



The BLUE DOOR

by Rachel Mack
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Start Today This Story Of Love And Mystery In A Grim Old Mansion

CHAPTER I

THE young men leaving an eastern army camp in the fall of 1917, both in a great hurry, both carrying suitcases and wearing on their collars the shining new bars of second lieutenant, bumped squarely into one another. Each muttered, "Pardon!" at the same time and hastened on his way. Each was about to be sent overseas. Each was going home first, for a brief visit with an adored wife and child. Each, during that visit, took on his knees his baby daughter and caressed her, and wondered if he would come back to the things he loved—home and wife and child.

Brian Chalmers, turning 2-year-old Elaine back to her sedate English nurse, pulled one of the child's sunny curls teasingly. "Goodbye, Beautiful! You'll be asleep when I pull out in the morning. If I don't come back, don't take any wooden nickels or stepfathers!"

The child laughed with delight at the jolly, meaningless words her father was saying. She liked his pungent, tobaccoish, shaving-cream smell, and the feel of his lean, hard cheek against her own. She liked his big polished boots and the funny belt that went around his waist and up over one shoulder. "Bye, Daddy," she said, kissing him rapturously.

"She likes men," the child's mother drawled. She was a beautiful woman in a clinging sea-green negligee, with a face that was rather soft and petulant. "She's going to be a man-hungry, that girl. A little while, I'm already jealous of her."

The man drew his wife to the arm of his chair and buried his face in the scented lace of her negligee. "You like men, too," he accused. "If I'm blown to atoms over there you'll select the best-looking mourning in town. You'll wear it becomingly for a year, and the day you step out of it you'll marry Elgate Deal!"

"Darling!" she remonstrated. "Must you be spiteful about all the men who have nice safe jobs in Washington?"

"No," answered Brian Chalmers. "Only when they're your old suitors and still in love with you. Gwen, you'll take good care of Elaine, won't you?"

The woman's eyes opened in surprise. "What a thing to say to the child's own mother! Please, remember, dear, that I love her, too. I put in hours and hours selecting her little frocks and toys."

"I know," the man nodded impatiently. "But I'm thinking of her character, Gwen, and things like that. I want her to grow up to be fine and straight and dependable."

He paused uncertainly and lit a cigarette. "Lord! What DO I want for her?" He looked after the lovely child as she toddled up the broad stairway, holding tightly to her nurse's hand. "I suppose I just want her to have anything in this world that will make her happy. Yes," he repeated it, rather like a prayer, "—anything in the world that will make her happy."

The other young man was named George Woodson. He and his wife, Eleanor, were so beautifully and simply in love with each other that this short leave of his was like a bit of heaven in a sea of horror.

Through every hour of its radiance sounded the relentless drum-beat of approaching separation, of submergence, of infested seas, and a war to be fought.

They were restless in their love and foreboding, George said, "Let's walk along the river this evening. It's swell in October."

"I'd thought of a picnic supper there," Eleanor replied. "At the

little cove where we used to go when we were engaged. But there's Baby Ruth. She has a croupy cough and we shouldn't leave her. Mrs. Gary would come in to look after her, but I'm afraid—do you mind terribly? I've a party for us in the icebox. A cold chicken and all the things you love—"

George Woodson took his wife in his arms. "Mind, dear? It doesn't matter to me where I am, just so you are near enough to touch. Tell me, Eleanor! If I don't come back, will you promise—?"

Her dark eyes widened in pain and she quickly laid her hand over his mouth. "Don't say it!" she begged. "Don't think it!"

"I will!" he replied stubbornly. "It's got to be said. We've evaded it long enough. If I fail to come back, you're ready to go on gamely. That will be your duty, just as it's mine to go out and die, if necessary, to get this bloody war ended."

She replied in a muffled voice from his arms. "Your part is easier than mine, George. I'd rather go and fight than wait here. I'd rather die in battle than be left without my very heart."

