Shall I promise?”

“Your word is all I want. Thank you, dear.”

Both girls were deeply moved, for it seemed, in some strange way, as though their mother had been there close beside them, directing them, guiding them lovingly as in the old days.

They almost forgot about Chester Drew until Rose, with a nervous little laugh, picked up the tray of sandwiches and started toward the sitting room.

“What do you think of him, Nell?” she whispered over her shoulder, as Helen followed with the cocoa. “Don’t you think he is good looking?”

“Handsome is as handsome does,” primly quoted Helen, and then laughed at her own primness.

Nevertheless, before he left the apartment that night, Helen had taken a fancy to Chester Drew, and since they had really met before, almost outside the gates of Miss Jessica Jellicoe’s house, he could not be called a stranger.

“You do like him,” said Rose when, some time later, she closed the door upon Chester Drew and turned for approval to her sister. “I told you you would.”

“Joe called to-night,” Helen offered, with apparent irrelevance. “He left, swearing vengeance on Chester Drew.”

# CHAPTER XIV

## SUSPECTED

IF finding that the one time Chester Drew had gone out with Rose was sufficient to throw Joe Morris into a rage and cause him to swear vengeance on the good-looking floorwalker, how much more raging was he destined to do in the days that followed?

For Chester Drew repeated his invitation to Rose and was again accepted.

Joe took Rose to the moving pictures and was so grouchy during the showing of the films that Rose was moved to inquire the cause of his ill humor.

“It’s that fellow you’re going out with all the time.”

“Just twice, so far,” murmured Rose.

“If I had known it was going to be like this,” continued Joe, not deigning to notice the interruption, “I would have left Henry Goos in his place.”

“Joe, you never could have been so cruel,” coaxed Rose. “You really have a very pleasant face!”

Now what could any one do with a girl like that? Surely Joe Morris did not know!

However, Joe did know one thing. And that was that Chester Drew’s attentions to Rose had done something uncomfortable to his state of mind. He became irritable and moody and not at all like the pleasant genial Joe of old.

However, Rose had too much to think about in Birdie North’s queer attitude toward Chester Drew to worry much about Joe—just then.

The more she studied her erstwhile friend and the handsome floorwalker—and the latter gave her plenty of opportunity to study him—the more convinced she became that some mysterious incident of the past lay at the root of Birdie’s strange behavior.

The day after she, Rose, and Chester Drew had gone to the theater together, Rose almost bumped into Birdie in the locker room and found to her dismay that the girl had been crying. Birdie-like, she had run off to the seclusion of the locker room to hide her hurt.

But when Rose, all sympathy, forgetful of past coldness, put an arm about the other girl and sought to comfort her, she met with a rebuff that sent her away from the spot, head up, cheeks flaming.

“All right, if that’s the way she’s going to act, she can have all the room she wants,” Rose told herself hotly. “One thing I do know, and that is, from this time on I am through worrying about Birdie North!”

Which fiery resolution did not in the least keep her from worrying just the same!

Meantime, Hugh was gradually getting better. His temperature was normal once more and he no longer suffered agony from his crushed legs.

He could even, after a while, with the help of the nurse and Helen, sit up in bed, propped with pillows, his bandaged legs stretched out stiffly before him.

The wound in his head mended first, since there had been no fracture of the bone. The day when the doctor first removed the bandages and Helen saw the livid scar, extending from the forehead far up into the hair, she felt faint and sick. She was realizing for the first time just how near he had been to death.

The girl still did most of her work sitting by the window in Hugh’s room. For though the young fellow, the victim of a strange lassitude, scarcely seemed to notice her when she was in the room, he became restless and uneasy the moment she left it.

Both Rose and Margy came to see him often, bringing various delicacies such as chicken broth, with a delicious hot, homemade roll done up in a napkin—this last, Margy’s production—to go with it (though, it is true, he was not allowed to eat the roll) lemon jelly and various other examples of the housewife’s art, famous for their appetite-provoking qualities.

But though these visits cheered Hugh and he seemed to look forward to them, it was Helen that he wanted all the time, Helen who helped him daily to conquer the lassitude produced by weakness, who, by her persistent, quiet cheerfulness was slowly winning him back to health and hope.

Meanwhile Margy was beginning again to encounter difficulties in the household of Miss Pepper. The new rôle she had assumed, at the instigation of Dale Elton, was beginning to lose its charm. There was too much work and worry attached to it.

In the first place, some time before, Margy had come to the conclusion that what the young reporter had hinted at in reference to Rex Pepper's intentions toward his elderly maiden aunt and Margy's employer went far deeper into the heart and scheming mind of this young fellow than even Dale had supposed.

There was an intangible air of mystery about the house that worried Margy and prevented her from concentrating on the work assigned to her.

Also, she could not help noticing that relations between aunt and nephew were becoming more and more strained.

"There is something afoot, I don't like the flavor of," she told herself one day, when, quite unexpectedly, she found Rex Pepper listening at his aunt's closed door. "I wish some one would call Rex Pepper off to Asia or Africa or some such heathenish place. Then maybe he would be put into a stew by the natives—a much more useful occupation than he has at present, anyway. Then perhaps I could get down to my work once more."

This rather blood-thirsty wish was so contrary to Margy's usual good-natured self, that even she had to smile at it. But, at that, it was a rather wry smile, for Margy was genuinely worried and alarmed.

Just when she got the impression that the presumptive heir to Miss Pepper's fortune suspected her of spying upon him, Margy could not tell. However, she did receive that impression and felt also that some of the animosity Rex Pepper felt for his aunt had been directed toward her.

Then, as though to bring matters to a head, Miss Pepper received news that a niece, living at a distance, was about to be married.

She declared, in her usual forthright way, to her social secretary that she would rather be "strung up" than go to the wedding. But it was expected and, despite her numerous peculiarities, Miss Dorcas Pepper almost always did what was expected of her.

Margy went to the train with the eccentric little old lady and saw her off with no little foreboding.

"If I am not much mistaken, Rex Pepper will be up to some special mischief while she is gone," she told herself, as she gave the chauffeur

direction to drive back to Miss Pepper's as quickly as possible.

They arrived without delay at the Riverside Drive home, and with a feeling of premonition Margy descended from the limousine, smiled absently upon the chauffeur, who greatly admired her, and hurried into the house.

She went directly to her room, bent upon changing from her street things and tackling the mass of work Miss Pepper had left behind her.

As she started up the stairs a slight sound in the hall above caught her attention.

She almost ran up the remaining few steps and was in time to see Rex Pepper turn from Miss Pepper's closed door and come nonchalantly down the hall toward her.

"Back so soon?" he asked, with a smile, and Margy had a moment of admiration for his marvelous self-control.

"Yes," she replied coldly, and went on to her room a little farther down the wide hall. Her heart was beating more quickly than usual when she came to it, however, for there had been something about Rex Pepper that had frightened her.

There had come a queer, almost evil, look in his eyes and he had stepped before her, as though to block her path.

He had thought better of it and gone off down the stairs whistling. But Margy could not help wondering, breathlessly, just what would have happened if he had not changed his mind!

For the first time since she had turned amateur detective the personal equation entered in. It was not the best thing for her, she realized suddenly, to be left alone in the house with Rex Pepper—especially if he really did believe she suspected him.

The next moment she was scolding herself soundly. Of course she was not really alone in the house. There was the chauffeur, who disliked "Mr. Rex" and would do anything for her. And there was Oliver, the stout and three-chinned butler, who could be counted upon to do exactly as she said, regardless of the feelings or rages of his employer's nephew.

Yes, the thought of Oliver was immensely comforting. Margy did not know when she had liked any one so much as Oliver, impressive abdomen, three chins and all!

It was the confidence bestowed by this thought of Oliver that prompted Margy to go herself to Miss Pepper's room and see for herself whether all was right within.

She would feel safer to know that all papers of her employer, not personally left with her, were safe beneath lock and key.

So feeling rather breathless herself, she watched her chance when no one was about in the great hall and slipped into Miss Pepper's room. All was, apparently, as its owner had left it.

The room was large and handsomely furnished, and though Margy had been in it once or twice before, she had never really felt acquainted with it until now.

The furniture was of mahogany, great four-poster bed, dresser, full-length vanity desk and chaise longue—this last heaped high with soft-toned satin cushions.

The room, exquisitely feminine in all its appointments, was not easily to be reconciled with Miss Pepper's prim eccentricities. As a matter of fact, Margy knew that her employer had had nothing to do with the furnishing of the beautiful house on the Drive. She simply "could not be bothered" with anything so trivial as interior decorating, and so had hired a decorator to do the work for her.

Evidently the decorator had furnished the house to suit herself, without any regard whatever to Miss Pepper's personal tastes and preferences.

There was a large desk in one corner of the room, and to this Margy went immediately. She felt instinctively that any important papers of her employer that were not in the safety deposit vaults or in, her, Margy's charge would be in that desk.

She had just time to pull at the knob of it and assure herself that it was locked when a slight sound in the hall without froze her to immobility.

Some one was outside that door!

# CHAPTER XV

## A THREAT

HAND at her throat, Margy stood there, her fascinated gaze upon the closed door.

Who was outside there, in the hall?

Jane, Miss Pepper's maid? Oliver, perhaps?

How, if discovered by either of these two, was she to explain her presence in her employer's room? Any explanation she might attempt to make would be too far-fetched for credence.

At that moment a hand was laid upon the knob of the door and it began slowly to turn.

Margy's hesitation vanished. Suddenly she was quite certain that neither Jane nor the butler, Oliver, would come to Miss Pepper's room that way—stealthily.

She had twice caught Rex Pepper just without the door to her employer's private room. Almost certainly Rex Pepper was making his third attempt.

Quick as a flash the girl sped across the floor. The door had begun to open soundlessly. She flung herself against it, forcing it to close.

There was a stifled exclamation from the other side of the closed door. There could be no longer any possible doubt of the identity of the intruder. Margy had recognized Rex Pepper's voice.

The key was in the lock. Margy turned it and leaned against the door, panting in swift reaction. She felt frightened and tremendously excited.

What would happen next?

It happened suddenly and with vehemence—a short double rap of furious knuckles against the door.

“Who is in there?” came a cautiously lowered, though wrathful, voice from the other side. “Will you open that door, or shall I have to knock it



down?”

“You may break it down if you please.” Margy was suddenly calm again at sound of that infuriated voice. She felt that, strong as he was, she had a tremendous advantage over Rex Pepper at that moment. “Break it down, if you please,” she repeated, more quietly still. “But I shouldn’t think you would care for the fuss.”

There was a moment of pregnant silence on the other side of that closed door. Evidently Rex Pepper was busy digesting the realization that it was Margy Blythe who had so unceremoniously locked him out of his aunt’s room.

Evidently he had decided upon a more conciliatory approach, for when he spoke again his words and tone were mild.

“Please open the door, Miss Blythe,” he said. “I haven’t the slightest idea, in the first place, why you have locked it.”

“I locked it in order to keep you out,” answered Margy, seeing no reason for concealing a brutal truth which he knew as well as she.

By means of that strange sixth sense that comes to one in such situations, Margy knew that her blunt statement had caused Rex Pepper to seethe with renewed rage.

However, his voice was merely formal as he said, frigidly:

“I would like to ask you one question, Miss Blythe. Who has a better right in my aunt’s room, you or I?”

“It would seem I have,” retorted Margy, with fully-restored confidence, “since Miss Pepper left me in full charge of her house and everything in it during her absence.”

There was a startled exclamation on the other side of the door.

“That is not true!” cried Rex Pepper. “My aunt could not have been so insane.”

“She was not in the least insane,” retorted Margy, and was feeling so sure of herself by that time, that she dared add: “In fact, the mere fact that she left things in my charge instead of yours seems to me sufficient commentary on her common sense!”

“Are you going to open that door?” cried the young man, no longer concealing his fury. “Are you?”

“As soon as you go away, I will be very glad to,” retorted Margy blandly.

Another silence outside in the hall, longer than any of its predecessors.

Then, in a voice that struck coldly through Margy’s triumph, came:

“You think you are very bright, just now, no doubt, Margy Blythe. But I think I can venture to say that if you do not keep your wits about you, you may find yourself in serious trouble. Any one who is foolish enough to take hold of a red hot poker is apt to burn his hands before he can let go of it again.”

“So I have been told,” retorted Margy coolly. “And from what I have been able to learn, I shouldn’t wonder if that old saying applies very neatly to yourself!”

Whether this shot went home or not, she was unable to tell. Nothing but silence greeted her from the other side of that closed door.

After the silence had continued unbroken for several minutes she concluded that Rex Pepper had decided to withdraw for the time being. The rugs on the hall were so thick and soft that a stealthy exit was easy.

Perhaps Rex Pepper had heard some one approaching and had decided that discretion was the better part of valor.

The thought was not a pleasant one, since Margy had no desire to be found by either Jane or Oliver locked in their mistress’ room. On the other hand, she did not wish to open the door until she was quite sure Rex Pepper was gone.

