

"Business Kisses"

By BEATRICE BURTON

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Rose sank back into a corner of the wide seat, with her eyes wide and her breath coming fast. She wanted to cry.

"You know I'm wild about you, Mary Rose, don't you?" Tom said huskily. "When are you going to marry me? You know you have no more chance of getting away from me than Custer's Last Stand! Don't you?"

CHAPTER V

Mary Rose had no answer to give him. He sat perfectly still in her corner of the car. And Tom said nothing more, but looked grimly ahead of him until the wheels crunched on the gravel driveway of the Pepper Pot restaurant.

Then as he opened the door and she stepped out, he took hold of both of her slim wrists and drew her slowly toward him. Mary Rose could feel that he trembled—could feel his breath on her cool cheek.

"Look here, why do you act this way?" he asked. "Why do you freeze up when I kiss you? You say you like me, and then you won't let me touch you."

With sudden passion he drew her closer. But before he could touch her lips Mary Rose pulled herself away from him.

"Don't, Tom, everybody'll see you!" she said sharply, and started for the long, low white building whose windows glared like squares of gold against the darkness. He followed her.

"There's nobody around to see us," he said sullenly. "And if you gave a snap of your fingers about me, you wouldn't care if there was! Look out!"

A huge Dexter automobile, with blazing headlights, rushed past them, its wheel grazing Mary Rose's skirts. Tom looked after it wrathfully as it swerved into the farthest corner of the yard and came to a dead stop.

"The fool! He almost hit you!" he exclaimed, holding Mary Rose close. "Why doesn't he watch where he's going?"

But Mary Rose wasn't listening. Her eyes were on the car. She knew that great blue car with its nickel trimmings! It was a special Dexter Eight and it belonged to Hilary H. Dexter himself.

"I must be sure to tell Flossie that she's not the only girl who runs around with Hilary Dexter!" she thought. "I wonder who's with him tonight in that car of his?"

It was not until she and Tom were sitting across from each other at a little corner table that another thought struck her. Suppose it were Flossie who was with Dexter, now, tonight?

"Excuse me a minute, Tom," she said, jumping up. "I want to go into the dressing room to powder my nose."

Tom rose, too. "And I was just thinking that you were the only girl I know who doesn't make up her face every fifteen minutes," he said respectfully.

Mary Rose flashed a smile at him and was gone.

The dressing room was at the end of a long, narrow hall that ran from one end of the farmhouse to the other. As Mary Rose walked toward it she saw that there were little private dining rooms on either side. The door of one of them stood open and as she passed it Mary Rose caught a glimpse of a man and a girl within.

"Now, why do they eat in there when they could be out in the big room where the crowd and the music are?" she wondered. "I don't see what fun there is in coming to a place like this and then having supper in a poky little room."

The dressing room had a big, bare place with uncarpeted floor and plastered walls that were none too clean. On a table in the corner stood the telephone.

Mary Rose gave her mother's number, and in a minute Mrs. Middleton's soft voice answered her, "Yes?"

"This is Mary Rose, Mum. Could I speak to Flossie?"

"Why she's not here," her mother answered. "She went out about half an hour ago. But I expect her back any minute."

"Where did she go? Do you know?"

"To the library for a book," the soft voice went on. Alice James stopped in about 5 o'clock and she and Floss left the house together just a while ago. She'll be back soon, I'm sure, because she knows that super ready. Is there any message for her, Mary Rose?"

"No, I just wanted to speak to her," the girl answered. "You're sure she went to the library?"

"Why, yes, of course," Mrs. Middleton's tone was crisp. "Shall I tell her you called when she comes in?"

"No, don't bother—I'll call later."

"I don't see why you can't give me any message you have for her, Mary Rose," she said. "I don't like you girls to have secrets from me. Good-by. The receiver clicked in Mary Rose's ear."

On her way back to the table the girl stopped and looked out of a chintz-draped window that faced the yard of the inn. The big Dexter car still stood in its dark corner. She could see its bulk outlined against the white paling of the fence.

But Hilary Dexter was not in the main room with its polished dance floor, its little white tables and the yellow lamps that bloomed on them like flowers.

"I suppose he's taken a private dining room," Mary Rose decided. "It took you a long time to powder your nose!" Tom said, as she sat down in the chair across from him. "The soup's getting cold."

With a flourish he took the cover from the tureen and served Mary Rose and then himself.

"I can't think of anything nicer than to have supper with you every night, all the rest of my life," he went on, showing his white teeth in a grin. But his eyes were serious.

