

LEAP YEAR BRIDE

by Laura Lou BROOKMAN

CHAPTER XII
HERRY sat in the window seat and looked at the only tree in the garden. Some of its leaves had blown to the ground but those that remained were bright yellow. They were in the sunlight, the very essence of carefree gaiety.

There were tiny vertical lines on Cherry's brown eyes. They were brooding and serious now. She was struggling with the most difficult problem she had ever faced.

The situation was terrifying. She felt it daily for the past week. The thing that frightened her was that you could put your finger on it. It was something intangible. It was something intangible. Cherry was too proud to inquire for help because she could not even tell.

In some way a barrier had risen between herself and Dan. She could see over this barrier or around it. Dan was on one side and she on the other. There had been no more meeting between them. Ever since the night of the argument about the nightgown, he left the house early in the morning and usually arrived late at night. When he came home for her he departed almost immediately. Cherry was too proud to inquire for help because she could not even tell.

For the rest of that day she was miserably cheerful. It was not easy when doubts arose. Cherry closed her eyes and tried to see the future. She was a course of action. Something was to happen within two days and she felt sure would restore her happiness. "I won't tell Dan!" she thought. "I won't tell him!"

Cherry said casually at dinner that night. "I've some shopping to do today. Suppose I come down at 12:30 and have lunch with you. I'll be all right." Dan did not glance up from the newspaper beside his plate. He said, "I'll be at 12:30." The young man nodded agreement. He did not leave the apartment as usual after dinner but flung himself on the davenport with a new book. Cherry felt this was encouraging. She was happy as she went out clearing the dishes from the table. She washed them and put them away, taking care to be quiet. "Everything's going to be all right," she assured herself. "I'm sure of it."

But there was disappointment. Dan did not come home for her the following evening. Cherry could not let this make her downcast, however. She was planning her trip on her plans for Saturday.

She intended to remind Dan in the morning that she was to meet him at 12:30.

She meant to speak of it the last thing before he left the apartment but somehow he was gone before she realized it.

At 11 o'clock she telephoned the office but Dan was not there.

"It doesn't matter," Cherry assured herself. "Dan never forgets anything. It was true that his memory was unusual."

While she dressed she planned how to break the news. They would go to Stanley's for lunch. It wasn't terribly expensive and besides this was a special occasion. While Dan was reading the menu she would say, "I like that special ice cream for dessert—Stanley's special they call it. It's appropriate today."

Dan would be sure to ask what she meant and then Cherry would say, "Why, dear, have you forgotten? It's our anniversary. We've been married six months today!"

That was the surprise she had planned. The anniversary was exact—six months and what a wonderful wife she had been. Oh, yes, everything would be as Cherry had planned. They could spend the afternoon and evening together. They would forget the rest of the world. There would only be she and Dan! Reconciliation would be all the sweeter after the bitter loneliness.

Cherry's thoughts drifted. The important thing was to get Dan to know she wasn't angry with him. To give him a chance to tell her he had been miserable these last few days as she had been.

She bathed and patted on the delicately scented bath powder that was her dearest luxury. She got into

brief, lace undergarments, new hose and best pumps. As she touched her cheeks with the pink pad from her rouge box Cherry was as careful as she had ever been when dressing for an engagement with a man before their marriage. She made her mouth into a vivid rosebud with lipstick.

She put on a brown frock, adjusted the little hat smartly and slipped into her polo coat. A bright scarf relieved the somber monotone. Cherry took a last glance into the mirror. Her eyes glowed with anticipation. Yes, she was satisfied with her appearance. If she met anyone she knew at Stanley's she need not feel ashamed.

The ride down town on the trolley required only 15 minutes but Cherry allowed herself more than that. She left the house promptly at 12 o'clock and 20 minutes later had reached the library. Naturally Dan was not in sight. He would probably be late.

Cherry walked leisurely along the block. The day was colder than she had realized and she pulled the collar of her coat snugly about her throat. A woman wearing a handsome mink wrap passed and Cherry thought ruefully of the beaver coat that had been a gift on her last birthday. The coat was in storage and if Mrs. Dixon had been at home she would probably have insisted on Cherry wearing it. Cherry promptly forgot about the fur coat. Two young men were crossing the street and for a moment she thought one of them was Dan. He wasn't. The youth turned his head and she saw he was a stranger.

In a glance at her wrist told Cherry that it was still too early to expect her husband. Not yet 12:30. She took another turn to the end of the block and back again. The street was filling gradually with the noon day crowd. Business men hurrying from offices. Tall girls, slim girls, fat girls. All of them appeared to be wearing new fall fashions. On their way no doubt to meet "dates." Young men who would presently meet these girls or others like them joined the procession. There were older women, errand boys, men with faces worn dull by years of routine. Yet all of these faces showed relief. The half-holiday brought an air of bustle and festivity to the street.

Still Dan Phillips was nowhere in sight. Cherry searched eagerly from left to right. The crowd swirled past and new faces came into view constantly. It was after 12:30. Cherry took her post directly beside the library entrance and decided to wait there. The alarming possibility came to mind that in this crowd she might miss Dan. She had never failed to meet him before. Today of all days that would be a calamity!