"I know," he said soothingly. "I know." To himself he was thinking: "War is hellish. Just three years ago we found each other. It was in the fall, like this. I loved the way she walked along picking up red leaves, sticking them in her hat. In her dress, I loved the way she laughed and the way she sang, a little off key, like a happy child. I loved the way she closed her eyes when she kissed me. I still love these things in her. I'd like to go on loving them forever. Instead, I'm going off to a dizzy war that somebody else started, and maybe have my guts torn out with a cold steel bayonet—"

"George," Eleanor said, "you're shivering. Are you cold?"

"No," he replied. "You're imagining things. What I started out to say, dear, is this. If I shouldn't come back, you'll have Ruth to take care of. It's not as if we had parents and brothers and sisters to help you. There's nobody you'll have any real claim on. But there'll be my insurance. My war risk insurance, and \$2000 more, of the regular kind. I'll show you the papers tonight—"

"There's no use in your urging me to live on," she said, "if you don't come back to me. I wouldn't—I couldn't. I would go to you, wherever you might be. Someone else would care for Ruth—"

He loved her the more, even for this weakness, this inconsistency. "All within five minutes," he pointed out, "you've refused to leave your baby for a picnic because she has croup, and you've refused to live for her if I die. That's logic for you."

They laughed together, rather shakily, and she pushed him down into his favorite chair and filled his pipe for him. He said, "Isn't that a new dress you're wearing?"

She answered, "Of course. If you hadn't noticed it, I was going to put poison in your tea. I'm making over the yellow flannel into a coat for Ruth. It's going to have cunning heavier collar and cuffs, made out of my neck-piece."

"More inconsistencies," he remarked, raising one eyebrow. "What'll you do for a neck-piece?"

Eleanor answered, "I'll wrap up in a muffler, I suppose. And I've done something else reckless, dear. I've bought six bronze chrysanthemums for the supper table, because we both love them so. And wait! That's not the worst. I've made two kinds of cake for tonight. The government

may get me for that, but this is a celebration. I'll go make the coffee now, and you can read the paper—"

But he did not read the paper. He went into the bedroom and looked at his child in her crib. He marvelled at the smallness of the two hands that lay outside the covers, and at the softness of the round, flushed cheeks. The dark eyes, closed in sleep, were like her mother's. But he knew that the wide, engaging mouth and the squariness of the little chin were his own contribution. "Funny little mixture," he mused, looking down at her.

And then, strangely, he said something that the other young father had said of his child; "I want her to have whatever it takes to make her happy. Whatever it takes!"

Though they never encountered each other again, Brian Chalmers and George Woodson had two things in common: a rendezvous with death on a distant Flanders field, and the wish they had made for their children. It was the fault of Fate that these two children, in the distant year marked 1935, should find themselves in the same place, wanting the same thing. . . . Which of you wished harder, oh gallant young fathers?



Ruth Woodson's face made the passerby want to stop and look again . . . not because of any startling beauty but because of an inner radiance and piquancy of expression.

CHAPTER II

RUTH WOODSON stooped to pick up a red maple leaf from the ground and realized that fall had come. "Fall and no job yet!" Well, what could she expect when she'd not had a business course, or any special training? She'd heard countless stories of girls like herself walking their shoes thin, and not getting anywhere. "And it's no idle tale, my girl," she murmured to herself as she stepped on a pebble and felt its sharp prod against the sole of her foot. "These shoes have got to be half-soled soon, or I'll have stone bruises."

The shoes were trim enough to look at, however, and covered a shapely, well-arched foot. Nor were her feet the only points of interest which the girl possessed. She had a slender, nicely poised body and a face that looked again, not because of an inner radiance and a piquancy of expression that she wore. The eyes were dark and nicely lashed. The hair was dark and waving. The nose was short and straight, the chin square, and between the two was a mouth that was too wide, like a small boy's, but alluringly shaped. Today a brave dash of lipstick caused the mouth to match exactly in color the gay, blood-red leaf

which she had just fastened in the lapel of her suit.