The girl only looked at him. She tried to laugh, but she couldn't. She knew that Tom was going to ask her to marry him again, and that she ought to say, "Yes." But could she?

"There's a white house out near my father's farm—a little white

house with green shutters and things," he said. "Will you drive out with me tomorrow and take a look at it?"

Her eyes left his and fastened themselves on the yellow-shaded lamp beside her on the table.

"Why?" she scarcely breathed. She felt as if a net were closing around her.

"Because that's where I want you to go and live—with me," she heard Tom's voice saying huskily. His hand closed over hers, as it lay on the cloth, and held it tight. "I want you, Mary Rose. How about it?"

She looked around her. The warm, bright room had begun to fill, and at most of the little tables sat couples who leaned toward each other and spoke in low tones.

The jazz band, on its platform in the corner, began to play the "Indiana Love Call." One by one the couples rose from the tables, and stepped out on to the smooth, honey-colored floor.

"Want to dance?" asked Mary Rose, with sudden brightness. She loved to dance and she did not want to talk about marriage just now.

Tom shook his head. "No, I don't, but if you want to, I will," he said, getting up. "I aim to please—and anyway, it gives me a chance to put my arms around you, you prickly pear!"

He put them around her, and they swayed out onto the floor in time to the lovely, disturbing melody of the "Love Call."

"Mary Rose," Tom said in her ear, "Mary Rose, go on and say you'll marry me. I can't get along without you. You know I've been crazy about you for five years and I'm never going to get over it."

His voice changed suddenly—lowered to a harsh note.

"If that bird over in the corner doesn't stop looking at you, I'll have to go and speak to him about it," he growled.

Mary Rose followed his eyes. A large blond man with reddish hair and a heavy, pasty face sat there. His eyes met hers and held them fast for a long minute. She stared at him in sheer fascination—he was so ugly.

"Let's not dance any more," she looked up at Tom.

"I don't see why he should look at me," she said, flushed and breathless, when they were a their table once more.

Tom laughed grimly, as he lit a cigarette.

"You don't?" he asked. "Don't you know you're the prettiest thing alive? You make all the rest of the girls look like wooden nickels. You think Flossie's a beauty, and so she is, but she can't hold a candle to you."

Flossie! Mary Rose stood up, an anxious look in her clear eyes.

"Oh, that reminds me of something! I've got to phone mother!" she said. "Take me out to the dressing room, Tommy."

She led the way, followed by the admiring eyes of the large, blond man at the corner table.

Tom loitered in the corridor while she talked to her mother over the dressing table phone.

"No, she's not here," Mrs. Middleton's voice said, when she asked to speak to Flossie. "I waited supper for her 'til 7 o'clock, and then I phoned Alice James' flat. No one answered there, so I suppose she and Flossie have gone somewhere together. But Flossie said she was only going to the library for a book, you know."

Mary Rose groaned. She might have known that Flossie wasn't going to the library. Not Flossie, who never read anything but motion picture magazines and style books! She'd never go to the library in a lifetime!

"She may have met Sam Jessup, somewhere, too," her mother went on. "I heard her phoning some one this afternoon, and she may have been planning to meet him—but I wish she'd come home. It makes me so nervous, not knowing where she is at 9 o'clock at night."

Mary Rose looked at her cheap little wrist watch. It was 9 o'clock! She hadn't realized how the hours had flown since she and Tom had driven into the courtyard of the Pepper Pot.

"Tom, I think I ought to go home," she said when she joined him in the outer hall, where he stood leaning against the wall smoking a cigar.

He looked down at her. "Why?" he asked shortly.

"Well, my mother says that Flossie left the house three or four hours ago—and she hasn't come back," Mary Rose explained as they walked back to their table.

"Was she alone?"

"No, she was with Alice James. They told mother they were going to the library for a book." She began to laugh suddenly. "Imagine Flossie or Alice James reading! I'll bet one of them has ever opened a book since they left high school!"

"They're a pair of wild kids—" Tom looked at her gravely. "But they're probably safe and sound sitting in a movie somewhere. Still, if you think you ought to go home and look them up—"

Mary Rose shook her head. "No, we'll have our dessert and coffee first," she said. She didn't want to spoil Tom's party. "Then we'll go."

She leaned forward over the table and slapped her hands before her. Tom laid one of his over them for an instant, then drew it away.

"I want to ask you something, and I want a straightaway answer," he said quietly. "Why don't you ever let me hold your hands? I really want to know."

"Because I don't like any one to hold my hands," she answered promptly and with decision.

"Not anyone?"

