

THE BLACK PIGEON

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THIS HAS HAPPENED
Ruth Lester finds that her blond beauty interferes with her opportunities for becoming an expert secretary and consequently dons yellow spectacles, ill-fitting clothes and skins back her curls so she may go her way unobserved by flirtatious employers.

But for this concealment of her loveliness she could not have worked unobserved four months for "Handsome Harry" Borden, promoter of dubious stock companies and notorious for his affairs with women. Ruth would resign but for a romance which springs up between her and Jack Hayward, young insurance broker, whose office is just across the narrow alley from Borden's private office on the seventh floor of the Starbridge Building.

On a Friday night in January Jack and Ruth became engaged and Ruth comes to the office next morning with her disguise removed. In her office, Ruth greets Benny Smith, 17-year-old office boy, who is astonished at her transformation and who instantly becomes infatuated. He advises her to don her disguise before Borden's arrival. She is interrupted by a phone call. It is "the woman with the beautiful contralto voice" whom Borden has previously refused to talk to. Ruth has time to put on her spectacles before Borden's arrival. Among his private mail is an orchid-tinted envelope which he thrusts into his pocket. He instructs Ruth to go to the bank for \$500 in cash and to the station to buy two railroad tickets and a drawing room.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

CHAPTER II
Ruth Lester was grateful for the errands to bank and station which "Handsome Harry" Borden had given her to do for they gave her an opportunity to review, in undisturbed ecstasy, the miracle which had happened to her. In a jaunty little brown hat, against which the newly released golden curls clung like sprays of delicate embroidery, her new nutria coat wrapped snugly about her small body, her blue eyes unobscured by the hideous spectacles, she stepped into the elevator which was directly across the hall from the Borden offices.

Micky Moran, the jolly, impudent, red-headed lord of the elevator cage, did not recognize in the pink and white and gold little beauty the third secretary who had been a daily passenger for the last four months. His bold eyes took her in at a glance, then he began to whistle significantly: "Yes, sir, that's my baby!"

Just before the elevator reached the ground floor, Ruth asked, in the hesitant meek voice which had been part of her "disguise": "Is your father recovering from that awful automobile accident, Micky?"

Before the astonished boy could

reply, Ruth, laughing at him over her furrowed shoulder, stepped into the lobby of the Starbridge Building.

"Vain little imp!" she characterized herself, as a gust of January wind tugged a her coat. "But oh, I'm so glad I can be me at last! Four months of being someone else! But worth it, worth it, worth it!" she chanted under her breath, as she joined the Saturday morning shoppers who milled about the busy corner.

It was meanly how accurately Benny Smith had diagnosed the absurd situation which had made a disguise necessary. Perfect blond beauty had been a pleasant possession, one which would some day bring her great happiness, she had thought, so long as her father had been alive to shield her.

She had been as proud of him as he of her, for Colby Lester had been one of the greatest criminal lawyers of his day—a criminal lawyer whose greatness lay in his keenness as a detective rather than in jury-awarding oratory. During the last five years of his life he had talked over all his cases with his daughter. Many a night they had sat up until dawn, Ruth curled kitten-wise in his arms, her childish brows knit, amusingly, in the same fashion as his, her logical mind keeping pace with his and sometimes leaping ahead of it.

"Good work, infant! You've got the makings of a Grade A detective behind those yellow curls. But please God, you'll never have to earn your living in any such—tid fashion as this," he had told her once.

A dignified home, exquisite clothes, servants who adored Colby Lester and his daughter, private school, association with keen and cultured minds—all these things Ruth had enjoyed until Colby Lester's sudden, tragic death.

He had been defending a woman on the charge of poisoning her lover, a married man, and had been shot down by the crazed widow of the victim because she had believed that Colby Lester would win the defendant's freedom for her. And he had, although his funeral took place while the jury was bringing in its verdict of "Not guilty."

Even now Ruth could scarcely understand why there had been so little for her when her father's estate was settled. But his books showed that he had defended more penniless victims of tragic circumstance than wealthy ones, because their cases presented problems which intrigued his detective instincts. And he had denied his daughter nothing—nor himself. He had been a connoisseur of comfortable living, had thought he could always make enough money to gratify the exquisite tastes he had cultivated in himself and his

daughter. And then he had died. . . . She had used what little money there was to take an eight months' secretarial course, and had come out of business college primed with all sorts of useful knowledge, her little fingers capable of astonishing speed in shorthand and typewriting.

But men had not let her do it. They were like women who cry out to "beautiful babies": "Oh, you precious, darling dumpling! I could eat you up." And they tried to eat her up, and she had to flee, from the job to that, from one humiliating experience to another. As Benny Smith, the office boy, had guessed, the wives of the married men she had tried to work for had been the worst. . . . But those scenes would not bear thinking of now, when she was so happy.

It was a motion picture, finally, which pointed a way out of her difficulty. Out of work, she had gone forlornly into a movie theatre in an effort to forget her rather absurd troubles. And she had seen, on the screen, a timid, money-besotted little secretary with skinned-back hair, ill-fitting clothes and horn-rimmed spectacles, suddenly transform herself into a beauty, so that she might win the love of her employer. Ruth Lester laughed so hysterically that lovers of the silent drama turned in their seats and glared at her.

The next day, with golden hair pulled tightly into a hard, unbecoming knot on her neck, eyebrows jerked back into a scared-rabbit expression, blue eyes obscured and drained of their color by enormous yellow-lensed, horn-rimmed spectacles, a longish, ill-fitting dark dress libeling her lovely small figure, had presented herself at the offices of Henry P. Borden, who had advertised for a secretary.

