

Probability and Error

By Sophie Kerr
Blue-Ribbon Fiction

Laura Wished More Than Anything Else in the World to Make Heaps of Money, but She Didn't Know How to Go About It; Then Came Kendall with a Recipe.

THE phrase belongs, strictly and technically, to the artillery, but it is vividly capable of translation into almost any affair of humanity, intellectual, financial, or emotional. It is, in fact, a military transmutation of the old proverb of the slip betwixt cup and lip, for it represents the little, incalculable margin left to explain why, after range has been mathematically found, humidity, wind, and such atmospheric vagaries allowed for, and the hundred and one other conditions which go to the firing of big guns toward any definite mark have been taken into consideration—even then, when all this has been done, with utmost exactness, a hit is not invariably scored. Therefore, the miss is accounted for and blamed on "probability and error." A good, euphonious phrase. The civilian sometimes finds it as useful as the soldier.

"I want to pay all these bills, Miss Woodford. But first, please write each committee chairman to come to the meeting on Wednesday, and bring a full report of what their committee has done." Mrs. Hillis gave this direction in her usual tone of calm majesty. Then she announced, with a violence that spread a hot, purple flush beneath her well-applied rouge and strained at the strings of her over-sung corset:

"Never, never again will I manage another bazaar! It's the most thankless job in the world. Jealousy! Irresponsibility! I'm leaving for Palm Beach, dear Mrs. Hillis, but I know you can easily get someone to fill my place."

Laura Woodford's almost childlike blue eyes darkened with real sympathy. In the three years that she had been secretary to Mrs. John Ganzewort Hillis she had seen that capable lady manage many bazaars, and all with the same friction, the same appalling waste of time and effort and money, the same minimum of financial return.

She picked up her little typewriter and a box of stationery and prepared to leave the apricot and gray-green Louis Seize boudoir where Mrs. Hillis parked her 190 pounds each morning and provided the motive power of her complex household and her even more complex social existence.

"Just one moment, Miss Woodford. Mr. Hillis is sending a man from his office who will take charge of all the financial details. He will, of course, co-operate with you, but his presence will relieve you of any responsibility about the accounts, which—and I quite understand it—you do not care to assume."

The library was a fine, high, richly colored room, and usually Laura loved to work there. Today there was so much to do she set up her machine and fell to without giving herself the pleasure of even the shortest glance about her. Blank sheets of Mrs. Hillis' best gray paper went in, and quickly came out again, bearing perfectly typed summons to committee chairmen.

At about the sixth or seventh letter the curtains of dusky red velvet were pushed aside and a young man entered.

"Hello," he said, with a rather forced politeness.

Laura did not look up. "Good morning, Mr. Hillis," she answered, as shortly as the click of her machine.

It was the son of the house. His nickname was Tiddy, and he was said to be good at billiards—which completes his description. He lounged on the corner of the carved oak table.

"Can't understand why a girl as pretty as you keeps on beating a typewriter and taking orders from the empress"—an allusion to his mother—"when Ziegfeld's simply weeping for another perfect blonde."

Now Laura looked up and gazed on him as she might have gazed at a large, juicy, white cutworm. "Get out of here," she remarked, in an even, dispassionate tone.

Tiddy watched her a few moments, tried another remark, which was rendered inaudible by the noise of her machine, and finally slid away, the velvet curtains falling noiselessly behind him. Laura glanced around to see that he was gone, and relaxed the austerity of her youthful countenance by sticking out her tongue slightly at the place where he had been. Tiddy was such a scream. The offspring of the very rich, Laura meditated, were too often another form of chastening to their parents.

"I'll walk home," she told herself. "I need the air. That house! The dogs! Tiddy! Ugh!"

dumped her packages on the kitchen table and stopped to light the oven of the gas stove.

She worked with a swift, ferocious efficiency. Callie, 16 years older than Laura, an incredibly homely girl of an imperforable good nature, glanced up from the pile of papers which eternally occupied her home hours, even as all school teachers.

