LEAP YEAR BRIDE

by Laura Lou BROOKMAN

CHAPTER XX

It was a week after the dinner party that had proven such a failure. Cherry Phillips, down on her knees scrubbing the bathroom floor, straightened up and dropped the dripping mop rag back into the pail. She surveyed her work, then with a groan wrung out the mop again and applied it to the floor.

There! It was done at last. Wearily the girl got to her feet. She lifted the heavy pail to carry it to the kitchen, but as she turned caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror.

She put down the pail and studied herself. What a sight she was! She had cleaned the apartment from floor to ceiling, but it appeared that all the dust and dirt she had scrubbed and scraped away must have clung to herself. The towel pinned about her shirt in place of an apron was blackened with grime. Her printed silk frock had once been attractive, but she had worn it for housework until it was frayed and soiled. Another towel, pinned about her head, concealed her hair except for a few stray wisps that straggled forth grotesquely. There were black smudges on her face and arms and one finger was shrouded in a bulky bandage. That was where Cherry had cut herself the day before.

"You're a disgrace," she told the image in the mirror. "You look like something the cat dragged in" as Sarah would say. Only no self-respecting cat would have anything to do with you because cats keep themselves clean!"

A sharp rap sounded on the door. "Anyone home?" a crisp voice called. "It's me—Dixie!"

Cherry reached for a towel. She was drying her hands as she drew the door back.

"Hello, Dixie," she said. "Come in."

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The girl on the threshold smiled brightly—and instantly the smile faded. "Saints above!" she exclaimed in a horrified tone. "What have you been doing to yourself, Cherry Phillips?"

Cherry shrugged. "I've been cleaning house," she admitted. "The place gets awfully dirty and I've been at it all day."

"But, my dear, you're a wreck! Why don't you hire someone to do the cleaning? That's what I do—"

The other girl shook her head. "We can't afford to hire anyone," she said. "Anyhow this is my part of the job. You see there are two of us to live on Dan's salary. You have only yourself."

Dixie nodded sympathetically. She dropped into the nearest chair. "Well, you're a game kid, I'll say that, but you're wearing yourself out and it doesn't pay. Listen, I like Dan and all that but take a little advice from a girl who knows. You'll regret his slavery!"

"Aren't you rather cynical?"

"Maybe. Did you know I was married once? Oh, yes—blushing bride, showers of rice, 'love and obey' and all that! Keeping house in a kitchenet love nest. Well, it lasted six months and I was a fool to stand it that long."

"Why, Dixie, I didn't know—"

"Oh, it was over and forgotten long ago. You see I was dumb enough to fall for an actor. Handsome brute all right, but as soon as we were married he stopped working. I kept my job and paid the bills until one day he got his dates mixed. There was a certain redhead and—well, that was the end of that! A nice quiet divorce and Dixie's been a wiser girl ever since. But, Lord, what am I going on this way for? I didn't mean to narrate my life history!"

"I'm sorry," Cherry said sympathetically.

"Don't waste sympathy on me. Think about yourself. The point is you ought to be getting out and having some fun. And don't, for heaven's sake, let Dan find you looking like Topsy herself! Better start scrubbing. It's going to take a long time to excavate that face."

* * *

Obediently Cherry began her ablutions. "I wish I were clever like you," she said. "I wish I could hold a job and earn money."

"Be glad you don't have to," the other told her shortly. She laughed. "I've been raving so much I almost forgot why I came. Can you and Dan come up for a little bridge tonight? Jack McAllister's coming over and I thought we'd have a party. He's the press agent at the Capitol Theater. You'll like Jack. I'll make a Welsh rarebit—it's my one and only culinary achievement and am I proud of it!"

"Of course we'll come," Cherry said. "I guess you're right, Dixie. I have been staying in too much."

* * *

Dixie departed. Cherry decided on a quick tubbing and was soon in warm, comforting bath. Dinner would be late but at least she would be presentable. Cherry told herself Dixie had been right. It was a mistake to stay at home working all day with no recreation later. That must be why she had felt so tired and cross.

Of course they had been trying to save, but they couldn't save all the time. It wasn't fair to themselves.

She was dusting powder over her shoulders when Dan came.

"Hello," she called, slipping a negligee about her. "Dinner's late because I've been cleaning house. It won't take long. I'll open a can of beans."

Dan kissed her absent-mindedly. "No hurry," he said. He tossed a newspaper into one chair and dropped his hat and coat in another.

Cherry said, "Doesn't everything look nice? I've been working all day."

"Sure. Everything's fine."

She knew from the tone that Dan had not even heard her. Cherry was disappointed. She slipped a dress over her head and went to the kitchen to rummage for the can opener.

It was the work of 15 minutes to boil potatoes, heat the can of baked beans, split a head of lettuce for salad and make tea. Canned peaches left from the night before served for dessert.