And for four months, although "Handsome Harry" Borden was notoriously fond of beautiful women, Ruth had been permitted to work in peace.

Sometimes it had been cruelly hard to keep her pose and her deliberately achieved homeliness. For Ruth found, to her surprise and disgust, that she missed the admiring glances of men and women who passed her in the street. And those months had been the loneliest she had ever spent, for in all that time no man had asked her for a "date"—except Jack Hayward.

Ruth drew a deep breath of joy. The pain of recalling the past had been wiped out by the ecstasy of arriving, inevitably, at Jack Hayward's name. Her little high-heeled pumps clicked a staccato accompaniment to her joy, as she turned in at the bank. Reaching into the big inside pocket of her fur coat she retrieved her spectacles, straddled her small nose with them, so that the teller could recognize her and make no difficulty about cashing Borden's check.

In the street again, on her way to the station to buy two tickets

and a drawing-room for Harry Borden and the woman he was to take to Winter Haven with him, Ruth had five more precious minutes in which to review her strange romance.

Pigeons! Involuntarily her blue eyes, free of the spectacles again, scanned the sky for a glimpse of the birds which had brought her happiness. She saw none. Probably they were huddling against chimneys for warmth. The poor darlings! She hoped it would not be too severe a winter for their sakes.

She laughed softly as she remembered how she must have looked, in her "disguise" leaning out of the window opening upon the airshaft, coaxing the black pigeons to her with crumbs held invitingly in the hollow of her palm.

But Jack Hayward, who had been watching, had not laughed. He had smiled, that tender, whimsical smile which was so dear a part of him. And she had smiled, forgetting for the moment that the dimple must be sternly repressed. Two days later, when she was feeding the whole greedy flock with crumbs sprinkled upon the window ledge, Jack Hayward had tried to lure them away from her with crumbs of his own. It had become a game between them—between the handsomest man in the Starbridge Building and the dove-diest, frumpest, most timid-looking little secretary.

Then one day he had appeared at the elevator—not the elevator in his wing of the building, but at the one across the hall from Harry Borden's offices. She could hear him now, see the dancing light in his bronze-brown eyes, the whimsical quirk to his mouth, as he had said:

"I wonder if you'll let me lunch with you, Miss Lester, so I can find where you get such potent bread crumbs. My greatest ambition in life is to have that black rascal of

a pigeon eating out of my hand, too."

She had wanted to turn back, then, into her own office, for five swift minutes at the mirror—just long enough to remove her spectacles, scrub off that sickly yellowish powder, release the golden glory of her curls, but the elevator came, and her opportunity to show him how Ruth Lester really looked had been lost.

It was during that first luncheon of theirs that Ruth's resolve was made. For Jack Hayward had talked to her as no man since her father's death had talked—as if she had a mind worthy of his! as if she were something more than a beautiful little scrap of femininity made to be gobbled up by man.

"I won't show him the outside of me until he has a chance to learn and love the inside of me," Ruth resolved, and trembled lest the great experiment should fail. For she already loved him—the outside and the inside of him. What if he should only like and feel congenial with her mind, and talk because of her disguise, to love her as a man must love the woman he marries?

But that would have to be her risk, she resolved.

"Oh!" Ruth came to herself with a start, and smiled at the ticket agent. She had not even realized that she had arrived at the station. "Two round-trip tickets and drawing-room for Winter Haven, please. The 2:15 train for this afternoon."

"What is the name?" the ticket agent asked briskly, though his eyes drank in her loveliness gratefully. "We have to keep a record of drawing-room reservations."

"It is for Mr. Borden—I mean Mr. H. P. Borden," Ruth corrected herself hastily. "Mr. and Mrs. Henry P. Borden."

The ticket agent raised his eyebrows at her slip, then gave her a long, significant glance, in which

there was a little astonishment.

"Hope you have a nice week-end, Mrs. Borden."

Ruth flushed vividly. "Thank you, but I am not—Mrs. Borden." As she turned back toward the Starbridge Building, her errands accomplished, she wondered who "Mrs. Borden" would be—this time. And she shivered a little, and was glad that it was not she. Soon such sordid things would not touch her, for she would be Jack Hayward's wife. Mrs. John Carrington Hayward! But oddly enough, she shivered again, and wondered if she were taking cold.

(To Be Continued)

In the next chapter—a torn \$500 bill.

SARGENT O. K.'S PAROLE FOR THOMAS W. MILLER

(Associated Press Leased Wire)
WASHINGTON, March 6.—Attorney General Sargent yesterday approved the parole of Thomas W. Miller, former alien property custodian, effective May 7.

Miller was convicted in New York, charged with conspiracy to defraud the government in connection with the return of property seized from aliens. He was tried with former Attorney General Daugherty who was acquitted.

Mr. Sargent's action was possibly the last act of his administration of the department, the announcement coming within an hour of the time set for William D. Mitchell to take the oath of office as attorney general.

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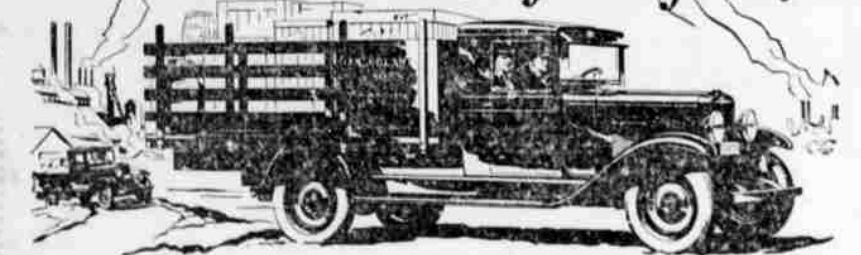
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