"Want any help?" she asked. Laura shook her head. They sat down without further words and ate the grapefruit. Then Laura brought in the rest of the dinner. Callie raised her eyebrows at the corn pudding. "Aren't we rather going it?" she asked. "Salad and vegetable?"

"An 11-cent can of corn and one egg. O, I wish I didn't know how much it cost," broke forth from Laura fiercely.

"Ah, I see our little friend has an economy complex, or a wealth complex, or something. What's the matter, honey-child?"

"Callie, I hate these little cramped up rooms, with the furniture we found in second-hand shops and repainted, the curtains we made ourselves, all our little shabby-genteel box of tricks. I want huge rooms, with great, high ceilings, and wonderful old Georgian furniture, and Italian mirrors, and fireplaces, and velvet hangings, and people to wait on me! I want lovely frocks and pink silk undies, and soft, luxurious furs, and strings of pearls—O, everything!"

Laura dropped her voice as she made a shameful confession. "Yes—I've considered that. Now you know how desperate I am. O, it takes so long to save, so endlessly long, and at the end what have you got? I've saved for two years—you know that first year I had to pay back Aunt Lizzie's loan—saved and scrimped and pinched, and I've got exactly \$600, not enough for one real good bust. In another year I'll have \$900, and in another \$1200, and by the time I'm an old woman I'll maybe have \$5000, just enough to give me a starvation income, provided I keep out of an old ladies' home."

"You're too silly for words, Babe. You'll never end-in an old ladies' home. And though I suggested that you marry Tiddy—you will note that I carefully refrained from saying anything about Dick. Dick's a rising young man, as the success books would say. Some day he'll be able to give you a big house and giddy gowns galore—if that's what you want, which I doubt."

"I don't want to marry Dick Long. I don't want to marry anybody. I want a lot of money all my own, so I can fly around and see the world all on my own, without any husband to fuss about trunks and hats looking at the things I want to look at."

The ting-tong of the doorbell that heralded Dick Long sent her to the door dimmed by her discontent. The lamps of joy that lit in her eyes at the sight of her got no response from her.

"Skip into your coat," he bade her. "I've got concert tickets—Rachmaninoff. Awful extravaganza, of course, but, say, Laura—I landed a bully little specialty shop catalogue today. Five thousand—no, no dollars—catalogues."

He tucked her hand under his arm, and bent his tall body to protect her from the wind as they came out into the street. And he kept on talking about the new contract. Dick's business was as dear to him as Laura herself—almost.

They reached the entrance of Carnegie hall, and waited a moment in the crush while the motors, like giant dark cocoons, released their butterfly contents, silken gay creatures, slipped in gold and silver, cuddling in fur and brocade. Two particularly gorgeous girls and an elderly man came from a great gray limousine and pressed past Laura and Dick.

"Oh, look!" said Laura, involuntarily, and she could not keep the envy out of her voice. "Aren't they exquisite?"

Dick's mouth twisted a little. "They're neither of them half as pretty as you are," he answered bluntly. "That's old Thomas D. Fairborn, and I suppose the girls are his daughters. If you think how he got his money, it's just exactly as if he'd stolen those clothes—and that car."

"Nevertheless, I think the result's worth a little stealing," said Laura dryly, after a pause.

"You've got a wonderful head for business."

"I haven't at all," said Laura, but naturally not displeased. "But, of course, I've got to have some sort of record with everything written out so that it's perfectly clear."

"Now what about those photographs? Have we got them all here?"

"I should say not. They all promised to let me have them, but only a few of them kept their promise. Here's the list—those that are checked are the ones we have."

"I'll take telephone in hand and demand the others. Or, how do you think it would be if I went right out and got them myself? It wouldn't take more than an hour or so with a taxi."

"You'll have lots more luck that way than by phoning. The dear creatures' promises are like pie crust."

