

"Business Kisses"

By BEATRICE BURTON

Author of "Gloria, The Flapper Wife"

The names in this story are purely fictitious and are not to be taken as referring to any particular person, place or firm.

CHAPTER LVII

As the slow weeks dragged by, Mary Rose wondered more and more why Jim Morrell's pretty wife was so jealous of him.

For he behaved himself perfectly. He never "got fresh" with Mary Rose.

He treated her much as he might have treated a nice young man who was working for him—never trying to touch her hand when he took his letters from her, never patting her shoulders or calling her "Cutie."

As time went on she began almost to like him, and if it hadn't been for that odd, sneering smile in his eyes, she would have trusted him.

But Mrs. Morrell got on her nerves. She would come popping in at the office at odd times. And if Mary Rose happened to be taking Morrell's dictation in his private office, she would suddenly open the door as if she expected to find them making love to each other.

"Isn't it terrible?" he asked Mary Rose one rainy afternoon in mid-December, when his wife had just left after one of her surprise visits. "She expects me to be kissing you every time she pops in like this! She's been married to me for nineteen years and she's never caught me at anything yet, but she hasn't given up hope!" The odd twinkle in his eye became more pronounced.

He swung around in his swivel chair, stuck his thumbs in his armpits and addressed her solemnly: "One of these days you'll be marrying, too, and I'm going to give you a word of advice—trust your husband! All of you women seem to think that all of us men are leading double lives. As a matter of fact, we're as decent as you are. Every bit. We never want but one woman—and she's usually the woman we marry."

Mary Rose thought this over. Of all the dozens and dozens of business men she knew, Hilary Dexter was the only one who had left the straight and narrow road for the primrose path—lured there by Flossie.

"I guess that's true," she answered gravely. But, look here, Mr. Morrell, your wife's jealous of you because she loves you. She probably sits at home as long as she can stand it, wondering if you're making love to some girl down here at the office, and then she just has to come down and see if you are!"

The smile that Mary Rose hated almost faded out of Morrell's face, and he put his head a little to one side as he looked at her.

"Think that's it?" he asked, moving his elbows slowly along the edge of the desk—an irritating habit of his. "I always thought she was trying to get something on me. Do you think a woman who really loved her husband would spy on him all the time the way she does? Now, do you?"

Mary Rose tossed her head. "Of course, I do," she answered. "And if I were you, I'd end her misery. I'd hire a man for my secretary."

"All right, you find me a smart young fellow, and I'll fire you and take him in your place. How will you like that?" he asked, and the twinkle came back in his eyes.

"I'll like that fine!" cried Mary Rose, joking. "Nothing cheers a girl up like losing her job!"

But she honestly wouldn't have cared particularly if Jim Morrell had discharged her. There was no joy in this new job as there had been in every stroke of work that she had done for John Manners. She did her work now, like a well oiled machine. But here heart was not in it.

Her only exciting moment every day came at 5:30, when she went into the washroom to dress to go home. She was very careful about her appearance these days—tucking her hair neatly around her ears and pinning a bunch of violets or an imitation gardenia to the fur collar of her coat.

For she had to pass the Dexter office on the way to a car line and there was always the chance that she might see John Manners some night on her way up the street!

"I might just happen to bump into him," she told herself every evening when she walked out of the building, "and I want to look nice."

Then one night she did see him—driving past in his shining black roadster with Doris Hinig beside him. A pang of jealousy that was like a stiletto in its sharpness shot through her as she glimpsed them and then glanced quickly away.

"My word! I'm as bad as Mrs. Morrell!" she told herself angrily. "Jealous as a cat!"

She was slowly making up her mind not to work for Morrell after the first of the year.

"It's not that I don't like the place," she told her mother and Flossie one Saturday afternoon when the three of them sat together in the gay little chintz-hung living room of Flossie's flat. They were doing her weekly mending for her while she lay stretched out on the chaise

lounge, looking at herself in a Florentine mirror of blue and gilt.

"And Mr. Morrell is nice enough, too, in his queer way," Mary Rose went on thoughtfully. "But I can't stand the way he talks about his wife."

"All men do that!" Flossie broke in, covering a yawn with two of her slim little fingers. "Show me the married man who won't roast his wife to any good looking girl he meets and I'll show you a holy angel!"

Mrs. Middleton frowned at her. "Flossie! Flossie! What are you saying? You mustn't talk that way about the angels of the Lord. My dear, I've tried to bring you up to be God-fearing—I just wonder if you ever say your prayers any more."

Flossie looked bored. "Nobody prays nowadays any more than they say 'grace' when they eat," she answered lightly.