After listening for several moments longer, she decided that it was safe to take a chance.

Silently she unlocked the door and slipped the key from the lock. The door opened beneath her light touch, slowly, cautiously.

Her heart beat wildly and almost with a sense of guilt as, assured that no one was lurking there, she slipped into the hall.

It took only a second to turn the key in the lock. It was the work of a moment more to glide down the remaining few feet to the welcome sanctuary of her own room. Margy closed and locked the door, then looked at the key in her hand.

She gave a cry of delight as she noticed that it was a foreign, hand-made key. That was one bit of luck, anyway. She had been worrying for fear Rex

Pepper, by means of a master key, might be able to enter his aunt's room in spite of her. But a master key was helpless before the intricacies of a hand-made key.

To open Miss Pepper's door now would mean that her nephew would have to engage the services of a locksmith who, in his turn, would have to examine the lock and make a key to fit it.

All this would take time, and, almost certainly, would require a number of explanations.

She might consider then, that, as long as the key remained upon her person, Miss Pepper's room was safe from intrusion by Rex Pepper.

Margy took from her drawer a gold chain which she had worn as a child. Because it had been given her by her mother and contained her mother's picture, Margy carried it with her wherever she went.

Now she slipped the locket from the chain and put it back into the drawer. The key she strung in its place upon the chain and fastened it about her neck, letting the key fall under her dress.

"Now, Mr. Rex Pepper," she told her excited reflection in the mirror, "you will have an interesting time finding your aunt's key. Try to get it!"

With this defiance she marched from the room and down to the library. She did not even bother to lock her own door.

Just the same, in spite of all this show of bravery, Margy was in a state of nervous excitement all that afternoon that precluded her most earnest efforts to dispose of the mass of unopened correspondence that awaited her attention.

Her peace of mind was not benefited greatly by a meeting with Rex Pepper that same evening.

They passed quite close in the hall, and at sight of her there crept into Rex Pepper's eyes a look so venomous that she shrank before it.

"You're looking for trouble, aren't you?" he said. "And those," he added in a level, cold voice, "who look for trouble, generally find more than they want!"

# CHAPTER XVI

## A MARVELOUS OFFER

THOUGH REX PEPPER'S words and the memory of his look when saying them kept Margy awake for most of the night, she hesitated about taking her troubles to her sisters.

Rose, always optimistic, would probably only laugh and say both she and Dale were letting their imaginations run off with them. Rose was having too much fun with good-looking Chester Drew at the Lossar-Martin store to have much interest in anything else, these days. Odd, that the new floorwalker in Rose's department should be one of the two victims of that automobile accident on Long Island.

Margy remembered that Chester Drew was not only good-looking but had seemed to her, even on that brief acquaintance, a remarkably likable young man.

She wondered how Helen felt about this new friendship and made a mental note to ask her on her next evening at home.

That was the only unpleasant thing about her position, she thought regretfully; that she was forced to spend so much time away from her sisters. Sometimes she felt that she was getting out of touch with them.

She thought of telling Helen of her new perplexities, but rejected that idea also. She had already told the girls what Dale Elton had hinted concerning the aunt and nephew and they had laughed at it together, and probably both Helen and Rose had forgotten the whole affair by now. At any rate, if she were to let her older sister guess that her position in the Pepper household might be one of positive danger, Helen would worry.

And Helen had enough to worry her, goodness knew, with Hugh's recovery dragging on so endlessly. Poor Hugh, it was time she made him some more chicken broth and baked him another batch of bread! Hugh did like homemade bread.

While Margy was being thus plunged into the heart of mystery and intrigue, Rose suddenly found herself in a position which would have

dulled, by comparison—at least, in Rose’s judgment—any problems that her sister had to face.

One morning Chester Drew came across to her counter, his face radiating excitement. He was fairly beaming with joy as he leaned toward her.

“Rose, I’ve got the most astounding piece of good luck to tell you!” he cried. “Chuck your place here for a minute and take a walk with me,” he begged. “Annabelle will do the work of two men for a while, won’t you, Annabelle?”

It was characteristic of him, thought Rose, still wondering and bewildered about him and Birdie, that he should address only Annabelle. Birdie was right there, not ten steps away from him, and yet he ignored her as though she had been a little spot of dust on the counter.

And Birdie’s face was again suffused with that dull red flush that almost always heralded the approach of Chester Drew.

Rose hesitated uncertainly. It was the rush hour and to leave the counter just then meant that both Birdie and Annabelle would have to work doubly hard to make up for her defection.

“Go on, dearie; don’t mind us,” urged Annabelle, noting her hesitation. “Birdie and me are so used to work we wouldn’t feel comfortable if any one was ever to tell us to take a load off our feet! Go on, dearie, and get this counter-draping Chester Drew out of here. There’s a fat dame tryin’ to take his place, and if I ever saw murder registered in a human eye, that dame sure has got it. On your way, Posie; on your way.”

Laughing and mystified, Rose left the counter and followed Chester Drew through the crowded store. She was feeling guilty and rather exhilarated, like a school girl who has “cut” her last period.

Yet she knew she could leave the store if the floorwalker gave permission to do so.

But the thought of Birdie plagued her conscience; Birdie, her thin, weary face flushed unbecomingly, her frail back bending beneath the extra burden that she, Rose, was imposing by her absence.

Chester Drew had proposed a walk, but when, hatted and cloaked, they reached the street they were met by an icy blast of wind that caused him to change his mind.

“I know a fine little restaurant,” he said, still with that air of restrained eagerness. “It’s almost lunch time—and we can talk, and, Rose, I’ve got to talk to you!”

Rose allowed herself to be led to Drew’s “fine little restaurant.”

She was not hungry. But her curiosity had been aroused to such an extent that it demanded instant satisfaction.

“Now,” she demanded, the moment they were settled at a quiet table, “tell me all, as they say in the story books. You look as if some one had died and left you a million dollars!”

“Not quite,” replied Drew enigmatically, as he beckoned to a waiter.

Thereupon he ordered a luncheon whose proportions caused Rose to gasp in protest.

“You shouldn’t be so extravagant,” she told him, when the waiter had disappeared. Drew was leaning across the table, beaming upon her. “You know quite well you can’t afford it.”

“Oh, is that so?” said Chester Drew. He liked Rose best when she was scolding him—as she often did. “Well now, young lady, just listen to your uncle Drew and—learn!”

Rose listened, with eyes and lovely mouth wide open. What Chester Drew told her was like a fairy tale.

Chester Drew’s uncle, who lived in Buffalo and had not seen Drew since he was a child, had died and left him, as his nearest heir, the business which he himself had built up from a modest beginning. Chester Drew’s inheritance, the department store of Drew and Young, was one of the smaller stores in Buffalo, but one that had a very high business rating and a good clientele.

“And it really belongs to you?” breathed Rose, looking at him out of dazzled eyes. “Why, Chester Drew, you must be, a—millionaire!”

“Not yet—but soon!” returned Chester Drew frivolously. Who wouldn’t be frivolous with such a fortune falling upon him from, as it were, a clear sky?

“But this is what I particularly wanted to ask you, Rose.”

Chester Drew leaned toward her, his smiling handsome face suddenly grave. Something in his look made Rose glance up at him quickly.

“Rose, if everything goes right out there—and I don’t expect any trouble in taking over the store and getting things in train—will you come out there with me? I will give you a position at twice the salary you are getting now!”

Rose stared at him a moment like one in a trance. She was thrilled, exalted, triumphant, and horribly frightened, all in one breath.

“Why, Chester, I never thought, I never dreamed of such a thing!” Her voice sounded queer and faint and utterly unlike her own. “It is wonderful of you—but—but—”

Drew, who had been watching her intently, leaned over and patted her hand, big brother fashion.

“Of course I didn’t expect you to accept at once,” he told her. “You would have to consult with your sisters, and I realize that leaving them would be rather hard. But, say, Rose, I’ve set my heart on having you out there! I—”

“Wait!” commanded Rose, leaning forward eagerly. “Are you making me this wonderful offer, Chester Drew, because you believe I will be able to make good in the place you say you will keep for me? Or is it—because—”

She seemed to be having trouble with the last part of her question and, like the gentleman he was, Drew came to her rescue.

“If you mean, is it because I like you, Rose, or because I believe in your ability, you ought to be severely chastised for even asking me such a question! You know very well without my telling that it is—both.”

A dimple appeared at the corner of Rose’s mouth.

“You are a diplomat, Chester Drew,” she said, adding, with a deep breath: “But whatever you are, you certainly have taken my breath away. I think I shan’t find it again for at least a week!”

That afternoon was a hurried and feverish one for Rose. She was forced to keep her attention upon the exacting demands of the people who crowded about her counter. On ordinary days this was easy enough, because she honestly liked her work. But to-day, when she was faced by the biggest problem of her life, it was nearly intolerable.

She hurried away on the stroke of five that afternoon, dodging the curious Annabelle. She would not tell any one until she had talked things over with Helen.

What was the matter with Birdie? Her eyes had been red and swollen. Poor Birdie! Why was it that the smallest attention paid to Rose by Chester Drew seemed torture to this quiet, uncomplaining girl. Rose began to believe that she was destined never to solve the mystery.

Out in the street hurrying toward the subway, she was disturbed by the realization that some one had been walking close beside her; had been accompanying her for some little distance.

She looked up impatiently, bent upon annihilating with a glance this disturber of her meditations. She gazed straight into the gloomy eyes of Joe Morris.

“Joe—” she cried, flushing with pleasure. Then, remembering that this particular young gentleman had not been near her, or inquired after her health, for more than a week, she promptly assumed the frigid politeness suitable to the occasion.

However, as Joe seemed also determined to maintain this uninteresting attitude, Rose changed her mind about it and decided to be friendly. She could afford to forgive a lot after what had happened to-day!

“Joe, I have had the most wonderful offer!” she said.

For the first time Joe withdrew his gaze from the horizon and regarded her with interest.

“What kind of offer?” he asked sharply, for in his mind was the thought of Chester Drew and his attentiveness to Rose.

But because Rose’s mind was more on her business career than it was on Chester Drew, she missed the sharpness of Joe’s query and the meaning behind it. With enthusiasm, she recounted her recent interview with the floorwalker and his marvelous offer.

“But Buffalo!” cried Joe. His brows were knit and he stared at her as though he could not believe she was in earnest. “Do you realize how far Buffalo is from New York?”

“Far enough,” admitted Rose ruefully. Joe’s attitude had disappointed her vaguely and now she looked up at him with just a bit of wistfulness in her glance.

“Aren’t you glad for me at all, Joe?” she asked.

The once cheerful Joe was again staring gloomily into the distance.



“I suppose I ought to be overjoyed to hear that you are going to the other end of the world,” he returned morosely.

“I haven’t gone—yet!” Rose reminded him, with determined cheerfulness.

Nevertheless, she was very much puzzled by Joe’s new attitude toward her. Was he really unhappy at the possibility of her going so far away? Or was the trouble something else, something more serious, that she knew nothing about?

Her question was answered unexpectedly that night, and by Margy.

“What do you suppose Lloyd told me about Joe, to-day?” And when the others looked at her, startled and interested she added: “The Reynolds Moving Company went into bankruptcy and closed down.”

“Which,” said Rose, as Margy paused, “leaves Joe minus a job!”

# CHAPTER XVII

## STALLED IN THE SNOW

So that was the reason for Joe's strange behavior!

Rose was conscious of an absurd relief and the next moment reproached herself for feeling it.

Poor Joe! He must be dreadfully downcast, losing such a good position! Even with the best of references, which he must certainly have, it was by no means an easy matter to place oneself satisfactorily, even at this season of the year.

But despite her real sympathy for Joe, Rose could not help feeling relieved deep down in her heart. It had not been pleasant having Joe angry with her. Poor Joe!

But she still had to tell her sisters of Chester Drew's good fortune and his proposal that she take a position in the Buffalo store at twice the salary she had been getting.

Helen and Margy received the news in characteristically different ways.

Margy was all enthusiasm and congratulations and as sure that the new position would be accepted by Rose as though everything had been settled.

But Helen's first thought was of a separation, and her face grew grave. It was no light thing to have her young sister go away to a strange city. She would undoubtedly meet with all sorts of problems and difficulties that would be very hard for her to settle without the assistance of some older person. At that moment, though she was only nineteen, Helen felt very much older than Rose!

They debated the question until midnight, and then, having reached no decision, decided to "sleep on it." They would have several days to decide, at any rate, since Chester Drew would have to go first to Buffalo to take charge of his new inheritance.

Margy had meant to tell her sisters something of the state of affairs at Miss Pepper's, but her own small worries seemed overshadowed by Rose's

great problem and she decided to keep her own counsel for a short time longer.

Next morning Rose came to Helen. She was dressed for business, and, though radiant as usual, her young face bore a very serious expression.