"Right! Then I'm off. As soon as I'm back I'll get the story ready and everything can go out to the papers before noon." He paused at the door and regarded her. "All the way uptown I was sore as a pup about having this job wished on me. But it was Mr. Hillis' personal order and it would have been plain foolish for me to refuse. If you don't mind saying something very personal on so short an acquaintance, I'm—I'm mighty glad now—that he picked on me." He was gone before she had time to look more than amazement at this hasty but obviously sincere compliment.

She told Callie Rhodes about it that evening. It was Callie's turn to get dinner, and Laura stood outside the kitchen door—there was no room for both of them inside—and related at length the coming of Mr. Kendall and his cleverness with accounts.

"Did Dick call you up today?" Callie asked at last.

It was Laura's turn to grin now. "You think I ought to run after Dick and tell him I'm sorry I was so unreasonable as to be annoyed when he was horrid and bad tempered, don't you, Callie?"

"Yes," said Callie, shamelessly, "I do. All men are like little boys and require to be humored and, when it isn't a vital matter, I say humor 'em."

Laura set her little chin firmly. "I won't be ordered about by any man, Callie. Dick needn't have been so superior. But, please—don't you be cross with me, too."

"And," pursued Callie, "I hate to see you getting all excited and sparky about this new young man, who's obviously attracted by you—and who probably isn't worth a tenth as much as Dick in any way."

"D'you think he's obviously attracted to me?"

"He'd have been blind if he wasn't, you little conceited pig!"

and clean up a little here and there. You can make a hundred grow into a thousand so quick sometimes it seems like witchcraft. But, of course, you've got to be in the know, and you've got to watch it every second."

It was at the end of the first week in "the bazaar game," as Kendall called it, when he came into the library to find Tiddy, half drunk and, therefore, unduly bold, holding fast both of Laura's hands and trying to draw her to him while she struggled away. Kendall had been out on errands and entered unheralded, took in the situation at a glance and collared and shook the offending Tiddy until his teeth chattered in his head.

The scuffle drew Mrs. Hillis, who was just descending from the apricot and green boudoir, and she loomed in amazed majesty upon the truly amazing scene.

"For heaven's sake," she demanded, "what's all this?"

With his hand still firmly closed on Tiddy, Kendall made his explanation. "I found your son annoying Miss Woodford."

"Let him go," said Mrs. Hillis, lines of sudden age and care breaking through the usual stern composure of her massive face. "Leave the room, Tiddy. I'll see you later." She turned to Laura, who stood scarlet and a little disheveled. "I suppose—it's not the first time, Miss Woodford?"

"No—and I hope you'll be sure, Mrs. Hillis, that I—"

Mrs. Hillis raised her hand. "I am sure. I know Tiddy perfectly. If it ever happens again, please come to me at once. We won't discuss the matter further."

"The dirty little rat!" exclaimed Kendall as soon as she was out of earshot. "I wish I'd bashed in his face. Has he been bothering you much?"

"No, he hasn't," said Laura. "Usually he doesn't bother me a bit, no matter what he says, and he never before tried this. Oh, I'm sure he was drinking. You see, I never pay any attention to him. And today I didn't even look up. So he—pounced. I couldn't reach the bell, and I didn't want to shout for help—you know what the servants are." She began to laugh. "He isn't very strong, you know, and I nearly had one hand loose, and then I was going to snatch the paper weight and bang him. But I was glad when you came in. Oh, he looked so f-funny when you grabbed him! It was f-funny, now, wasn't it?"

"Not so darn funny," said Kendall, still fuming.

The incident had the effect of advancing their friendship as perhaps nothing else could have done. When he walked home with her that night and asked if he might not come on Sunday afternoon and take her to tea, there was no thought of refusal in her mind nor in his. Of course Callie had to be told, but the Tiddy affair made that easy.

Indeed, when Kendall had made his short stay after the excursion for tea Callie admitted, without being asked, that he was "very nice," "yea, really very nice." But she commented that his eyes were just a trifle sharp—and set a trifle too close together.