"I pray," Mrs. Middleton said very quietly. "And let me tell you something—I never could have lived through these last few years if it hadn't been for prayer! Wait until you have children, my dear little girl, and you'll find out that God is an ever-present help in trouble."

Flossie looked at her amiably. "All right, wait until I have children if you want to," she chirped. "But don't hold your breath."

She turned her sea blue eyes to Mary Rose. "What does that bird, Morrell, have to say about his wife?" she asked curiously. No one dared a titbit of gossip more than Flossie.

"Oh, nothing much, except that she's jealous of him," Mary Rose replied, snipping off her darning silk and rolling a mermaid pair of socks together. "Of course, there's no doubt that she is wildly jealous of him, poor woman! I feel sorry for her."

"I'll bet she hasn't any children, that's what I'll bet!" Mrs. Middleton said, after a moment of silence broken only by the soft ticking of the little French clock on the mantel-piece.

"Why, no, she hasn't! But how did you know it?" Mary Rose asked in wide-eyed astonishment.

Mrs. Middleton looked as wise as the proverbial owl. "Oh, I just put two and two together," she said smartly. "You take a woman who has a family of children to bring up and she hasn't much time to imagine things about her husband. Half the mischief in the world, it seems to me, is done by these wives who won't have the children nature intended 'em to have. The very idea of a woman saying she won't have children is wicked, that's what!"

She looked straight at Flossie, who smiled up at her lazily from the cushions that were heaped around her like broken rainbows.

"Hitting me over Mrs. Morrell's back, aren't you, mother?" she asked, narrowing her eyes until they were just a gleam of green blue between her lashes.

"Yes, I mean it for you, too," her mother admitted. "This notion that you girls have nowadays that you won't have your babies, is immoral! And don't think that your husbands like you any better for it. They don't. Men want their families!"

She stopped and sniffed the air. From the direction of the kitchen came the unmistakable smell of burning sugar. "That's my pie running over," she cried, and hurried away. She always cooked Flossie's meals for her when she spent the day at the honeymoon flat.

"Mother ought to hire a hall and be one of these women preachers," Flossie laughed, stretching herself like a kitten. "I never did know anybody who loves to hand out advice like she does. What's the matter?"

For Mary Rose was staring at one of her little white hands that lay, like a pale flower, on the arm of the long chair. Upon its third finger shone a ring that Mary Rose had seen before—the star sapphire that Hilary Dexter had given her months ago, when he was at the height of his passion for her!

"For heaven's sake, why are you wearing that thing?" she gasped. "This! Flossie held up her hand and looked lazily at the jewel.

"Why, I suppose I'm wearing it because it's the only decent piece of jewelry I'll ever have! Sam never notices what I have on, anyway. I could flash forty-seven rings under his nose and he'd never see 'em! He's as blind as a bat in some ways."

"Even so, you haven't any business wearing another man's presents when you're married to him," Mary Rose told her earnestly, and Flossie gave an amused snicker.

"I never think of the things Dexter gave me as 'another man's presents,'" she drawled. "They're just some lovely bits of jewelry that I have and I'm going to keep 'em and wear 'em. And you mind your own business, will you?"

Her tone was insulting.

That was on Saturday.

And on Sunday morning, as Mary Rose was getting dressed for church, a taxicab came tearing up New York St. and stopped with screaming brakes before the house.

From her bedroom, Mary Rose saw Flossie jump out and come running up the walk, followed by the driver, carrying two suitcases. The front door bell pealed loud and long.

"Dear, dear, dear! What a noise! That must be a telegram!" cried Mrs. Middleton, coming out of her bedroom in her corset cover and petticoat. "Run downstairs and see who it is. Mary Rose, I'm not dressed!"

"It's Flossie. I saw her," Mary Rose answered quietly, tying her bathrobe around her waist as she started down the steps.

"What's happened, Baby?" she asked a moment later, when she opened the door. For Flossie's lovely little heart-shaped face was swollen and streaked with tears and her hair was flying.

"I've left Sam!" Flossie sobbed out. "Pay the taxi man, will you? I haven't a red cent!"

She passed Mary Rose and flew upstairs to her mother.

By the time Mary Rose had paid the cab driver and lugged both the suitcases up the stairs she was lying on Mrs. Middleton's bed, crying in a quiet, heartbroken sort of way.

"What happened, darling?" her mother was saying, sitting beside her and stroking the soft little hands. It was then that Mary Rose noticed that Flossie was not wearing Dexter's star sapphire.

OUT OUR WAY—By WILLIAMS



OUR BOARDING HOUSE—By AHERN



SALESMAN SAM—By SWAN



BOOTS AND HER BUDDIES—By MARTIN



FRECKLES AND HIS FRIENDS—By BLOSSER