Mary Rose's voice quivered. But she told the truth.

"Not anyone—whose ever tried to hold them," she said, looking away.

"Mary Rose, you're in love with some one. I've known it, somehow, all along," he answered, after a long silence. "Who is it?"

(To Be Continued)



OUT OUR WAY—By WILLIAMS



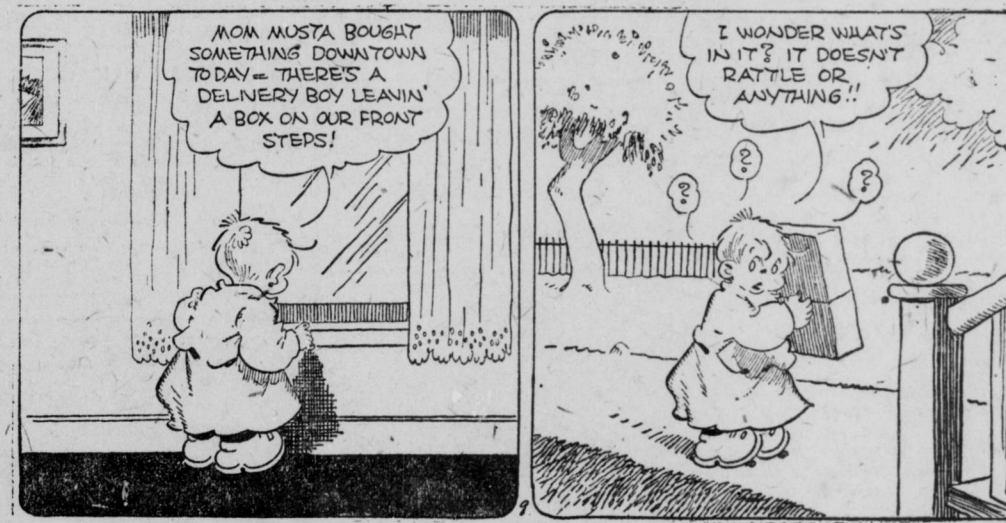
OUR BOARDING HOUSE—By AHERN



BOOTS AND HER BUDDIES—By MARTIN



FRECKLES AND HIS FRIENDS—By BLOSSER



SANDY by ELENORE MEHERIN, Author of "CHICKIE"

CHAPTER CXVIII

He stood at the kitchen door, his back to Judith.

Judith noticed the slump of his shoulders; the lighted cigarette that he flicked but didn't smoke.

She noticed the white hydrangeas that in one moonlight had bloomed with such mysterious, arresting beauty—bloomed behind two figures clasped joyously in each other's arms.

The hydrangeas looked dusty in the sunlight—dusty against the blue walls of the kitchen porch. Judith now thought resentfully.

Douglas turned, showed a hand wearily over his hair. "They're taking a devil of a time."

They avoided miserably each other's eyes.

Tuesday morning—morning of freedom—sunny March morning, Douglas came over to the table, stared at the newspapers spread out as Judith's sister had left them.

Spashed all over the front page were pictures of himself and Sandy. Vivid, dramatic accounts of the sensational windup of the Worth murder case. An artist's sketch of Sandy as she stood with the sunlight falling on her white, haunting face; as she stood in that moment just before she fainted; just as she called out:

"Douglas—oh, you hear—Douglas, I don't do it—I couldn't—"

she said that and swayed. He felt her soft, yielding body in his arms—his face against her cheek.

And he now bit his lips—the print of the newspaper blurring. He shoved his hands one after another over his hair.

"God, they're taking a terrible time, Jude!"

"Yes—terrible."

They looked at each other then. In the mind of each was an image of Sandy—Sandy with the sheet pressed to her lips—the sheet crimson with her blood.

He leaned on his two hands, drawing long, stifling breaths—waiting.

They were waiting for a verdict—another verdict now.

In the room with Sandy was a lung specialist! Hal Hume had brought.

Now Hal and the specialist were in the living room conferring, and a nurse was with Sandy.

And now an image of Sandy as she lay back on the pillows, the ghost of a smile on that luring, beautiful mouth came to him—as she lay there reaching her hands for him, murmuring inaudible and husky: "It's nothing—I'm better—"

Lay there like that, so thin—a blue line at her mouth—the mouth she had raised so gaily to this—

He tried bitterly to put this image from him. He shoved the newspapers. Lord—how violently un-

derable... how incredible all this—

Distracted scenes trooped through his mind—a cell—Conners spattering tobacco juice on the floor—the tanks where a fellow sentenced to be hanged had walked—food eaten with his fingers. Then an office—a man lying dead—someone creeping along the floor—creeping and moaning—

These scenes trooped through his mind in a shuddering disorder—nightmare scenes.