“We haven’t decided anything, Nell,” she said, putting an arm about the older girl. “Can’t you tell me what I ought to do?”

Helen was silent so long that Rose thought she had not heard the question. She was about to repeat it, when Helen turned to her, her face very grave.

“It is a dreadfully hard thing to give advice, Rose dear, when so much may be at stake,” she said slowly. “I lay awake all last night thinking about it, wondering what to tell you—”

“Nell, you shouldn’t! You will be worn out!”

“And I have decided not to advise you either way, dear,” finished Helen gravely. “Naturally, I want you here where I can help you when you need help—sort of take mother’s place to you. Still, if it means your whole future —”

Rose threw her arms about her sister and hugged her hard, choking off the rest of the sentence.

“I won’t go, Nell, darling. Why, it would be like tearing out my heart to leave you and Margy! I—I’ll tell Chester Drew that this morning, before,” she turned and flung a rueful little smile over her shoulder, “I have a chance to change my mind!”

After Rose had gone Margy delayed her trip to the Riverside Drive house to have a serious talk with Helen over this great chance that had come to their younger sister.

“She will take care of herself, Nell,” Margy found herself assuring the older girl over and over—perhaps for the sake of convincing herself. “She is an unusually sensible girl. In some ways, in spite of her beauty, I think she is more level-headed than I am.”

“But I wouldn’t want you to go to Buffalo, Margy!”

There was that in the older girl’s voice that prompted Margy to turn quickly and put an arm about her.

“You are just like mother, Nell dear—and, I couldn’t pay you any higher compliment! But you know, these days, girls have to stand upon their own

feet. And after they once find a reasonably sure footing they enjoy doing it, too! If I were in Rose's position I would snap up the offer before Chester Drew had a chance to change his mind and give it to some one else."

"But she said she was going to refuse it," Helen reminded her.

"Fiddlesticks!" cried Margy, with vehemence. "I am willing to bet everything I own that she changed her mind on that point before she reached the street!"

As a matter of fact, Margy's surmise came very near the truth. Rose had changed her mind—not once, but several times—before she entered the employees' entrance of the Lossar-Martin department store.

It was about this time that she realized that this was the biggest problem that had yet entered her life and one that she was going to find it very difficult, indeed, to solve.

"I believe when I am ninety," she told herself desperately, "I will still be saying, 'Will I, won't I?' I haven't the slightest idea, just now, whether Chester Drew has made me terribly happy or awfully miserable! In the words of Annabelle, it's a great life, if you don't weaken!"

Meanwhile, back at the apartment, Helen was receiving an early morning call from Mrs. Draper.

"I don't know what has got into Hugh," the latter apologized, "but ever since he woke up this morning he has been asking me if I couldn't get you to come down for a few moments. I had to come now to save my life or reason—or both!"

"That's the best thing I've heard in weeks!" exclaimed Helen, her face brightening. And while the exclamation might have seemed strange, and even heartless, to the uninitiated, Mrs. Draper understood. It had been a long, long, weary time since Hugh had seemed alive enough to care to "pester" anybody. The mere fact that he wanted something badly was a splendid sign.

Helen did not wait to clear away the breakfast dishes or right the apartment, but went directly below with Mrs. Draper.

They found Hugh sitting up in bed, bolstered up by pillows. His face was flushed and his eyes feverishly bright.

"Helen!" he cried, as soon as she entered, and stretched out both hands to her.

Helen went to him quickly and touched his forehead. For a moment she had feared he was feverish, but she found his skin cool.

“I must have been insane—or worse—all this time,” he cried impatiently. “I have been lying here like a baby when, for all I know—”

“You have been very sick, Hugh,” Helen reminded him gently. “The kind of fever you had weakens one dreadfully.”

“Well, I’m all right now—except for my legs.” Hugh made a grimace of pain as he tried to move one of them. “Helen, do you remember what you said about going to the office and collecting data for Hayes versus Weston? Did you really mean that?”

“Of course,” said Helen, adding briskly: “Do you want me to go now?”

Hugh’s weary face lighted up in a way that paid her in advance for any inconvenience the trip might cause her.

Her heart fairly sang as she ran up the stairs to get into her street things. Hugh was once more becoming interested. Hugh was getting well! If only his poor legs—but she resolutely shut the thought away from her. She would not let anything spoil her pleasure.

While Helen was *en route* for Hugh’s downtown office, things were beginning to happen to Margy.

Directly upon arriving at the Riverside Drive house, she went to Miss Pepper’s room and tried the door to see if it was still locked.

She found that it was and was again triumphantly conscious of the pressure of the key that swung by the gold chain about her neck.

“So far, so good,” she murmured to herself. “I will call up Dale Elton and ask for an interview with him to-night. I think I may be able to tell that enterprising young reporter a thing or two that may interest him.”

But when she got the offices of the *Evening Star* it was only to be told that Dale Elton was out of town on an assignment and would not be back for two or three days.

Margy was conscious of a feeling of keen disappointment as she hung up the ’phone. She had wanted to talk with Dale Elton rather badly. He was the only one she could talk to, since, presumably, he was the only one who knew about Rex Pepper’s designs on his aunt’s fortune. And things had reached a point where Margy felt she had to talk to some one.

All that afternoon she was weighted by a distinct premonition that something was going to happen.

Around five o'clock she received a telegram from her employer, saying that she was at a hotel in a small New Jersey town and bidding Margy join her there on the following afternoon.

Miss Pepper never deigned to explain her comings and goings. It was enough that she was in this place and desired Margy's services.

"Well, I don't see that there is anything very dreadful in that, except that it is bad weather for traveling," sighed Margy. "Of course I don't care to leave Rex Pepper in the house alone, but I don't see how it can be helped."

Rex Pepper had not been near the house all day. His absence was a great relief to Margy, even though she suspected that there was fresh trouble looming on the horizon.

The next morning Margy awoke to find that during the night a blizzard had descended upon them, covering the streets with a thick white blanket, delaying traffic and interfering with business.

"Bother!" she said crossly, staring out of her window over the wintry Hudson. "If I don't get snowbound going to Jersey to-day, I miss my guess."

It was characteristic of her, though, that she never once thought of disobeying her employer's orders. Miss Pepper had said "come" and come she would, no matter how many blizzards made the going difficult.

It was still snowing when she started, but there was little discomfort in this part of the trip, since Miss Pepper's chauffeur obligingly "ran her over" to the ferry.

The river was choked with great blocks of ice so that the passage over the ferry was necessarily tedious. Once in the train and on the last lap of her journey, Margy breathed a sigh of relief.

"Nothing can stop me now," she thought vaingloriously. "Let it snow!"

But, alas! the train had not been half an hour on its way—a very slow, halting way, because of the snow-packed rails—when it suddenly puffed distressingly and came to a slithering halt.

Margy wiped the steam from the window with her glove and peered out. All she could see was a dazzling whiteness. The snow was coming down steadily, thickly, forming a solid sheet before her.

“Bother!” she cried, for the second time that day. “I reckon we’ll be stalled here now for the rest of the night!”

“Not quite as bad as that, I hope!”

Margy had no notion that she had spoken aloud until she was accosted in this manner by a pleasant masculine voice at her elbow.

She glanced up, startled and a bit indignant, to find Chester Drew smiling down upon her.

# CHAPTER XVIII

## TAKING CHANCES

“WELL met!” Drew cried gayly, while Margy stared at him in surprise. Then, indicating the seat beside her: “Have you any very strenuous objections to my sitting here for awhile?”

“Of course not!” replied Margy, with a smile, recovering. She moved over, making a place for him. “May I ask, without seeking to pry into your private affairs, how you happen to be sitting here in this train at such an hour?”

“I don’t wonder you are surprised,” said Drew, chuckling. “I feel rather strange myself—going off on a pleasure jaunt, so to speak, when the rest of the work-a-day world is bent over its desk. Sounds rather queer, but I hope you gather what I mean!”

He went on to explain that he had intended to take the train in New York for Buffalo that morning. However, at the last minute, he had had word from a friend whom he really would have to see before starting, and so had gone over to New Jersey and taken a later train from there for Buffalo.

“So you see,” he finished, his handsome face taking on a serious expression, “I’m bound for the old home town, after several years’ exile—voluntarily, you understand!” he added, with a grin.

“I don’t see why you should voluntarily exile yourself from anything so pleasant as an old home town,” said Margy, smiling, and more for the sake of saying something than for any special interest she felt in the conversation. “I am very sure I shouldn’t want to stay away from Riverdale for several years!”

Drew was silent for so long that Margy began to fear she had offended him in some way. However, he turned to her presently, his face looking rather solemn in the dreary light of the blizzard.

“Not all home towns contain happy memories, Miss Margy, contrary to the general opinion,” he said slowly. “I ought to know, for when I left my particular old home town, I vowed that I would never enter it again!”



Margy saw that the young fellow was full of these old memories and was eager to indulge in reminiscences to a sympathetic audience. Margy had always liked Chester Drew, and now, because of his recent offer to Rose, she was more than ever interested in him. So she very willingly constituted herself an audience of one, while he revealed to her the secret of his bitterness toward that usually beloved place, the “old home town.”

It seemed that there had been a high school romance in which he had played a leading part. Chester Drew had grown up next door to a girl, who had gradually become as necessary a part of his life as his school books, his three meals a day, or his pet rabbits that lived in a hutch at the back of the house.

The girl was younger than Chester and had always been a rather delicate child. Perhaps it was for this reason that, at an early age, Chester became her staunch champion and ally.

He shared everything with this little girl next door, even to giving her one of his precious pet rabbits—Sandy by name and coloring and possessing by far the best disposition of the two.

“We are moving!” exclaimed Margy at this point, noticing that the engine with more protesting snorts was once more pushing heavily through the drifts. “But please go on, Mr. Drew. I am very much interested.”

“If you are sure I am not boring you?” rejoined Drew, and was encouraged by her quick gesture of negation to continue.

“You’ve no idea the hold that slender little slip of a girl had over me. She had a stern sense of justice—I often think she must have been able to trace her descent straight back to the Puritans!—and she saw to it that I toed the mark all through my early youth.

“I was naturally disinclined to study, but do you think Robin would let me indulge my laziness? No, sir. She would bring her books over every night—I can see her now, slender, determined little thing that she was!—and do her lessons while I did mine. And I *had* to do them, too.”

He paused and chuckled. Then he sighed.

“I was so disappointed in Robin,” he said, slowly and with a finality that stirred Margy from her contemplation of the drifted snow outside her window.

“Robin—what a pretty name,” she murmured. “How do you mean—disappointed, Mr. Drew? Unless you would rather not tell me,” she added

swiftly, as he frowned.

“There was a row in high school. Some of the fellows staged a trick on one of the professors. I wasn’t with them—I had nothing to do with it. But Robin saw me near the place and accused me. She told about it, and several days later I was brought up before the head and suspended.”

“How about the others, who were really in the plot?” asked Margy, all interest and sympathy now. “Surely you were not the only one to suffer!”

Chester Drew shook his head, in his eyes the shadow of past bitterness.

“They were fired too, but that didn’t help me any.”

“Did you tell this friend of yours, Robin, you call her, that you felt she was responsible for your trouble?”

Chester Drew nodded moodily, but was silent so long that at last Margy prompted him.

“Well, what did she say? Did she admit it?”

“She certainly didn’t deny it,” returned the young fellow, and Margy knew by his tone that he had thought a great deal of this girl and that his disappointment had been very keen. “She simply stood and stared at me for a moment with those great eyes of hers and then turned and went into the house. I went away a pretty sore kid, I can tell you.”

“And you never went back?” questioned Margy.

Chester Drew smiled wryly.

“I went back not once but many times,” he confessed. “I felt all at sea without Robin. You see, my mother and father had died some time before, and I felt the undeserved disgrace at high school pretty keenly. So, when Robin steadily refused to see me, I got desperate and left the place.

“That’s the reason, you see,” he added a little wistfully, “that I am not overjoyed at the prospect of returning home. The strange thing,” he added, and Margy got the impression that he had forgotten all about her and was talking to himself, “was my meeting her again at Lossar-Martin—”

Margy uttered a slight exclamation and the young fellow paused, regarding her queerly.

“At Lossar-Martin?” she repeated, a little breathlessly. Rose had told her of the change in Birdie North’s attitude toward her since the arrival of

Chester Drew, had even wondered if the young floorwalker and Birdie might not have met before under unhappy circumstances.

Now the solution to the mystery flashed before Margy's mental eyes like the fragments of a picture puzzle.

She looked up at Chester Drew and her eyes were bright as she said:

“Your Robin isn't by any chance Birdie North?”

The young man slowly turned brick red. He stared at Margy for a moment longer, saying nothing, then turned again to the window.

“You've guessed it,” he muttered. “Though I didn't mean to tell you her name. I—”

There was a long pause during which the two listened to the laboring of the engine as it forced a slow way through the drifts.