"Everything's ready," she told Dan who was buried behind the pages of the newspaper.

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The meal began silently. Once or twice Cherry glanced at Dan to see if anything was wrong. She could not understand his mood.

Presently she said, "We have an invitation for this evening."

"Invitation?" Dan looked up.

"Dixie wants us to come up and play bridge. She's invited someone for a fourth. I told her we'd be glad to."

"But, Cherry—!"

"Why, I thought you'd like to go. We—we never go any place, Dan. I'm tired of it—working all day long and then just sitting around here evenings."

"You can go if you want to. I'm not going."

"Dan!"

"Well, I mean it. I suppose you think I don't work all day long? Maybe I don't get tired too. Bridge! If there's one thing in the world I don't want to do tonight it's to play bridge!"

"But I've already accepted, Dan! I told her we'd come."

"Well, you can just tell her we won't. Tell her anything—I don't care what you say!"

"Please won't you do it for me?"

"I've told you I'm not going to play bridge tonight and I'm not! If you want to, go ahead. I'm not stopping you."

"I can't go alone. You know that. Oh, Dan, I think you're being horrid. I've slaved all day long for you. I've scrubbed and swept and dusted, until every muscle in my body aches! I'm sick of it and I want a little fun!"

Dan Phillips put down his knife and fork. "Maybe you think I wouldn't like a little fun once in a while," he said. "Do you know why I can't have it? Because the rent's due next week. Because I've borrowed from everyone in the office until I can't raise another nickel and I'm ashamed to ask for it. Fun? Would it interest you to know that I turned down a poker game with the boys tonight to come home and spend the evening with you? And I did it because by working all evening maybe I can write a story that will bring in some extra cash!"

The girl was subdued. "I—I didn't understand," she said slowly.

"Of coure I'll tell Dixie we won't be able to make it."

The meal proceeded. It was not an appetizing dinner and neither of them were in communicative mood. When they had finished Cherry cleared the dishes away and went upstairs to make excuses to Dixie.

She returned to find Dan sitting before his battered typewriter, a stack of fresh copy paper at his side.

As quietly as possible she went about the work of washing the dishes. She tiptoed whenever she crossed the floor. Now and then the typewriter keys rattled, followed frequently by a terrific banging that could mean only that the writer was "x-ing" out his previous work.

An hour must have passed while she sat huddled in he big chair pretending to read. The silences between periods of typing became longer.

Suddenly, with a loud "Damn!" Dan jerked the paper from the machine. He jumped to his feet, tossing the crumpled sheet to the floor. Without another word he grabbed for his hat and coat and banged out of the apartment.

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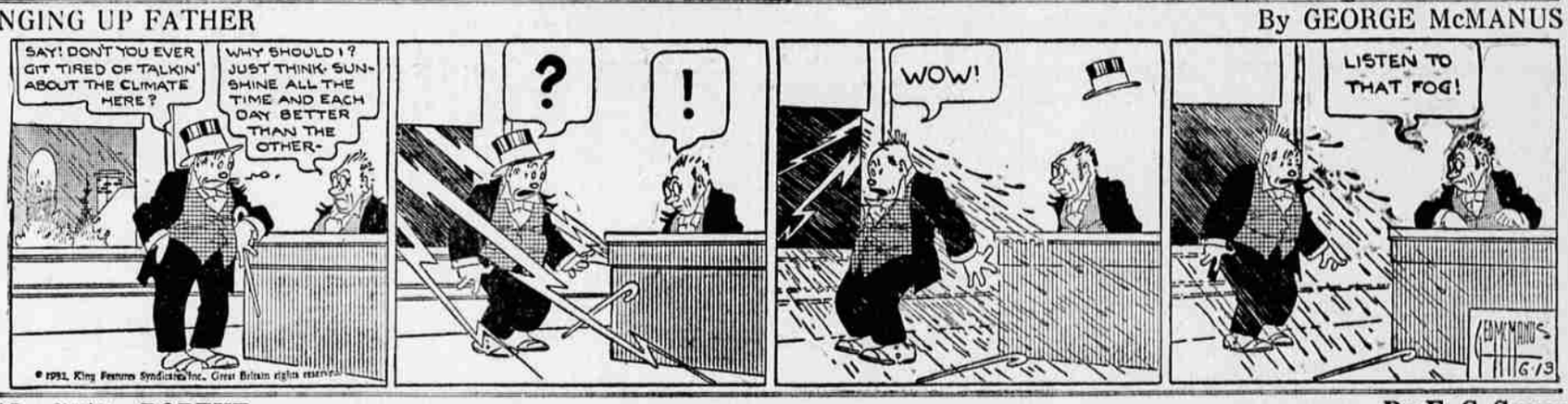

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