Again he pushed his hair, one hand after the other. Not nightmare. Reality. All this had happened—all this was happening.

A door opened.

They both started violently. But when Hal Hume came, neither could speak. They looked at him limply. Judith: "Why don't you go and see Sandy, Doug? She'll be wanting to see you..."

He rubbed his teeth over his lower lip. "What—Hal—what does Matthews say?"

"He wants to watch her for a while... He'll come again. He wants her kept very quiet..."

When Douglas went from the room, he shook his head at Judith.

"Jude—how in the name of God did all this come to you and me? How did all this come to her?"

"I wonder about it, Douglas," "Sandy wonders about it, too, Jude—Oh, if we could just get her over this—Jude, you and I could take her away—"

Judith went up to him and pulled a chair to his side: "Yes—if we could do this, Douglas—"

"It's coming to her. All her life.

Then Douglas came with pitiful little boy trustfulness to Judith. "What did he tell you, Jude? We can save her? She's much brighter. She's better."

And it was like this for a week—Judith came so often and found him sitting at Sandy's bed—sitting there, holding her hand—or sometimes kissing her hand—pity and love in his eyes—love and pity in his voice.

He followed Judith to the kitchen. "She's better today, Jude."

"I thought so, Douglas. She seemed better today."

Then he sat down and leaned his chin on his fists. And again all those distorted images went through his mind. Another one followed these—the image of Emma. Emma had a way now of following him about—a way of coming up abruptly and searching his face. Of saying to him: "My boy—oh, my lad—don't be crushed—you must be yourself again—"

He laughed at Emma. He was not himself—but he would be—he would be, of course—let her give him a little time—just a little time—

"Jude—how in the name of God did all this come to you and me? How did all this come to her?"

"I wonder about it, Douglas," "Sandy wonders about it, too, Jude—Oh, if we could just get her over this—Jude, you and I could take her away—"

Judith went up to him and pulled a chair to his side: "Yes—if we could do this, Douglas—"

"It's coming to her. All her life.

Jude—how awful everything has been for her—"

And Judith found no words—nothing except to answer "Ah, yes—how awful—"

She thought of Sandy wishing for a light along the path—wanting someone to hold aloft a torch lighting up the path. She had so wanted love—so wanted ardent, sweeping raptures. One so blithe, so very debonair, has right to this. She had wished to go arrogantly, a young queen taking as she would.

And she had found life indifferent to all this. Life is so ruthless in the way it fastens consequences, making even of queens and kings mere little links in a vast, endless chain. Not even kings and queens may live their lives alone...

A light along the path—Sandy wanted this. Judith now saw her running along in the darkness.

Sandy running so. And she running like this and Douglas. And whole armies of men and women plunging along through shadows—running down the centuries of life in shadows. No light raised. These armies of men and women vanishing, leaving no light—no mark. Yet, here and there a symbol raised—a cup of hemlock—a cross.

Down the endless dark path only this—now and then a cross raised—now and then the cup of hemlock.

Sandy let her hand lie happily in that of Douglas. She smiled at him through brilliant, cavernous eyes. That brown, shapely head—how good just to lie here like this and let her hand rest in his.

"It's coming to her. All her life.

She thought: "I'm glad to be here—glad to be weak... Then he loves me more... He wants to care for me... Just a little while... Soon I'll have to give him up... I'll do this—I've learned—"

She said all this to herself, planning for the day when she would be well and breezy and strong again. Yet glad that day was still distant—still far off.

She said eagerly: "Douglas, you looked at me as though you were older—why, as though you pity me. And, Douglas, in your heart you must surely think that it is I who have—who have put a terrible load on you. You blame me—no, don't stop me—but when you are alone, when you close the door of your room and shut me away and do not have my hand in yours, then do you think, 'Why did she come into my life—why did I ever know her? Ah, you think this?'"

He had his head lowered, the face hidden from her. Now he leaned down. "No, Sandy, I don't think this. I wonder why—why it came to you—to you and to me—yes. But we'll forget—we'll soon forget it all."

"Oh, say that," she reached her hands to his face—she clung to him with her eyes. "Say that, Douglas, dear."

His eyes filled—pity and love, love and pity. He put his arms about her, wishing so to spare her. "I say it, Sandy."

"I love you, Douglas—I love you. She gave a quick, gasping breath. "Oh, raise me up—quick!"

(To Be Continued)