Margy was immensely excited over Chester Drew's disclosure and wanted to hear more concerning Birdie North. To think that she had been Chester Drew's “little girl next door!”

It was all tremendously thrilling and romantic, and like most girls of her age, Margy wanted the story to have a happy ending.

“Aren't you going to speak to her? Aren't you going to try to make it up?” she asked rather tentatively, for Chester Drew had turned away as though to close the conversation.

Now he shrugged.

“What's the use?” he said. “Too late for that sort of thing now. And I haven't any reason to believe she wants to make it up! The whole thing is probably ancient history by now. Shouldn't wonder if she hasn't forgotten it long ago.”

Margy was on the point of protesting that she was quite sure this was not the case. However, she checked the impulse. Her intuition told her that Chester Drew was sorry he had talked so much and was very anxious to put an end to the conversation. So—

“Look,” she said. “The train has stopped again and it seems to be snowing harder than ever. Oh, dear, I am bound to be dreadfully late and Miss Pepper will never forgive me. She wouldn't consider a blizzard any excuse for not getting to a place on time.”

Drew asked where she was going, and when she told him he pointed out that they were now within a short distance of her destination.

The young fellow knew the inn Miss Pepper had mentioned in her letter and was well acquainted with the country at this point.

“We must be mid-way to the station now,” he said. “In good weather it would be easily walked from here.”

“I’ve a good mind to try that!” Margy’s brow was furrowed and it seemed to her at that moment that anything would be easier to face than the displeasure of her eccentric employer.

Despite the rather alarmed protests of Chester Drew, she firmly took her little bag in one hand, and, fortified by exact directions from him as to the direction of the inn, stepped from the train and into the midst of a drift!

# CHAPTER XIX

## THE SCHEME REVEALED

IT seemed to Margy that she sank down as though into a featherbed instead of into a four-foot snowdrift. A feeling akin to panic clutched her, but she pushed it resolutely from her and scrambled from the drift.

She saw some half obliterated wagon tracks in the snow and, judging that this was the road Chester Drew had described as running past the hotel, she took it immediately.

Something told her that swift action was what was needed. The bitter cold penetrated her warm clothing and viciously attacked her cheeks and nose.

Also the blizzard, far from decreasing, seemed to grow in violence after her descent from the train. The wind rose, dashing the snow into her eyes and half blinding her. She was forced to stop every few steps to brush the clinging flakes from her eyelashes.

“Guess it’s up to me to get where I’m going in a big hurry,” she told herself. “Lucky that some one passed this way not very long ago,” she added, studying the faint mark of the wagon tracks. “Otherwise this snowy landscape would be as blank as the proverbial desert. As it is, at the rate it’s snowing, I soon shan’t be able to see any marks at all. Hello—where *is* that wagon road?”

She paused and looked around her rather wildly. Nothing but the unbroken crust of snow rewarded her. Half-blinded by the snow, she had wandered from the road and lost it. Really frightened, she searched about her, and again stumbled upon the faintly marked tracks.

With relief in her heart and increased determination, she started forward doggedly, lowering her head against the assaults of the wind, shifting her bag from hand to hand so that she might slip half-frozen fingers into the warmth of her pocket.

She thought of Chester Drew in the stalled train. He was safe and warm, at any rate. He was right. She had been foolish to try it. And yet, Miss

Pepper—

A long period of stumbling along, eyes glued to the wagon tracks, by this time almost obliterated. Then—

“Won’t Rose be surprised when I tell her about Birdie North?”

Poor Birdie! Mighty hard on her to have to sit by and see Chester Drew pay attention to Rose, her best friend! No wonder her attitude had changed toward Rose. She wondered, rather vaguely, what could be done about it—if anything.

Then she shivered.

It was a long, long way to that inn. She hoped Chester Drew had been sure of the direction. Miss Pepper would be furious, waiting for her so long.

Then when she seemed to have been out in that lonely waste of wind and snow for eternities—it was, in reality, less than half an hour—Margy came to a sudden realization that she had again lost the faint tracks of the wagon road.

She hunted wildly about, but this time was not so fortunate as to regain the trail.

Either she had wandered away from it entirely, or the track had turned off suddenly, winding down some side street, perhaps; or else the driving snow had now quite covered all trace of the wagon.

Coming to the conclusion finally that the more desperately she searched, the farther she got from the road, Margy stood still, trying to decide what she should do next.

“If there was only a house near by!” she wailed, and then paused again, struck by a new idea.

“You have probably passed many houses, Margy Blythe,” she told herself. “Only the storm is so bad and the snow so thick that you couldn’t see them. Now then, the problem is to reach one of these places of refuge. And there can be no doubt at all,” she finished grimly, “but what it is a problem!”

If there were any houses near that spot, Margy was not destined to find them that day.

On she struggled and, for what seemed to her eons of time, floundered about in the snow while the cold soaked through her heavy clothing as though it had been made of gauze and turned her to ice.

“It seems so silly,” she told herself once, as she checked her wild floundering and plunging and tried to calm her tingling nerves. “I’m not really in a desert or at the north pole. There must be some one living around here.”

At the thought of warmth and shelter she started on again. But this time she was not destined to go far.

Pushing through the snow, she suddenly lost her footing, slipped down into fleecy depths that gave beneath her weight.

She came to a stop at last and found that the snow was up to her waist. The ground must have sloped away suddenly at that point into a hollow where the snow had collected until it had formed a tremendous drift.

“And you might know it would be my luck to run right smack into it,” said Margy, as she sought to raise herself from the soft imprisoning snow. “Now, how in the world am I ever going to get out?”

After several seconds of fruitless struggling, Margy decided that she was not going to get out. In the panic resulting from that belief, she lifted up her voice and called wildly for help.

What was her inexpressible joy and relief to hear her cry answered almost immediately. That the owner of the voice was masculine, Margy did not doubt, and beyond that fact she did not care.

She continued to call in order to guide her rescuer to the spot and was answered in tones that became increasingly familiar.

When at last the owner of the voice appeared before her in the flesh, Margy gave a gasp of utter astonishment.

“Dale Elton!” she cried. “What are you doing here?”

The young reporter chuckled hard-heartedly.

“Seems I might better ask you that,” he retorted, and immediately began the work of pulling her out of the drift. A few moments later he deftly set her upon her feet and began to brush the snow from her coat.

“For goodness’ sake, stop brushing me and tell me where I can find a fire,” cried Margy, impatiently pulling away from him. “Can’t you see I’m half frozen to death?”

“I suppose perching in a snowdrift might be calculated to upset one,” murmured Dale Elton gently. “Only,” plaintively, “I think you might at least say thank you for saving your life the second time.”

“I would,” retorted Margy, her good humor returning in the presence of the unquenchable Dale, “only I really am in a dreadful hurry, Dale. I wonder,” she hesitated, “if you can tell me how I can get to the Hammond Inn. I’m completely bewildered.”

“Wait!” commanded Dale Elton suddenly, with a dramatic gesture. “How wonderful is life—how wonderful, coincidence—”

“Dale, do stop raving.”

“Raving!” he reproached her. “She calls my high philosophy the feeble ravings of, I dare say, a feeble mind—”

“Dale, I’m nearly frozen!”

“My dear, I beg your pardon. You were quite right to bring me up short.” He took her by the arm and led her forward masterfully. “As I was saying, I myself have just left the Hammond Inn. As a matter of fact, you may see it, even now, looming through the drifting snow. How’s that, Margy Blythe, for rhythm?”

“Oh, do be sensible!” Margy saw that they had indeed reached a gateway that guarded the entrance of some sort of hostelry. “Do you mean to say,” she cried, “that I have been floundering around there in the snow when all the time I was within a stone’s throw of my destination?”

Dale grinned.

“Sad as it may seem, that is certainly a fact. Look here!” leaning toward her suddenly, “you’ve come here to meet Miss Pepper, haven’t you?”

“Yes, and I’ve got to hurry up about it, too,” replied Margy, suddenly stirred to action by the name of her employer. “Else, to-morrow, I may find myself without a job.”

“Wait a minute.” The young reporter caught her arm urgently. “I’ve got to talk to you just a minute, Margy.”

“All right,” returned Margy, shivering. “Only it will have to be inside.”

“Of course!” cried Dale, reproaching himself for his thoughtlessness. “You must be frozen.”

“Not yet,” answered Margy, laughing shakily as Dale opened the gate for her. “But very soon!”

In the foyer of the hotel they found an open grate fire.



Margy took off her gloves and spread her hands to this, sighed rapturously and murmured:

“Gracious, but it’s good to be where I can get warm once more!”

Dale began an apology for not hurrying the girl at once into the inn, but Margy stopped him before he could finish.

There were several people lounging about the place, but none of them took any notice of the newcomers.

Margy gave a quick glance about her to assure herself that Miss Pepper was not present. She then turned quickly to the young reporter.

“What is it you wanted to tell me? Please be quick, Dale. Miss Pepper may come in at any minute. She must be furious with me for being late.”

“It’s about that fool of a nephew of hers,” replied Dale Elton, drawing two chairs before the fire and speaking in a carefully lowered tone. “I have been on his trail for the last two days, and I’ve found out a number of things.”

“Oh!” said Margy, suddenly and intensely interested. “Do tell me, Dale.”

“Well, first among them is that he is a skunk of the very worst kind,” said Dale Elton, with emphasis.

“I knew that already,” broke in Margy impatiently. “Is he—Dale, were you right in thinking he was planning something against Miss Pepper?”

“Oh, just a *little* something,” returned Dale, with elaborate carelessness. “He is just about ready to play his pretty little trick. He thinks he has gathered evidence strong enough to put his aunt out of the running forever. He is trying to prove her insane!”

# CHAPTER XX

## A GREAT DECISION

“INSANE!” repeated Margy, staring at Dale Elton incredulously. “Miss Pepper insane! But what utter nonsense!”

The young reporter smiled grimly.

“Rex Pepper doesn’t think so.”

“But you do!” In her earnestness Margy had placed her hand imploringly on his arm. “Surely you don’t believe such a terrible thing?”

“The very fact that Rex Pepper said it would be enough to brand it as false in my estimation,” he told her dryly. “However, people often make the mistake of underestimating the cunning of men like Rex Pepper. If he should succeed in putting over his trick, he would stand to gain a considerable amount in hard cash, you know. In my opinion that boy can bear considerable watching!”

Then Margy told him of Rex Pepper’s attempt to enter his aunt’s room and of how she had prevented it. When she opened her coat and surreptitiously showed him the key on the chain about her neck he chuckled with delight.

“Getting to be the real thing, sure enough,” he told her admiringly. “First thing you know, you’ll be putting my nose out of joint!”

They talked for a few moments longer, Dale confiding that an interview with Miss Pepper had been his reason also for venturing over into New Jersey on such a day.

“She wasn’t in a very communicative mood,” he admitted ruefully. “But I succeeded in gleaming a few small facts that may be of assistance to me.”

When Margy left him to go to her employer it was with the promise that she would keep in constant touch with him, reporting any interesting movements of Rex Pepper in the Riverside Drive house.

A few minutes later Margy found her employer so pleased to see her and so eager to take up the work again that she forgot all about scolding because the girl was late.

“Hate marriages—always did,” she told Margy, evidently referring to her reason for leaving New York. “Depressing—very. Never get married, my dear.”

“No, Miss Pepper,” said Margy dutifully, and bent her dark head over her pad to hide a smile.

For a time after this all things seemed uncertain and unsettled.

At Miss Pepper’s, Margy was kept on the alert night and day for fear of harm to her employer at the hands of her scheming nephew.

At the Lossar-Martin department store the girls in Rose’s department were busily mourning the loss of Chester Drew and envying Rose her wonderful opportunity to go with him to the new store in Buffalo.

Rose herself was restless and undecided. It seemed to her that she would never be able to make up her mind.

“Believe me, dearie, if you turn down that offer you’ll be missing a chance of a lifetime,” Annabelle told her, with unaccustomed earnestness. “If I ever pulled a stunt like that I’d call myself a prize dumb-bell—no fooling!”

“And you, Birdie?” said Rose, turning to the other girl a little wistfully. “Haven’t you any advice for me?”

Birdie turned so white that Rose was alarmed, but she only shook her head.

“I never give advice,” she said quietly. “I’ve found it doesn’t pay.”

Rose was as much at sea about Birdie’s queer behavior as ever, for, in the excitement of meeting Dale Elton and the need for eternal vigilance in the Pepper home, Margy had quite forgotten to tell Rose of Chester Drew’s story. As a matter of fact, Margy had shamefacedly to admit some time later that the whole matter had completely slipped her mind.

At home Helen kept steadily on with her painting, though her attentions to Hugh made her progress necessarily slow.

She had received word from Mr. Bullard that he had been called out of town on business and would not be back for two or three weeks.

As the winter scene in the park was nearly finished, this word came as a disappointment to Helen, for she had counted on getting the money for her new work.