Ruth sat down on a park bench and opened the newspaper she had bought on the corner. She turned to the column that said "Help Wanted, Female." She saw there was nothing new there—nothing she had not already followed up or eliminated as out of her range. With a sharp little sigh she laid the paper down and let her thoughts run riot. . . . "I can't afford lunch today. Thirty cents saved is 30 cents made. . . . I must go to one of the 10-cent stores and buy narcissus bulbs for Cousin Bessie's birthday. . . ."

Cousin Bessie, of the impending birthday, was the widowed relative with whom Ruth lived in a small, artistic and very crowded flat in Brooklyn. Mrs. Lawrence read manuscripts for a tottering publishing house in New York and was very poorly paid indeed. With this inadequate salary she supported herself, an 18-year-old daughter, and a 10-year-old son. For some months now she had been supporting Ruth Woodson as well, at least as far as food and shelter were concerned. It was this thought that made Ruth a little desperate when she had time to think about it, as she was doing now.

Ruth had been "passed around" since her fourth birthday. George Woodson, her father, had gone to his brave death just before the Armistice. Eleanor Woodson had eventually followed him, as she had told him she would do. It took long months of grieving assisted by nervous exhaustion and pneumonia to turn the trick but in the end she had died with a triumphant smile on her face and a feeling of release in her heart. She was off to find her lover.

The child, Ruth, and George's insurance went to Great-aunt Sarah Woodson, who accepted them as a sacred trust and a terrible burden. Great-aunt Sarah lived several years to do her duty by Ruth before dying and passing her on to another great-aunt whom Ruth affectionately recalled as "Aunt Matilda." At Aunt Matilda's death the child's real troubles began. She was 10 years old and as she actively expressed it at the time, she had "run out of aunts." She had also run out of money, for the two old ladies between them had invested the little competence unskillfully.

Ruth was then passed about among several cousins of her parents' with more speed than tact. A child of less

character might have been broken in spirit and have become a self-pitying, shrinking little introvert. Or she might have developed into a pushing, obnoxious little aggressive, snatching advantage where she might. But Ruth Woodson did neither. As her body grew straight and true, so did her naturally sunny disposition. The knowledge that she was a moneyless orphan whom no one needed did not embitter her. It only made her a little more watchful and well-mannered than most children. She learned to squeeze into corners, as it were, and to make herself useful when she could.

When Ruth finished high school in the little upstate town where she had grown up, there was no job available for her, so she came to New York to the one relative who remained untried—Cousin Bessie Lawrence. The cousins in Worthville waved her off with finality and ill-concealed relief, for they had broods of their own and they regarded Ruth as "a problem." The girl had an excess of high spirits and a taste for adventure which upset and annoyed them.

Cousin Bessie, to whom Ruth had come so eagerly that day two summers ago, was kindness itself. Unfortunately, she was also inefficient and impractical. She had spoiled her own two children beyond reason, and she dashed from home to office every day, and back again, like a rabbit pursued by hounds—the hounds of work and debt and possible failure.

Bessie Lawrence managed to give Ruth the wrong advice at every turn. Instead of arranging for the girl to borrow money for a short and thorough business course or for some vocational training, she allowed her to take temporary jobs for which she was unsuited and which soon "spetered out," leaving Ruth discouraged and dismayed. For weeks now she had had nothing at all to do. The dwindling change in her pocketbook was there because she had been able to re-line a coat for a woman in the apartment above them.

Ruth got up from the bench to go and noticed that a figure was standing in front of her. It was an exceedingly well-dressed man, not old, not young. He was looking at her, and as she looked at him he took off his hat courteously.

He said, "I'm on my way to a late lunch. The casualness of the attack impressed Ruth more than any maneuvering on his part would have done."

She looked at him with interest and found him to be rather handsome and impressive. He might even be a gentleman. She thought, "I'm hungry. Why not? Besides, it's an adventure. Imagine being asked to the Casino, just like that!" She'd never been inside the doors of, of course.

The man said, "Girls who look like Claudette Colbert expect to be admired by strangers, naturally."