She stood on tiptoe peering over the crowd. Nobody seemed to notice her and she felt as though she were at the center of a merry-go-round. The men and women hurrying past her might have been carried by some mechanical force.

Twelve thirty-five. 12:40. 1 o'clock. There were fewer pedestrians now. Cherry's eyes were dark with alarm. "I should have reminded him!" she told herself. "I should have telephoned."

Still she would not give up hope that Dan would come. It was 20 minutes after 1—almost an hour past the time she and Dan were to meet. Cherry raised one hand and brushed the mist from her eyes. No use to wait longer. No use to hope against hope that the next moment would bring him. He wasn't coming. He had forgotten about her!

Suddenly Cherry felt a hand on her arm. She whirled, her face lighting with happiness. "Oh—" she exclaimed and her lips moved to form Dan's name.

But it wasn't Dan Phillips who smiled down at her. Max Pearson stood there. He said easily, "Hello, stranger. Where've you been keeping yourself?"

Cherry's reply was a confused murmur. She heard Pearson speak again, without knowing what the words were. She heard him say something about lunch and was surprised to find herself walking down the street beside him, entering the dining room of the Hotel Wellington.

They sat at a small table. Cherry turned her head and suddenly her eyes focused on a figure across the room. For a moment the figure blurred and the room swam before her. Then the outlines steadied themselves. It was—oh, it WAS!

Dan was sitting at a table not a dozen yards away, leaning forward in earnest conversation, and the woman facing him was Brenda Vail.

(To Be Continued)

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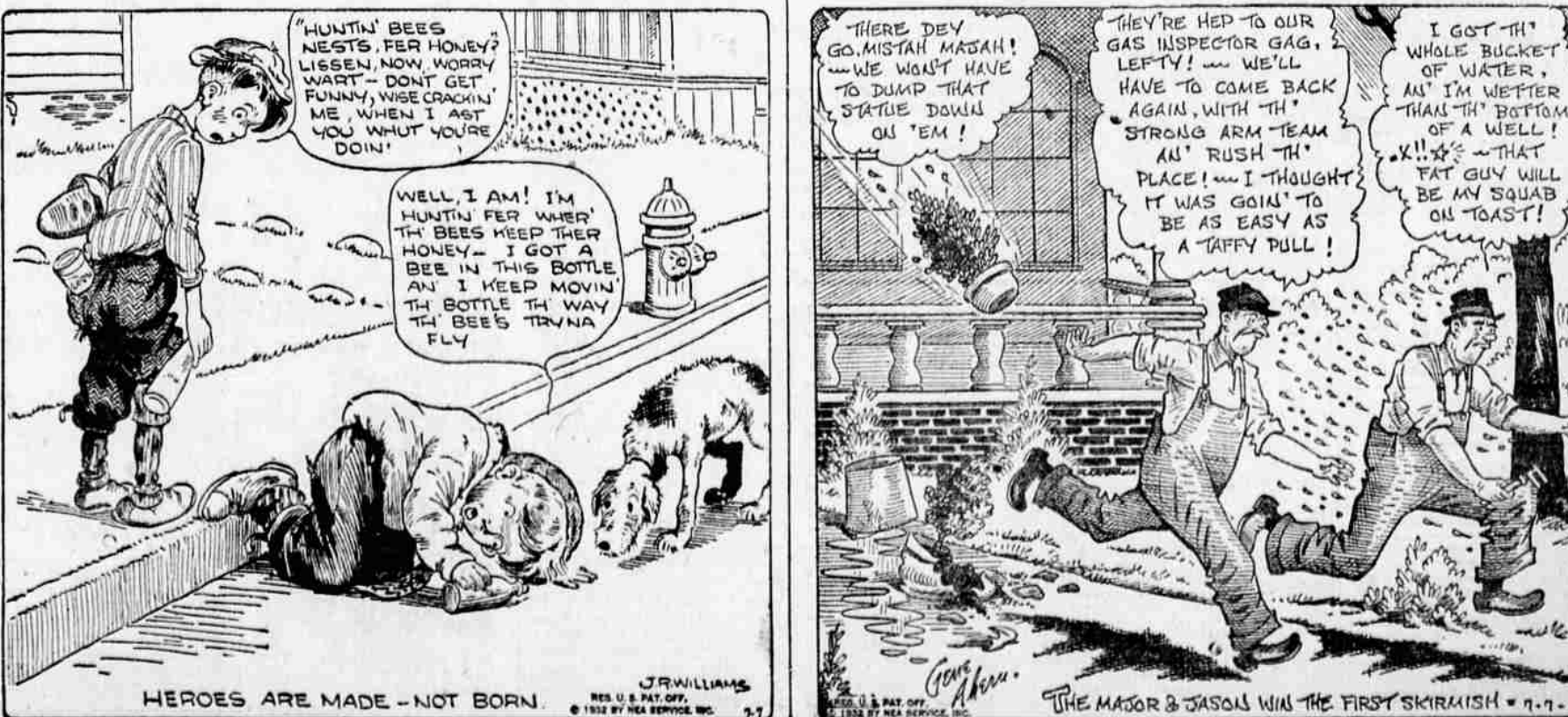
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— THIS CURIOUS WORLD —