However, Helen-like, she made the best of it and contented herself with the knowledge that Hugh was getting steadily better.

Several of the men from Hugh's office, including the "big chief" himself, had been to see the young lawyer and express their sympathy, and both Mrs. Draper and Helen were proud to see the esteem in which he was held.

The big case had been postponed until the following month, and Hugh's superior, Mr. Ross, assured him that the case would be held for him if there was any possibility of his being able to appear in court. Doctor Brown said there was a very good chance, and so the case was held.

Only in their hearts were Helen and Mrs. Draper doubtful. For, while Hugh's general health steadily improved, he had not yet regained the use of his crushed legs, nor did there seem any immediate prospect of his regaining the use of them.

It broke Helen's heart, reading his briefs to him every day, to see the return of his hopefulness, his high enthusiasm. As his keen mind grasped the facts of the case he grew more and more certain of victory.

"They can't beat us!" he cried one day, when he and Helen had been going over certain points in the case. "All we have to do is to give them facts. Helen, I can't tell you how grateful I am for—everything. No one else would have done for me what you have."

"Nonsense!" said Helen brusquely, to hide the fact that she was close to tears. "If I have done anything, I have been pleasing myself too. Now," putting away the papers, "I am going to pull down the shades so that you may have a little rest. You've done work enough for one day."

It touched her to see how readily he obeyed. Strong and masterful as he was, he never questioned her slightest command. Her wish seemed to be his law.

Oh, if he only might not be disappointed!

While she waited for Mr. Bullard to return, she put away her park scene and brought out the unfinished picture of the old homestead.

Perhaps she could finish that by the time he came back, and so give him two pictures instead of one. If Mr. Bullard should like them well enough to

take them both—Helen closed her eyes before the too-bright vision of so much luck and affluence. She refused, as Miss Jessica Jellicoe would say, to “count her chickens.”

Meanwhile, Rose was steadily coming nearer and nearer to the time when she must find an answer to her problem.

She had received a letter from Chester Drew, in Buffalo.

The latter was enthusiastic over his inheritance, declaring that the store was sound financially and that the personnel, from office force to errand girl, was of high grade. Furthermore, he saw where he could increase the scope of the business.

He was urgent in his plea that she join him there. He would make her head of the millinery trimmings department and in other ways painted a brilliant picture of her future.

Besides, he wrote—and Rose sensed the personal note that had occurred in more than one of their meetings—Chester Drew was very anxious, for other reasons, to have her with him.

Wondering what the “other reasons” might be, Rose turned rosier and became suddenly very thoughtful.

She showed the letter to Helen and it had the effect of turning the other girl very thoughtful too.

“He’s awfully nice, Nell, and of course now he will be criminally rich, I suppose. Not that it matters,” she added quickly, as her sister glanced up at her. “But, somehow, I get a little bit scared when I think of going way off there all alone. If only you could come with me, Nell!”

Helen smiled quietly, though in her heart she was exceedingly troubled.

“I can’t do that, of course, dear,” she said, and could not resist adding: “Buffalo does seem a long way from New York.”

“Not as far as San Francisco,” suggested Rose airily.

There was another consideration that counted more than Rose cared to admit, either to her sisters or herself. She knew that if she went to Buffalo she would miss Joe Morris.

She tried honestly to put this consideration away from her. Joe, she decided, had acted in a peculiar manner lately and so did not even deserve to be thought about.

He had not been near her for ever so long. Of course, it was too bad he had lost his position, but that did not warrant giving up all his friends. If her pride had permitted, she would have called him up and asked him point-blank what was the matter with him.

She missed him very much indeed, just the same; and, missing him, found to her surprise that she was thinking of him more than of Chester Drew and his golden offer.

Having found this out, she proceeded to call herself a number of names that did not describe her in the least. Also, she made up her mind to accept Drew's offer on the spot and be done with indecision.

She might have done it too, had not the fates once more seemed to take a hand. They sent as their agent the very person of all others who had so aroused Rose's indignation; none other, in fact, than Joe Morris himself.

Rose met him going out to lunch one day. He looked so utterly downcast and forlorn that she forgot to feel angry. It is hard to be cross with a man who looks as if he had just lost his last friend.

"I say, Joe," Rose hailed him, laying a hand upon his arm. "Have I shrunk so you can't even see me?"

# CHAPTER XXI

## MARGY'S STORY

THE light that sprang to Joe's eyes at sight of Rose was unmistakable. He seized the hand that she had laid on his arm and drew her into a store entrance, where they could talk in comparative privacy for a few moments.

"I say, you're a sight for sore eyes, Rose," he exclaimed, eying her admiringly. "I began to think I would never see you again."

"Whose fault is that?" asked Rose, adding quickly, as a shadow crossed his face: "What are you doing in this particular part of town?"

Rose saw that she had again struck upon the wrong subject by the deepening of the frown on his face.

"Pounding the pavements," he told her gloomily. "Looking for a job!"

"Oh, Joe, I am so sorry!" said the girl softly. "Margy told me, and I have thought of you ever since. Joe," she went on, with just a hint of reproach, "why didn't you tell me yourself and not leave me to find it out through some one else?"

There was silence while Joe stared at the crowds that hurried by.

"I—I suppose I sound like a touchy kid, Rose, but I got the notion that you wouldn't care much one way or the other. You broke an engagement with me once, you know, for Chester Drew and—well, I felt pretty sure you were tired of our friendship."

This time Rose did not answer. She was silent so long, that Joe drew his eyes from contemplation of the crowd and looked at her.

What he saw in her eyes made him reach for her hand quickly, penitently.

"Gosh, Posie, I didn't mean to make you feel bad," he said, awkwardly. "Say—you're not crying, are you?"

"N-no. I wouldn't do such a thing!" said Rose, with a shaky laugh.

“Gee, Rose, I feel like a brute!” cried Joe, suddenly his old self again. “I didn’t dream that anything I could say could hurt you. Let me come up to the house to-night and square myself, will you, please?”

“That sounds better—much,” declared Rose, laughing up at him. “And, Joe, if you really want to square yourself, come and have a bit of lunch with me, won’t you?”

“Sure! But you’ve got to let me pay for it,” he added hastily.

“Well—I suppose,” Rose replied.

Then they indulged in a modest lunch and chatted animatedly as they ate it. Needless to say, Rose did not write to Chester Drew accepting his offer that day!

Meanwhile the strain of acting in a dual capacity, in being Miss Pepper’s private secretary and “private detective” at the same time, was beginning to tell upon Margy.

Twice she found Rex Pepper prowling about the house in the dead of night. This, added to the fact that he regarded her with increasing animosity, led her to believe that his spleen might not vent itself on his aunt alone.

Finally she met Dale Elton on Riverside Drive, not far from the Pepper house, and declared to him her intention of laying the whole matter before her employer.

“I am tired of bearing the responsibility, and it isn’t fair to Miss Pepper,” she told him. “If forewarned is forearmed I certainly think she should be told of her danger.”

The young reporter surprised her by instantly agreeing with this view.

“I was just about to suggest the same thing myself,” he assured her. “Marvelous how our minds run in the same channel.”

“It would be marvelous—if they did,” retorted Margy dryly and with a dampening effect.

Consequently, the first thing the next morning, Margy went to Miss Pepper and told her the whole thing.

The latter was disposed to be incredulous at first, declaring it “all nonsense! Utter rot!”

But when Margy insisted and gave circumstantial evidence as well, her employer gradually began to believe.



Then she went into a queer sort of rage, pacing up and down the room in a cramped, jerky way, waving her hands and muttering unintelligible things to herself.

Margy watched her, fascinated. It was not possible to be bored in the society of Miss Pepper, for it was impossible ever to prophesy what she would do next!

She left off pacing the floor after a while and abruptly sat down in the chair opposite Margy.

“Humph!” she snorted, glaring at Margy through her spectacles as if it were all her fault. “Messy lot—men. Never trust ’em. Mind what I tell you. Insane asylum, eh?” she pushed back her scanty gray hair while her thin mouth set in a still more determined line. “More likely to get himself in jail! Like that, would he? Rascally young puppy!”

Miss Pepper broke off and regarded Margy intently for a moment. Then she reached over with a queer, jerky motion and patted her hand.

“Much obliged, my dear, I’m sure. Very good of you!”

Embarrassed, Margy murmured something that sounded like “not at all” but might easily have been almost anything else.

“Insane asylum, eh?” Miss Pepper had forgotten her social secretary again and was gazing balefully into space. “I’ll show him. I’ll cut him off without a cent!”

It was a day or so after that that, her mind more at rest concerning her employer, Margy was beset by a guilty memory of Chester Drew and his revelations concerning himself and Birdie North.

Since she knew it would be impossible for her to get away that evening, she wrote notes to Helen and Rose, which the chauffeur willingly delivered, and asked them to come to dinner with her at the Riverside Drive house.

Miss Pepper had met both the sisters and had taken a fancy to them. She had often urged Margy to have them up to dinner, but the girls had felt a little queer about accepting the invitation.

To-night they accepted, since Margy told them in her notes that she had “something of importance” to tell them.

“Now I will have to ask Miss Pepper—which I should have done first,” thought Margy, with some trepidation. “I don’t suppose it will make any difference, though, since she is going out.”

To Margy's surprise, Miss Pepper seemed inordinately pleased that they were coming and promptly declared that she would give up her engagement and stay at home to welcome them.

Although Margy appreciated that this was a great concession on the part of her employer, she could not repress a slight feeling of disappointment. She had wanted a good evening of talk with the girls. Still it was pleasant to know that Miss Pepper was really fond of her sisters.

She need not have worried about her employer interfering with their confidences, as things turned out.

After welcoming her guests in a burst of unusual cordiality, Miss Pepper immediately seemed to forget their existence. She ate her dinner rapidly—and it was far too good a dinner to be “gobbled,” Rose remarked later—seeming absorbed in her own thoughts and occasionally muttering to herself.

As Oliver of the three chins set dessert before her, Miss Pepper rose hurriedly, almost upsetting her chair as she did so.

Oliver hastened to her and caught the chair, as one who would say reproachfully: “Why do you take this unseemly initiative? Do you not know it is my place to pull out your chair?”

“Indigestion!” Miss Pepper explained shortly, waving her hand toward the bit of confection on her plate. “Sight of it makes me sick. Take it away!”

Without another word of explanation or apology she turned and marched abruptly from the room.

Helen and Rose looked after her wonderingly. The face of the younger girl was a study as she turned it toward Margy.

“What's the matter with her?” she asked in a cautious whisper, since Oliver had not yet left the room. “Did we do anything to hurt her feelings?”

Margy shook her head.

“She is always that way,” she said. “She seemed unusually glad when I told her you were coming. But after you got here, she probably forgot all about you.”

In spite of the exquisite appointments of the dining room and the very excellent dinner, the girls were glad when it was over and they could retire to the cozy intimacy of Margy's room upstairs.

Once there, Rose kicked off her shoes and reclined luxuriously among the pillows of the chaise longue, while Helen dropped into a huge,

upholstered chair and Margy perched upon the windowseat.

“This is the life!” breathed Rose. “Now tell us what your great news is, Margy,” she commanded. “We have been dying of curiosity ever since we got your notes to-day.”

Without more ado, Margy told them the whole story as nearly in the words of Chester Drew as she could remember it.

The girls listened eagerly, only interrupting once or twice to put a pertinent question.

“It’s impossible—absolutely impossible!” cried Rose, at last. “I don’t believe it!”

“You don’t believe the story?” asked Margy, in surprise.

“I don’t believe that Birdie North, or Robin, as he called her, would ever do such a sneaky, underhand thing as to report Chester Drew to the principal, especially when she couldn’t have been sure of his guilt in the matter,” said Rose stoutly. “I know Birdie too well for that.”

“It’s amazing!” spoke up Helen, from the depths of her easy chair. “Imagine those two being separated for years and then meeting again so unexpectedly.”

“Just coincidence—”

“Or Fate!” said Rose dreamily.

# CHAPTER XXII

## THE END OF MYSTERY

ROSE spent an endless day behind the millinery trimmings counter following her visit to Margy and the latter's story concerning Birdie North and Chester Drew.

Rose said nothing to Birdie concerning what she had found out, though she did confide in Annabelle, to the extent of enlisting the latter's help in what she planned to do.

"You get her to go with you to a movie to-night—"

"Good night, Posie!" protested the black-haired one. "You might just as well tell me to get the mayor or the governor. She's just that contrary. Sits and mopes at home, getting thinner and whiter and losing the sad remains of her looks. She won't go anywheres."

"She will to-night," said Rose decidedly. "And you're the one who's going to make her!"

"Oh, all right," said Annabelle, with a deep sigh of resignation. "You speak like you've got your mind made up, dearie. I'll be the goat."

Although it was extremely difficult to evade Annabelle's aroused curiosity and get out of telling her the whole story, Rose managed it somehow. It spoke well for the latter's tact that in the process she succeeded in retaining the friendship of the dark-haired girl, as well.