Ruth again felt a prick of admiration for his cleverness. She knew there was a haunting resemblance to Colbert's face in her own. This observing man might be entertaining. Certainly he was flattering. And then, struggling up from some deeper consciousness of her mind, there came this warning, like a little bell in some far away temple garden:

"Wrong things begin this way. Careful, Ruth! You're about to be picked up! Once done, it gets easier and easier!"

She looked at the man for a moment, coolly. Then she said to him, "I hope you'll enjoy your lunch. Don't let me detain you."

He smiled guardedly. "I'm sorry," he replied. "Now and then one tries the wrong girl. No offense, I hope?"

"None at all," Ruth told him. "And thank you for saying I look like Claudette." She smiled as she turned and left him, but it was a clear-cut smile of dismissal.

In the 5-and-10 she bought a chocolate bar when she selected Cousin Bessie's narcissus bulbs. The bar was her lunch, and she came out of the store nibbling it. It tasted heavenly. She had sold no part of herself to obtain it, not even her pride.

CHAPTER III

WHEN Ruth reached home she found her cousins, the Lawrence young people, engaged in one of their major battles. Letty was trying to wrest from her brother a dollar bill which he had found on their mother's desk. Being large and well-developed for her 18 years, the girl was more than a match for the slim 16-year-old youth who was holding out against her.

"Help, Ruth!" Cecil yelled, biting at his sister's exposed arm. They were struggling on an antique Jennie Lind daybed and it gave signs of falling apart at any moment.

Ruth looked at them helplessly. "I don't know who's right," she yelled back above the tumult.

"Well, you know who's getting beaten!" Cecil retorted between gasps. Letty said, "If she comes near, I'll

slap both your faces, and I mean it. Give me the dollar, pig! You got the last one we found. You know how I need stockings!" With a final twist she pried open her brother's hand, snatched the damp, crumpled bill and fled with it to her bedroom.

Cecil lay groaning and rubbing his chest, where his sister's knee had pressed. Ruth said, "If you wouldn't smoke so many cigarettes, Cecil, you might beat her now and then." She had no admiration and very little liking for this high school junior who took his mother's hard-earned money as his just due and pampered himself extravagantly.

Letty came back into the room with her hair smoothed and her face carefully made up. She had a round, pretty face with wide, sky-blue eyes, fringed with dark lashes, and light brown hair. She looked much like a Christmas doll. In fact, she had once played that role in a school play, standing against the wall in a huge box, clothed in a crisp, knee-length dress, and holding out her arms invitingly while she smiled a blank, dimpled smile. Ruth knew, however, that Letty was not as blank and forceless as she appeared.

Once when Cousin Bessie, Letty's mother, was bemoaning the fact that the girl could not go to college, Ruth had said to her, "I don't think Letty would like college, Cousin Bessie. She's not a book-worm like you at all. I think Letty ought to marry young." It was true. She was a voluptuous rosebud that had formed early and needed to blossom early. Marriage would be the perfect blossoming.

Letty sat down and crossed her pretty legs. "Any luck in town today, Ruth?"

Ruth answered, "No, Letty," and wished that she might never hear that question again. "Can I help you with dinner?"

"It's almost ready," Letty replied, brightening. She genuinely loved to plan and cook a meal. "On account of its being Mother's birthday I've cooked a chicken. There's rice to go with it, and head lettuce salad and home-made rolls. I've made a cake, too, Cecil—" she exclaimed, turning to her jollying brother, "so clean yourself up before Mother gets home."

Cecil sat up, yawning. "All right. If the doorbell rings while I'm washing," he said, "it'll be Jack Willer. Let him in. He wants some radio books I've got."

"I'll let him in, of course," Letty said. She was looking intently at her finger nail. She got up and went into the kitchen and put on a ruffled organdy apron.

Ruth followed her. "What can I do, Letty?" she asked earnestly, wanting to help. "Or had you rather I stayed out of your way now and washed the dishes afterward?"