The next evening, however, on her way home from school, Callie stopped in at the drugstore and squandered one of her precious nickels on a telephone call to the Richard C. Long Printing company. Just what she said will ever remain a mystery. That it was effective cannot be doubted, for that night, before they had quite finished dinner, the old familiar two rings tingled the apartment-house bell and Dick appeared, a trifle anxious as to how he would be received.

And for the moment Laura forgot they had a quarrel on and gave him both her hands in enthusiastic greeting. She couldn't help being glad to see him, and she showed it. Then she remembered and was promptly impelled to tease.

who can help trying the game now and then? It gets into your blood. Did I tell you about our telephone girl? Naturally, she's in the position to gather a lot of confidential information and she's made the most of it. She was smart enough to use it right and to keep her mouth shut, and last week she retired—yes, ma'am, retired—bought a prosperous chicken farm in Jersey and had a bunch of gilt-edged bonds left over. Did it all in five years, too. Pretty clever, eh?"

"Oh, heavens!" cried Laura. "I wish I could do something like that. But if I had the chance I'd be too stupid."

There was an electric silence and young Kendall seemed to be considering. "Miss Woodford—if you've got a little capital—I believe I could tell you how to increase it," he offered tentatively. "Please don't think I'm officious or trying to run your affairs, but you've spoken of this before—wanting to pick up a little extra, you know, and so I—"

"Oh, would you?" cried Laura. "Would you really?" I've got \$600 in the savings bank—would that be enough to start with?"

"If you think you can trust me. There's a little oil stock that I've had my eyes on, and I'm convinced that it's just about due for a whirl."

"But why does it go up and down so? Do they find new oil wells or something?"

"No, not exactly. They only find new suckers. It's going to be a piece of expert manipulation by a man who's one of the biggest gamblers in the world, and he stands to clean up a fortune or to come out wearing a barrel. I don't think you'd understand it if I explained it to you."

"No, I suppose not."

"And you may be sure that I wouldn't let you into it if I wasn't sure it was a good thing and that you'd get a nice little bunch of velvet out of it. You do trust me, don't you?" He leaned to her as he spoke, and his gaze was warmly personal.

"You know I do," said Laura. "After what you did to Tiddy—and you being in Mr. Hillis' office—"

He leaned ever nearer and touched the soft smoothness of her hand. "Not for those reasons. Don't you, can't you trust me because you—like me a little?"

"You know I trust you—the only question is, ought I to bother you with doing this for me? It seems—so much."

"Don't. It's the least little thing in the world. I'm only too glad."

The next day at luncheon time she hurried to the savings bank, withdrew the entire \$600 and had it sealed in an envelope and all ready for Kendall when he appeared. It was a hideously rushed afternoon, with Mrs. Hillis present in her most difficult and exacting humor, and there was no chance to say a word. Kendall gave her an understanding look and slipped the envelope in his inner pocket.

Later he whispered: "I'll give you a receipt for this as soon as she goes."

we've got and get out, I think, rather than risk so much for a few extra hundreds we might make."

She turned sick at the thought of losing. "Oh, I think so, too," she cried. "Sell now, quickly, while we've got such a lot."

"You're a good little sport. I'll do it. And, say—I've got to go out of town for to see you on Saturday night with your share of the spoils. That all right?"

Laura pressed her palms to her hot cheeks. It was true, then, true! She had made—she had made—she seized pencil and paper for the hundredth time. A hundred and fifty shares at \$4—fifty-one hundred dollars. Oh, she'd forgotten—Otho had told her about brokers' fees, but they weren't much. She'd have five thousand dollars. Five thousand dollars—on Saturday night.

Dick came up on Friday night with a box of candy and a new book, which he offered shyly.

The three of them sat there and ate Dick's candy, and Callie and Dick talked, for Laura was strangely silent and nervous. There came another ring at the bell, and for one sudden dazzling second Laura thought: "Oh, it's Otho—he came back sooner than he expected." She sprang to open the door.

It was not Otho, but a short, gray-haired man with a curiously quiet, mask-like face.