Rose was more excited than she had been for days, and far happier. At last she had solved the secret of Birdie's attitude toward her. And, solving it, she knew for the first time just how much the cooling of that friendship had meant to her.

Just before the five o'clock gongs sounded that evening Annabelle drew her triumphantly aside and announced that she had "turned the trick."

"You'll have poor Mrs. North all to yourself to-night," she said. "You can lay your deep, dark plots in peace. But, beware woman, if the papers run headlines to-morrow morning, I'll know who done the dreadful deed. I'll

have the drop on you. And besides, I owe you one for keeping me in the dark about the mystery.”

There was something plaintively hopeful in this observation, but Rose refused to take the lead. If there was one thing she had learned from her business experience, it was to keep her own council.

She had sent word to Helen not to expect her home to dinner. Annabelle and Birdie had planned to see the first show, beginning at seven o'clock. And Rose had planned to be in Birdie's apartment as soon as possible after that hour, so as to have a good long talk with the invalid.

She lingered in the little restaurant where she had gone for her dinner as long as she dared. But even at that, she reached the corner of the street on which Birdie's apartment, house was located when it was still only a quarter to seven.

Afraid that she might meet Annabelle and Birdie on their way to the moving picture show, Rose turned down another street and entered a drug store on the corner.

There she bought a number of things she did not in the least want. After lingering there as long as possible, she sauntered from the store and walked around the block until a quarter after seven.

Then, convinced that the two girls must have left the apartment house, Rose entered it and went swiftly up the steps toward the North apartment.

Not until she stood before the closed door did she realize that there was no way she could enter the apartment, for she had no key.

“Stupid!” she raged at herself, in her disappointment. “Why didn't I think before that Mrs. North can't get out of her chair and open the door for me? Rose Blythe, in the words of Annabelle, you are the prize dumb-bell. Hello, what's this?”

In her disappointment and irritation she had seized the knob of the door and given it a little shake. To her surprise the knob turned easily under her fingers. Experimenting gingerly, she felt the lock turn and the door swing gently inward. Further examination told her that the latch had been slipped.

“Annabelle, oh, Annabelle!” murmured Rose joyfully. “You certainly had the right idea that time. You deserve a medal for this!”

As she stepped into the hall she called out cheerily to the invalid who occupied the little room in the rear of the apartment.

Mrs. North answered in a tone so filled with surprise and pleasure that Rose realized suddenly how much the invalid must have missed her presence about the place.

She found Mrs. North in her invalid's chair near a window that looked down into the cold bleakness of the street below.

"Why, you are almost in the dark!" cried Rose, pointing to the gas jet that had been lowered to the tiniest flame possible. The poor little apartment was one of the few places of its kind in these modern days still lighted by gas. "How come?"

"I like to see things passing in the streets," explained the invalid. "Sometimes it is lonely here and the people down there are company."

"I see!" said Rose. She took the invalid's thin hand and patted it gently. It was then that she became aware that Mrs. North was looking at her queerly, questioningly.

Rose drew up a chair and leaned forward impulsively. The flickering gas flame played upon her eager face and seemed magically to brighten the dreary room.

"I know what you are thinking, Mrs. North," she said. "You are wondering why I have not been here for so long. But truly it is not my fault. Birdie—"

"I knew there had been some trouble between you," said Mrs. North, taking Rose's hand in hers and smoothing it gently. "I tried to question Birdie, but she would only burst into tears and run away. I have been worried. And I have missed my Rosebud."

Rose gave a little choked cry, half laugh, half sob.

"Oh, dear Mrs. North, it was all because I was so blind! I did not understand!"

"Did not understand what, dear?"

"What Birdie was suffering," replied Rose softly. "When I think that I was the cause of it, however innocent, I could just about kill myself!"

"Hush, dear; you must not talk so. If you have hurt my little girl, there is no need for you to tell me the hurt was unintentional. But tell me—you have made me very curious—"

"Yes, yes, that is what I came for. And I must hurry or the girls will be back."

Rose pulled her chair up closer, listened for a moment to be sure that they were alone in the apartment, then hastily told the story about Birdie and himself that Chester Drew had told Margy in the train. She was so hurried and so eager that her words tripped over each other, and several times Mrs. North was forced to stop her and make her repeat.

“So you see,” Rose finished, looking lovelier than ever in her earnestness, “What a dreadful misunderstanding there has been. Chester Drew has believed all this time that Birdie not only thought him guilty of the crime that expelled him from high school, but that she condemned him unheard and, because she believed him guilty, would have nothing further to do with him. Of course we know, you and I, that Birdie could have done nothing of the kind.”

Mrs. North looked at her steadily for a moment, while her eyes slowly filled with tears.

“What a dear child you are, Rose,” she said softly. “And what a friend for my little girl! No, you are quite right. My Robin could never have done what Chester Drew accuses her of doing.”

“Robin!” cried Rose eagerly. “Then you call her ‘Robin?’ ”

“She called herself that when she was too little to say Roberta,” Mrs. North explained. “It was only after we were forced by bad fortune to move to the city and Robin took a place in Lossar-Martin that the girls there began calling her Birdie. Since a Robin is undoubtedly a bird, I saw no objection.”

“Only that Robin is much prettier,” said Rose.

They sat for a long time in silence. Suddenly Rose turned with a pretty shyness to the older woman.

“I suppose you wouldn’t tell me what really happened?” she suggested. “Birdie wouldn’t mind, would she?”

“I’m quite sure she wouldn’t,” replied Mrs. North, gently patting the rosy cheek. “Roberta was very fond of Chester Drew. They lived side by side and were practically inseparable.

“Then, when Chester was nearly through high school and Roberta just entering, it began to look as though the bond between them was going to develop into more than a girl’s and boy’s friendship.”

“They were very fond of each other?” Rose interrupted eagerly.

Mrs. North nodded.

“And I was glad to see it, for Chester Drew was a nice, clean boy and he seemed absolutely devoted to Roberta.

“Then came the trouble in school. Birdie saw Chester in company with the guilty boys, but she would not believe that he had anything to do with the trouble. She came home and wept and said to me that no matter what any one said, she knew Chester could not have done such a foolish, almost criminal thing.”

“What was it the boys did?” asked Rose quickly. “Could you tell me that?”

Mrs. North considered for a moment; then nodded.

“I don’t know why not, since it is all over and done with,” she said. “You see it was a practical April Fool’s joke that some of the more mischievous boys decided to play on an unpopular teacher.

“It was more than a practical joke, it was criminal, since they tampered with the machinery of his car.”

“Oh!” cried Rose, her eyes big. “Did he get hurt?”

“It was only the mercy of Providence that he wasn’t killed,” said the invalid. “He was driving along the mountain side when something went wrong with the steering gear—”

“Oh!” cried Rose again, covering her eyes with her hand as though to shut out the picture. “How dreadful!”

“Luckily, he was driving slowly, enjoying the view,” Mrs. North continued, “and so had just time to jam on the brakes. When he drew the car to a standstill it was less than a foot from the edge of a cliff.”

“No wonder those boys were suspended,” said Rose. “They were lucky they weren’t put in prison.”

“Something much more serious would undoubtedly have come of it,” agreed the invalid, “had it not been for the intervention of the teacher. Out of consideration for the parents of the boys, who were respectable, law-abiding citizens, he recommended clemency for the offenders.”

“But there is one thing I don’t understand,” said Rose. “Since Birdie did not tell that she had seen Chester Drew with those wicked boys, how did it happen that he was accused?”

Mrs. North shook her head sadly.



“Birdie didn’t find that out until after Chester had left town,” she explained. “It seems that there was one of these boys who had tampered with the professor’s car had always been jealous of Chester. The two boys had a battle royal more than once, and the fact that Chester came out victor every time did not strengthen the friendship between the two.”

“It wouldn’t!” murmured Rose, her eyes shining. Everything was becoming so marvelously clear! “Please go on.”

“Well, it was this boy who implicated Chester, saying that he had been the ring leader in the trouble. After that it was useless for Chester to protest his innocence, especially as he had been seen by a member of the faculty near the scene of the accident.”

“And he thought Birdie had given him away—worse than that, accused her of it!” exclaimed Rose. “Now, isn’t that just like a man?”

Mrs. North gave Rose a quizzical smile and patted the soft cheek fondly.

“What do you know about men?” she challenged.

Rose shook her golden head solemnly.

“I’m beginning to find out a lot,” she declared. “You’d be surprised!”

Then their glances chanced to meet and they laughed gleefully, as only people who understand each other perfectly can laugh.

When Rose left a few minutes later her eyes were shining and in her heart was a great excitement, a tremendous happiness.

For once, at least, the ride in the subway seemed a pleasant thing and the time flew quickly as she made the ride uptown. To the rhythmic click of the wheels her thoughts kept time, and the girl sang over and over that she had regained her friend and that Birdie North and Chester Drew would be brought together again!

Before she went to bed that night Rose wrote a long letter to Chester Drew in Buffalo.

# CHAPTER XXIII

## THE ACCUSATION

IT was not till the next evening that Rose came to Helen and told her that she had definitely declined Chester Drew's offer of a big position in his store in Buffalo.

Helen had been pouring a second cup of tea for herself. Now she set the teapot down quite suddenly and stared at her younger sister.

"You have—told him—so?" she said then, quite slowly.

Rose nodded airily, and if there was any regret in her heart, surely it did not show in her bright face.

"The letter is on the way," she said.

Helen hesitated for another moment, then reached across and gripped her sister's hand hard.

"Rose darling, I suppose I'm a selfish old thing, and very wicked, but I'm glad—glad!"

"You, wicked and selfish, Nell! You!" cried Rose, and smiled across at her.

A little while afterward when they had talked her decision over from all angles and definitely finished with it, Rose added with a mysterious little smile:

"I've got a secret, Nell—and I am not going to let even you into it for a little while. It's a sort of—experiment, and I can't tell until later whether I am going to be glad or sorry I made it!"

Meanwhile Helen still visited the Draper's apartment every day, reading to Hugh, working busily on her picture of the old homestead, or exchanging views privately with Mrs. Draper concerning the invalid's improvement.

Hugh was now able to be out of the bed and in a chair by the window. But, although he felt stronger in every way, he still was unable to stand.

His crushed legs had been marvelously mended, thanks to the skill of Doctor Brown and another able surgeon whom the latter had called in consultation. But even these learned men could not declare positively whether Hugh would eventually recover the full use of his limbs—or indeed, even partial use of them.

They were both optimistic. But Mrs. Draper, and Helen, too, had seen optimism fail before fact, and so were not unduly hopeful.

In Hugh's presence they were always cheerful, however, and it would have been impossible for him to guess what agonies of fear they suffered when not with him.

Hugh himself seemed imbued with the belief that he would get well. Was not everything in train for the big case—the case that would make his fortune if he won it? And, of course, he must win it!

It was only when one week went by, then two, and there was still no progress made in the strengthening of his wasted limbs that a shadow began to grow in Hugh's eyes.

He became increasingly morose and would not speak for hours at a time.

Mrs. Draper and Helen marked these signs with growing alarm. If Hugh should lose his cheerfulness, his hope, then indeed was all lost!

Helen made an attempt to interest him more strongly in her picture, asking his advice on some points that she needed not the smallest advice for, simply to take his mind from the brooding thoughts that seemed to possess it.

He tried gallantly to respond to her need, but in the midst of praising her picture he one day turned to her suddenly, his hands gripping the arms of the chair until his knuckles turned white.

“Helen, I want you to tell me the truth,” he cried in a voice made harsh by emotion. “Do you really think I am going to get well? Do you believe, in your heart, that I shall ever recover the use of—these?” pointing to the robe that covered his helpless legs.

Taken aback by the suddenness of the attack and by the steady persistence of his regard, Helen said nothing for an instant.

Reading her real opinion in that moment of revealing silence, Hugh leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes, his brow furrowed as though he were in physical pain.

“I knew it! I knew it!” he muttered over and over to himself. “You and mother have tried to hide it. But you couldn’t—forever. A cripple—useless—helpless—hopeless!”

“Oh, Hugh, don’t!” begged Helen, her heart aching unbearably. “You *are* going to get well—”

“Stop!” cried Hugh, turning to her almost savagely. “What is the use of trying to blind me to the truth—you, mother, those infernal doctors, everybody! I am not a baby to be lied to and cajoled. Forgive me, Helen.” He caught her hand as she turned away from him and was suddenly, abjectly penitent. “I hardly know what I am saying, except that I don’t deserve your generosity—your goodness. You were right to go away—”

“I won’t go away,” Helen told him gently. “Not unless you ask me to.”

For answer he pressed her hand to his face for a moment, and when Helen drew it away she found that there were tears upon it, the tears of a strong man who believes his battle lost.

“But it is not lost—it must not be!” cried Helen fiercely to herself. “Some one must find a way to help him! Somebody must do something!”