"Yes," answered Letty, "that would be better." She got out four salad plates and then thoughtfully went and got another. "I'll ask Jack to stay," she said. "He's fun."

Ruth turned her back and began to hum. Ruth went to the coat closet and hung up her hat and coat. She thought, "Letty doesn't want me around. She dislikes me more all the time." It was a problem that Ruth had tried a thousand times to solve. She was dependent on the Lawrence until she could establish herself. She knew that she crowded them. Even before she came it must have been hard for the three of them to move about the five small rooms, filled as they were with Bessie Lawrence's antique furniture and brass candlesticks and samovars and India prints.

Mrs. Lawrence had collected these things in her happy young married days, and she would no more have parted with them than with one of her children.

After Ruth's arrival they let her sleep on the daybed in the living room, and keep her clothes in one side of the coat closet. Ruth was deeply grateful and felt herself fortunate. (An orphan who has lived in the crowded homes of distant relatives does not grow up expecting a great deal of life.) She only wished that

Letty did not feel this authority toward her. "Not that I blame her, am, taking up room, consuming the family income and making nothing but a little work."

The doorbell rang and Ruth was absent-mindedly, to answer it. The house was a duplex and the Lawrence lived on the first floor. When she opened the door she saw a young man standing on the porch. It was Jack Willer.

"Hello!" she said politely. "Do you show him where to put his hat? He sat down on the little Victorian settee and began to make polite conversation, while he strode around the room, picking up things and laying them down in the restless way common to young men. He was 22 or 23 years old and was handsome in a curly-haired, movie hero way. He had always found her rather boring. She once said to Letty, "If you'd move the slant from Jack's conversation, all you'd have left would be a stack of prepositions and a 'come or two.' Letty had disagreed, thinking he's awfully clever and interesting," she had said.

Ruth noticed that Jack Willer was looking at her queerly. He said, "An accusing voice, 'I've been talking to you for five minutes and you haven't even been listening.'"

Ruth replied in confusion. "I don't, Jack! I always listen to you simply hang on your words." In her remorse for his injured feelings she made her voice more warm and cordial than she intended.

In an instant he was on the sofa beside her, his arm around her shoulders and his sparkling eyes looking into her surprised ones. "You have you always avoided me, Ruth," he asked. "Why aren't you always nice to me like this?"

Ruth jumped to her feet, not knowing what to do or say. She felt positively relieved to see Letty standing in the door. That is, until Letty said coldly, "Am I interrupting something?"

"No," replied Ruth in embarrassment. "Oh, no. I'll go and call Cecil. As she passed Letty's eyes gave Ruth the answer to the question she had been asking herself for weeks. Letty was in love with Jack Willer and regarded Ruth as her rival."

Ruth walked bitterly that there were some spots in the house where she might go and be alone, some sanctuary where she might go to with her problems and her mistakes and try to think them out. Well, that was the street—

She went to the coat closet and her hat and coat and put them on. She slipped out of the kitchen door.

Ruth did not know how far she walked, or how long. She found herself on the fringe of a busy business section. She saw a great big city going before a station. Across its side in neat painted letters, were the words, "CLEVELAND, BUFFALO, ROCHESTER, SYRACUSE, SCRANTON." The lights were lined up in a few people were filing in, but the driver was not in sight.

"It won't be going for a while," Ruth said aloud to no one in particular.

Next door there was a pawn shop. She saw that, too. There were the gilded balls hanging above the door. She went through that door.

The man who came to serve her was elderly. He wore a skull cap and had a white beard and infinitely kind eyes. He reminded her of Mrs. Lawrence. He said to her, "I have a little here that I would like to sell. It's a grandmother's before that. I think even belonged to my grandmother's mother." She explained it from her collar and showed it to him. "Will you give me for it?" she asked.

(To Be Continued)



Ruth, sitting in one of the deep seats, felt a thrill of excitement. "Off into the unknown!"



He said, "I'm on my way to a late lunch. I wonder if you will join me?"