"Is this Miss Woodford?" he asked. "My name is Plunkett—I am Mr. Hillis' secretary. May I come in? I'd like very much to talk to you for a few minutes."

"Oh!" cried Laura, ushering him into the little sitting room. "There hasn't anything happened to Mrs. Hillis, has there? This is my friend, Miss Rhodes, who lives with me, Mr. Plunkett, and this is Mr. Long."

Mr. Plunkett looked at the other two uncertainly. "If I could see you alone, Miss Woodford—the matter is, in a way, confidential—no, nothing has happened to Mrs. Hillis. I only want to ask you a little about your acquaintance with one of the young men in our office—Otho Kendall." He stopped and eyed Callie and Dick in a way which was a clear invitation for them to leave.

"There's nothing that I know about Mr. Kendall," said Laura instantly, "that my friends can't hear."

"I'm glad to know that," said Mr. Plunkett, "because Mr. Hillis particularly said that he would feel considerable personal responsibility if you were in any way involved, since he had sent Kendall up to help you at Mr. Hillis' request. Mr. Hillis is far more thoughtful and sensitive than most men of his wealth and innumerable obligations."

Then, quite plainly, without another word, Laura knew. She sank down on the sofa beside Callie and took hold of her arm. It was the only thing that kept her from fainting. She could not speak. But Dick saved her that trouble.

"What d'you mean, involved?" he asked, almost roughly. "Involved in what?"

Mr. Plunkett went on very smoothly: "We were all deceived in young Kendall, I as much as anyone. To make a long story short, he's been speculating, he's made a big haul, and he's absconded—disappeared. As far as we've uncovered it, he's made over a hundred thousand dollars. In itself that is no crime—at least it is not punishable by law. But he borrowed the greater part of his capital from various gullible young women with whom he carried on more or less ardent flirtation."

"But what has that to do with Miss Woodford?" asked Dick.

"Mr. Hillis was afraid that she had been one of Kendall's victims—I don't mean," went on Mr. Plunkett, raising a deprecatory hand, "that she would permit him to make love to her, as he apparently has to several of the others—Miss Woodford's record of exemplary behavior in the service of Mrs. Hillis prevents that. But, on the pretext of investing it for at great profit and by using Mr. Hillis' name, he might have got money from her."

"Oh, no, Mr. Plunkett," she lied desperately. "No—Mr. Kendall was very nice—always—and helped me with the bazaar and afterward came here to call once in a while—but—he never even talked about money, except that he hoped to make it for himself. I really knew him—very slightly."

Mr. Plunkett became instantly more human. "I'm very glad to hear you say so. You see, we only happened to discover what he'd done by one of the other—ladies—involved—calling up late this afternoon, and when she couldn't get Kendall she made rather a fuss. It seems she'd called his boarding house and he'd left there this morning with all his baggage. He'd left the office a little early, too, just before she called up. I got her on the telephone, and—well, with a little quick investigation the whole thing came out. He had left a notebook in his desk with names and addresses. There seem to have been eight or ten of these girls, and in practically every case he got every cent they had saved and in one instance actually persuaded the girl to sell her liberty bonds and let him save the money. Not one of 'em has anything in writing to prove that he got it."

He got up to go.

"There's nothing we can do. He hasn't taken a cent from the firm, nor done the least thing irregular, except to play the market, and we can only discharge him for that. If any of the young women would prosecute Mr. Hillis would be glad to bear the expense of having him followed and brought back, but not one of them will hear it. So he's free to do what he likes, go where he pleases and spend all he's made. He'd got them all pretty fond of him, you see." Mr. Plunkett smiled dryly. "Good night, Miss Woodford, and again my congratulations for being so sensible."

Dick let the visitor out of the door and returned swiftly to the sitting room, yet not so swiftly but Laura had had time to throw herself into Callie's arms and burst into a passion of tears.

"Oh, Callie, Callie," she sobbed. "It will kill me. It will kill me." Dick bent over her. "Don't cry," he

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