Meanwhile, at the Riverside Drive house, Margy found herself a witness to a scene that would live long and joyfully in her memory.

Rex Pepper had steadily grown more and more offensive in his attitude toward her. Just the night before he had met her in the hall and had stepped directly in front of her, effectually barring her descent to the rooms below.

Margy thought at first of retreating to her own room. But she knew that Miss Pepper was waiting in the library for her. Besides, all her hot temper rose to the surface and she felt that she would cheerfully die rather than permit Rex Pepper the satisfaction of forcing her to retreat to her room.

“If you will not let me pass, I will call Miss Pepper and rouse the house,” she said.

“Call away!” the youth challenged her sneeringly. “Such an action on your part would be greatly appreciated by me, since it would give me an opportunity to tell my aunt a few little things I have found out about her social secretary.”

Pure surprise made Margy forget her indignation. She gazed at him curiously, as though he were some strange kind of animal.

“Found out about *me*?” she repeated. “Would you mind telling me what you mean?”

“Not in the least,” he retorted suavely. “As a matter of fact, there is nothing I can think of calculated to give me greater pleasure. To put the matter succinctly, Miss Blythe, and in such a manner that not even you may fail to understand me, I believe you are that objectionable thing—a fortune hunter!”

This from him, who was planning to put his aunt in an insane asylum, so that he might gain control of her fortune!

It tickled Margy’s sense of humor. Her eyes twinkled as she said sweetly:

“How clever of you to find that out, Mr. Rex Pepper. Do you know,” leaning forward as though to confide in him, “I never would have guessed that thing about myself if you had not told me of it. I suppose, though, you have no end of proofs—you being so clever!”

Evidently her attitude was the last he had expected of her. Margy could see it made him furious. His eyes had narrowed to flinty slits when he spoke again.

“Perhaps you will not be quite so ready to laugh in the morning!” he informed her, and stepped aside to let her pass.

In spite of her amusement at the time, Margy could not lightly dismiss the young man’s threat. Although she was very fond of her employer, she was under no delusions as to her eccentricity.

If Rex Pepper managed to catch her in a certain mood, there was no telling what influence he might be able to exert over her.

It was even possible that he might induce her to believe that she, Margy Blythe, was that horrible thing he had called her—a fortune hunter.

After all, mused Margy uncomfortably, blood was known to be thicker than water!

So it was with no little trepidation that she descended to the library the next morning to take up her official duties. When she had first stepped into the hall from her room she had been vaguely conscious of voices below stairs.

But as she came nearer the library the voices rose in heated altercation, and she was no longer in doubt.

Margy halted, unable to decide what she should do next. Miss Pepper had called her and it was her experience of that lady that when she asked for a thing she wanted it immediately.

On the other hand, how could she go forward and interrupt that heated conference taking place behind the drawn portières of the library?

She could hear Rex Pepper's voice, loud and angry, interspersed with Miss Pepper's jerky, decided utterances.

While she hesitated, Margy heard her own name and stood suddenly rooted to the spot, as powerless to move as though she had been stricken with paralysis.

"Oh, so your social secretary has been filling you up with all this nonsense, has she?" raged the youth. "Well, my dear aunt, my advice to you —"

"Don't want your advice! Never asked for it!" came from Miss Pepper.

"My advice is that you keep a pretty keen eye peeled for that young lady. If she hadn't got you pretty well hypnotized already you would see her motive for telling you all this rot about me!"

"You think she has a motive?" asked Miss Pepper. Margy could tell by her voice that her employer was suddenly and keenly interested. Her heart gave a leap and then sank down into her boots.

"Motive!" sneered young Pepper. "I should think you could see that for yourself with one eye closed! She is a regular little gold digger, fortune hunter!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Miss Pepper in a high, thin cackle that startled Margy and sent the chills rioting up and down her spine. "That's good—very—very—good! Ha, ha! Drat the girl!" she exclaimed, with one of her swift changes of mood. "Where is she? Rang for her minutes, hours ago! Ah—here you are!"

For Margy had parted the curtains and stepped into the room.

She could not have made a more dramatic entrance if she had tried. Rex Pepper stared at her vindictively, his rather large face going a dull red.

"Ah, here she is," he sneered. "Probably eavesdropping."

Miss Pepper rose to her feet so suddenly as to startle even these two, who were so accustomed to her eccentricities.

“Stop it—stop this instant!” she cried, marching up to her nephew, her firm chin uplifted, sharp eyes flashing at him. “Call my secretary names, will you? There—take that!”

And before her astonished nephew could realize what she meant to do, she had slapped him right soundly, straight across his sneering mouth!

# CHAPTER XXIV

## THE INVITATION

LATER, MARGY looked back upon the scene as though it were some fantastic dream. Rex Pepper standing there, his face a study of conflicting emotions—little gray-haired Miss Pepper, hardly more than half her nephew's size, but dominating him absolutely by the sheer force of her powerful personality.

At the time, Margy half expected Rex Pepper to resent the blow in kind. For a moment malignity looked from his eyes and Margy stepped forward with the half-formed intention of protecting her employer, should she need it.

But Miss Pepper needed no one to protect her—not she!

After a moment of steadily and contemptuously eyeing her nephew, she turned over to the desk in the corner.

She had evidently prepared for this interview, if, indeed, she had not actually sought it. For she had no difficulty finding what she wanted.

She picked up a little slip of green paper and charged down upon her scowling nephew, waving it in his face.

“Here's a check!” she told him unnecessarily, since he could not possibly have mistaken that slip of green paper for anything else. “Take it! Clear out! Better go to Europe. Stay there a year!”

“Europe—a year,” mumbled Rex Pepper, staring at the check she had thrust into his hand.

His aunt's fury seemed to have robbed the youth of his. He seemed suddenly to have wilted and sagged against the doorpost as though his clothes were too big for him.

“And if you come back too soon,” Miss Pepper shook a wrathful finger beneath his nose, “I will cut you off with dime. I mean what I say. Do you believe me?” she asked suddenly. And, as he did not immediately answer, asked again: “Do you believe me?”



“My dear aunt!” Rex Pepper seemed to regain some of his old nonchalance as he slipped the check into his pocket. It was of generous proportions and, though he had not planned to go to Europe at this time, having had other aspirations, he did not particularly object to his change of plans. He knew an excellent place in Paris where one could have a good time, given enough money! “I have had sufficient experience of you in the past to be convinced that you always mean what you say. It shall be as you wish.”

He made his aunt a gallant bow, paid no more attention to Margy than if she had been a stick of furniture, turned and sauntered from the room.

As Margy and Miss Pepper stared at one another, they could hear him whistling on the stairs.

Miss Pepper shook her head sadly.

“No fool like an old fool,” she muttered, and glared at Margy.

Slightly taken aback, Margy did not know what reply to make to this, and so wisely made none.

“Should have sent him to prison—cut him off without a cent,” mourned the eccentric old lady. “Instead, what do I do?”

“You banished him to Europe, didn’t you?” ventured Margy, finding her voice.

“Banished him! Humph,” snorted Miss Pepper. “Sent him off for a vacation, you mean. Anyway,” brightening, “I slapped him—hard! Hurt my hand. Have to try it again sometime! Come now!” turning to Margy and glaring at her again. “Got to get down to business. What are you waiting for?”

Margy accomplished more work that afternoon than she had done for several weeks. The very fact that Rex Pepper had been sent away and that he would be in no position to bother her for the next year, at least made her feel as light as air and as though she could accomplish anything.

She called Dale Elton up that evening to tell him about Rex. She was so elated that when he suggested she go to dinner and a play with him and talk it over, she was caught off her guard enough to declare that it would be an excellent way to spend the evening.

They laughed together over the scene in the Pepper library and congratulated each other over the fact that they had warned Miss Pepper in time to prevent any real harm coming to her.

But when, at her door at the end of one of the pleasantest evenings Margy had ever spent, the young man begged humbly to be allowed to put something concerning the affair in his paper, if only an “insignificant paragraph,” Margy was adamant in her refusal.

“If you do, I shall never speak to you again.”

“That’s the woman of it—always asking you to choose between them and your career. It’s a cruel, cruel world!”

Margy could still hear him muttering mournfully to himself as he disappeared into the darkness.

Meanwhile, at the Lossar-Martin store, Rose was wondering if she had done wisely to try to play the rôle of peacemaker.

She had heard nothing from Chester Drew, and Birdie retained her aloof attitude. Rose had sworn Mrs. North to secrecy concerning that night when they had talked together. So, as far as Birdie was concerned, nothing had changed between her and Rose.

Whether the girl missed Chester Drew it was impossible to tell. At least it must have been some relief to her, thought Rose, watching her one day, as Birdie went methodically about her work, not to be forced to witness her old friend’s attentions to another girl.

However, as day followed day and nothing happened to break the monotony, Rose began to feel that, in some way, her good intentions had missed fire.

Perhaps Birdie did not really care for Chester Drew as she had supposed and was only annoyed with Rose for interfering. Perhaps, again, it was Chester Drew who was indifferent. Perhaps he would not even bother to write.

Then one day she reached the Lossar-Martin store to find that an unprecedented thing had taken place. Birdie North had not come downtown at all!

Rose’s surprise swiftly gave place to alarm. She imagined all sorts of terrible things. Suppose something had happened to Mrs. North? Or, perhaps, it was Birdie herself who was sick. The girl had certainly looked frail enough the day before! Even the hard-hearted Miss O’Brien had seemed disturbed by her pallor and had recommended that she take a day or two off and rest.

Perhaps that was what Birdie had done. But in her heart, Rose was sure that Birdie would not stay at home unless something very unusual had occurred, for the “day or two off” would mean that she lose just that much from her meager salary.

If the defection of Birdie had not made it practically impossible for her to leave the millinery trimmings counter because of the extra work to be divided between her and Annabelle, Rose would have taken things in her own hands and run up to the North apartment to see what was wrong.

All day she worried, despite Annabelle’s persistently optimistic views concerning Birdie’s absence.

“Take it from me, girlie, that kid’s come into some sense at last,” she assured the worried Rose. Annabelle took a vanity case from some mysterious receptacle in her clothing. She held the tiny box and mirror with one hand while with the other she arranged her hair carefully. “She probably decided at last that her death wouldn’t make the difference with Lossar-Martin that it would with her, and is actin’ accordin’. If you’re worrying about Birdie North, you’re wastin’ your time—now, take it from me. Yes madam!” frigidly to an impatient customer, “I was just about to wait upon you. What is it you wish?”

The five o’clock gong was a welcome release to Rose. Never had a day seemed so interminably long.

She rushed to the cloak room for coat and hat, bent upon evading Annabelle. Usually she was glad enough of the stimulating presence of the dark-haired girl. But this time she wanted to see Birdie North alone, unhampered by the other’s aggressiveness.

Bundled to the ears, for it was a bitterly cold day, she went down to the street, taking the elevator for the sake of speed. As she hurried through the employees’ entrance she felt a hand laid on her arm and turned rather impatiently to see who was delaying her.

“Birdie!” she cried, and then looked again to be sure she was not mistaken.

For it was a transformed Birdie North who stood before her. This girl’s eyes were bright where Birdie’s had been dull. Where Birdie’s mouth had always drooped, the mouth of this stranger turned upward in an irresistible, rapturous smile.

“Stop staring at me, Posie, and come along!”

This new Birdie North was actually tugging at her sleeve, impatiently leading her toward a candy shop several doors from the Lossar-Martin store.

Rose went with Birdie, befogged in mystery, yet with a strange stirring of excitement. Was it possible that she knew the cause of this remarkable change in her friend?

Still with that new manner of authority, Birdie pushed her way into the confectionery shop and led the way to a table at the far end of it.

“What’s the idea for the isolation?” asked Rose at last, borrowing some slang from Annabelle. “Looks as if you were about to spring something on me!”

“Posie—if you only knew!”

The glance she flung to Rose was breath-taking in its bubbling happiness. Rose watched the girl intently while she ordered two cups of hot chocolate from the hovering waitress.

When they were alone again, Birdie turned to Rose, unable for another moment to hold back her wonderful news.

“Rose,” she cried. “I had a letter to-day from Ches—from Mr. Drew!”

“Did you?” asked Rose, and made way for the waitress to set a brimming cup of chocolate before her. “Did he, by any chance, say anything important?”

“Oh, Posie, you would never guess it, never, if you tried a hundred years! He wants me to come to Buffalo!”

# CHAPTER XXV

## GOOD NEWS

ROSE stared at her friend in incredulous delight.

“Birdie!” she cried. “You don’t mean that he—that maybe he—”

“Oh, Rose, please don’t!” pleaded Birdie, turning a brilliant pink that was tremendously becoming to her. “Some one might hear you. And besides, I don’t know what he wants—not really. You see, he didn’t say—exactly.”

“Didn’t he—exactly?” teased Rose, glorying in Birdie’s flushed face. She had never dreamed that Birdie could look like that. Why, she was almost pretty!

She leaned across and put one hand on Birdie’s.

“I never pretended to be a fortune teller, Birdie North,” she said softly. “But I think I could tell you what he meant, without even knowing what was in the letter!”

Birdie North looked across at Rose for a moment and suddenly it seemed to the latter that her face, in its new sweetness and tremulous joy, was actually pretty.

“Posie, if that is what he wants,” she said, almost in a whisper, “I think I shall die of happiness.”

They talked for a long time, these two, while Birdie poured into her friend’s ears the story of those years of heartache and unhappiness since her parting with Chester Drew.

“And now you have done this for me, Rose—you have!” she cried, at the end.

“Why, has Chester—” began Rose; then paused, being not quite certain how to word her question.

“He told me everything—about the letter you wrote him, and such a dear, kind letter it must have been! He told me how you had been to see

mother and got the truth of that old high-school story from her. You bad, deceitful things, both of you—to keep such a secret from me!”

“Weren’t we?” cried Rose, dimpling.

“And all the time I was treating you so badly! Oh, Posie, it makes me ashamed every time I think of it! It wasn’t really me, Birdie North, treating you that way; it was some mean little imp inside of me.”

“Hush, honey. You don’t have to explain to me,” cried Rose. “I am the one who should ask your pardon for making you suffer so.”

“But you didn’t know!” protested Birdie, and fell silent for a moment.

Suddenly she looked up and, finding Rose’s gaze upon her, said shyly:

“Posie dear, I have another confession to make. From the first I thought you did know about Chester and me—and didn’t care.”

“Birdie! How could you?”

Birdie shook her head.

“I don’t know. It was beastly of me. But you aren’t going to hold it against me, Rose?”

“Goose!” cried Rose fondly. “Birdie, could you drink some more cocoa? Could you?”

“I feel as if I could go on drinking cocoa for the rest of my life,” returned Birdie. “Oh, Rose,” she added rapturously, “I am so happy!”

They came around after a while—a rather long while during which several cups of cocoa were consumed, with an admirable disregard of digestion—to the discussion of how Birdie could go to Buffalo without her invalid mother.

Rose suggested at once that Mrs. North come to them for a while, and though Birdie protested that she couldn’t think of making Helen so much trouble, it was evident that she was overjoyed at the suggestion and meant to accept it.

When they parted at last, Birdie getting off at her station and Rose going on uptown, Birdie promised to call Rose up early the following morning at the corner drug store and let her know definitely just what her plans would be and when she could start for Buffalo.

Rose watched the transformed Birdie melt into the crowd on the station platform, her own face bright with happiness.

For once she had not suffered the fate of the peacemaker, but had been rewarded beyond her rosiest dreams.

Early the next morning, Birdie telephoned as she had promised, and announced that she expected to start for Buffalo the following day and if the girls really wanted her mother—

It was here that Helen, who had gone to the drug store with Rose to await the call, warmly seconded Rose's invitation.

But when Rose put up the receiver she was conscious of an indefinable sense of loss. She loved Birdie truly, and it was hard, now that they had become friends once more, to lose her so soon.

Then, too, there had been a certain degree of romantic possibility in Chester Drew's offer of a bigger and more important position in Buffalo. By comparison, her own good position with Lossar-Martin seemed just a little bit dull. However, in the excitement and hurry of her work at the store, she soon shook off this slight feeling of depression.

It was later in the same morning that she heard of a position with a furniture moving company that had been a rival of the Reynolds Moving Company, with which Joe Morris had been associated, and at her lunch hour she lost little time in calling Joe up, determined that he should know of this chance at least, even though nothing might come of it.

At the lunch hour she also saw Birdie again, and arranged that she would go in a taxicab as soon as she could get away from the store and take Mrs. North to the little uptown apartment, which was to be her home for the present.

"You'd better come too, Birdie," Rose told her. "You can't stay in that apartment all night alone. And you can start from our apartment in the morning."

"But where can you put me?" protested Birdie. "You won't have any room."

"Oh, we'll put you somewhere, don't worry," answered Rose, feeling very thoughtful.

Rose was captured by Annabelle and made to tell the whole story of Birdie's good fortune. Annabelle, who, at heart, was the most sentimental of beings despite her cynically expressed views on the subject of love, was deeply stirred, and declared such an ardent desire to clasp Birdie to her

bosom and wish her good luck before she started that Rose was moved to invite her up to the apartment for dinner that night.

Annabelle was delighted and made no bones about saying so.

The two girls rode gayly to the North apartment after business hours, feeling, Annabelle said, “like genu-wine swells.”

Later, Annabelle and Rose made a “seat” of their intertwined hands and carried Mrs. North downstairs and into the waiting cab. It was a surprisingly easy thing to do, even for girls who had no great amount of strength. For Mrs. North had been so wasted by illness and worry that she seemed as light as a feather.

When they were all seated in the cab—Birdie with a new hat and coat, reckless extravagance! and a new, shiny satchel at her feet—Annabelle looked at her in frank admiration.’

“Gee, you’re great, girlie,” she said. “Never saw such a change in anybody. Some classy looker!”

Which, though it was perhaps not the most refined way of putting it, caused Birdie to redden with real pleasure. She had so much reason for looking nice—now.

The dinner at the little uptown apartment that night—it was an exceptionally good one, from a culinary point of view—passed off gayly, despite the fact that Mrs. North was patently nervous and excited and Birdie continually strung to the point of tears.

Margy came in later in the evening and made their party complete.

When finally Annabelle, loud-voiced and cheerful as ever, had departed and Rose was helping to make the couch in the living room into a bed, Birdie came to Rose and put an arm about her and kissed her.

“Posie,” she said, her eyes dewy with tears, “I may not see you for a long time. But before I go I want to tell you, that I—love you—Rose.”

Then they sat down on the edge of the couch and cried whole-heartedly for joy. Helen, coming in a little later, found them and scolded them and then sat down on the couch and cried a little with them.

The next morning being Saturday, Rose recklessly declared the day a holiday and announced her intention of going to the station to see Birdie off.

Margy, who had been given the week-end by Miss Pepper, said she would go too.



When they came into the living room a few moments before they must start for the train Birdie was clad in the new hat and coat and the other two girls were also ready for the street. Mrs. North beckoned to her girl—just a ghost of a gesture.

Birdie dropped her bag, ran to her mother with a little cry and sank to her knees beside her chair.

“Mother, don’t miss me too much!” she cried, tears raining down her upturned face. “I have a feeling—oh, I know, that we are going to find happiness—you and I!”

Then a hasty drying of tears, a confusion of laughing farewells, and Birdie was gone.

Several days passed and Helen heard suddenly from Mr. Bullard. He had returned from his business trip and would like to see her at once.

Helen dropped the letter and ran to her room, where she found the picture of the old homestead. She had finished it only the day before and had meant to show it to her sisters that night. Now it was too late.

She handled it lovingly, almost fearfully. If Mr. Bullard did not like it, she would be bitterly disappointed. Better leave it at home and take it some other time.

With a quick reversion of mood she called herself a coward and packed the picture up with the winter scene in the park. Then, giving herself no time to change her mind again, she hurried into her street things, said a word or two of explanation to Mrs. North and fairly ran into the street.

She would not even stop to see how Hugh was for fear she would be tempted into lingering and so, perhaps, change her mind again.

But once downtown and approaching Mr. Bullard’s little art shop on the side street, her footsteps lagged. She passed the door several times; then turned and darted into it, nearly bowling Mr. Bullard over with the sudden opening of the door.

Once recovered from his surprise at her cyclonic entrance, the old gentleman greeted the girl with his customary cordiality. After remarking pleasantly on her look of health, he reached with interest for her canvases.

“I have been looking forward to your first winter scene,” he told her. “I have an idea that you have ‘a particular gift’ for that sort of thing, Miss

Helen Blythe.”

Helen did not answer, though she managed a smile. Her eyes were on those big firm hands of his as he picked up her pictures.

She had put her park scene on top. He saw that first. He studied it for a moment and smiled.

“Yes, it is as I thought. You have caught the sunlight on the snow. That slope, rising in the background of feathery sky, is particularly well done. Good—good! Ah, what is this?”

Helen held her breath. He was looking at her picture of the old homestead.

For a long time the old gentleman studied it. Then he reached over and took the girl’s hand in his, gently, as her father might have done.

“You loved this old place, did you not?”

Helen nodded, her eyes full of tears.

“Yes, yes, one can see it. There is a loving touch even in that old gnarled tree that droops its snow-laden branches over the house, protectingly. My dear, you have the true artist’s gift.” Helen sat, unstirring, her hand quiet in his, her eyes on his kindly old face. “For you can make sadness beautiful. See!” he held the familiar picture so that Helen could see with him. “Through this one-tone grayness that you have achieved—and achieved is the only word for it, my dear—there seems to be shining a light, rosy, vague, dreamlike, the ghostly radiance of happier days, glorifying its loneliness, making it beautiful. That is what you meant, is it not, by your beautiful picture?”

Helen nodded. Her eyes were shining.

“You seem always to understand. Mr. Bullard, you are so kind to me!”

Then uptown again in a glorious daze of happiness. In Helen’s pocketbook was the tremendous sum of a hundred and twenty-five dollars—fifty dollars for her park scene, and seventy-five for the old homestead! Mr. Bullard had bought the pictures outright, sure that he could sell them.

And though this modest sum seemed untold wealth to Helen just then, it faded into insignificance beside Mr. Bullard’s hearty praise of her picture.

She was to do another one, too, right away—another scene in Bronx Park—and neither Helen nor her sisters, in talking things over, could possibly realize what a strange happening this was to bring about. What that

happening was will be related in another volume, to be entitled, “The Blythe Girls: Helen’s Strange Boarder; or, The Girl From Bronx Park.”

Helen felt that she must tell her great news to some one. If only the girls were at home! But there was Hugh. She would tell Hugh!

Mrs. Draper opened the door for her, and, reckless in her new happiness, Helen ran down the hall and flung open the door to Hugh’s room.

The young lawyer looked around, saw her standing there, glowing, triumphant.

“Helen!” he cried, and made a tremendous effort.

Helen stared at him.

“Hugh!” she said in a small, strained voice. “Hugh, you are standing! Hugh—”

The young man looked about him dazedly, saw what had happened, pulled himself more fiercely erect, raised his arms above his head in a gesture terrible, triumphant!

Mrs. Draper ran toward him from the doorway, tears streaming down her radiant face.

“Hugh—my boy—my dear son! Then my prayers have been answered!”

Helen turning away, blinded, groping, and left them there, clasped in each other’s arms.

Three weeks passed. Hugh, well and strong once more, threw himself with a new zest into the big case; was more than ever confident of success.

Helen, feeling very affluent because of the sale of her new pictures and feeling that she must do something to celebrate all the good fortune that had come their way, had invited their special “crowd” to dinner.

They were all there, Margy and Lloyd Roberts, Dale Elton, Hugh and Annabelle—all except Rose and Joe. Since the most tempting aromas floated in from the kitchen and everybody was ravenously hungry, the absence of these two was commented on unfavorably.

Mrs. North sat in the center of a circle of young folks. She was looking far better than when she had come to the Blythe girls; and, as she sat there, drinking in their jokes and laughter, seemed almost to grow young with them.

At the instant when Helen was declaring that they would wait no longer for the truants, but would eat without them, the two came in.

Rose was carrying two letters in her hand, and, with only a laughing nod to her friends, went directly to Mrs. North and handed one of the letters to her.

“From Birdie,” she explained, with an air of suppressed excitement. “One for you and one for me. I’ve read mine!”

There was an expectant silence while Mrs. North, with a murmured excuse, opened her letter. A moment later she laid it down, her thin face flushed with excitement, her eyes misty.

“My little girl is married,” she said softly to the eager circle of young faces.

“To Chester Drew?” asked one of them eagerly.

Mrs. North nodded.

“She wants me to come to her—to them—as soon as I can.”

Rose dropped to her knees beside the invalid’s chair and put both arms about her.

“Dear Mrs. North,” she said softly, “Birdie was right, then, wasn’t she, when she said she could see happiness straight ahead?”

Mrs. North patted the soft cheek and smiled.

“Thanks to you, dear,” she said.

As they were going into dinner some few minutes later, Joe tugged at Rose’s sleeve and held her back until all the others had gone into the dining room.

“Rose, I’ve got a new job—a humdinger!” he cried exultantly. “It makes the old one look sick.”

“Oh, Joe, I’m glad! Was it the one I told you about?”

Joe nodded.

“This has been some day for me,” he added confidentially. “I only needed the news that Chester Drew was safely married to make it perfect!”

Rose looked at him pityingly.

“You perfectly idiotic Strainer Man!” she chuckled. “Come on, and get some dinner.”

And Joe did!

**THE END**

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## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

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Book author has been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Rose's Great Problem* by Elizabeth M. Duffield Ward (as Laura Lee Hope)]