

THE FICTION CORNER

BANDBOX BETTY

By MARY KEMPE CHEATHAM

HEAT shimmered from the downtown pavements. Torrid light fell in bars through the Venetian blinds in Mr. Humphreys' private office, carrying with it a coppery odor, like that of a penny clutched too long in a perspiring palm. It was a hot day all right, and the city lay panting under the noonday sun.

"Leave the door open, Miss Barclay," called Mr. Humphreys, as Betty returned from lunch. "Let the air circulate." "Whew," he added, mopping his brow, "we've got to get some air conditioning in this hotbox."

Betty smiled, removing her white gloves and her crisp white hat. Mr. Humphreys said the same thing every summer. She laid her gloves and white purse neatly away in the bottom desk drawer and sat down at the typewriter. With her blonde hair sleek and smooth and her pale green dress miraculously unwrinkled, she looked as cool and fresh as an iced limeade.

"How do you do it, Miss Barclay?" marveled Mr. Humphreys, entering the cubicle of an outer office where she sat as secretary and receptionist. "You can't be as cool as you look! Anyhow, let's put this fan out here somewhere to stir up a little breeze."

He looked around vaguely, pulled out a chair a few feet from Betty's desk, set the fan on it, plugged in the cord and returned to his own large desk through the open door marked Private.

Betty gazed doubtfully at the fan whirling away on the chair before her. She anchored the fluttering papers on her desk with paperweights, and, with a little frown of annoyance, smoothed back the tendrils of hair which were beginning to blow loose from the bun at the nape of her neck. She caught Mr. Humphreys looking at her and smiled. After all, Mr. Humphreys was the boss. If he wanted to go around putting electric fans on chairs, it was no business of hers. Anyway, Mr. Humphreys was nice. Nice, and quite, quite happily married.

They were all quite happily married, thought Betty with a sigh, as she began on her transcription. All the really nice members of the office force in the other departments, all the nicest salesmen. That business of romance in an office was just something you read about in magazines.

"Is Mr. Humphreys in?"

She looked up as a tall, broad-shouldered, red-haired young man stroled toward her desk and thrust a business card into her hand. Before she knew what was happening, he had pulled up his trouser legs slightly, to preserve their meticulous crease, and had begun to assume a sitting position over the whirling fan.

"Don't sit down!" Betty shrieked, simultaneously with Mr. Humphreys' shout.

The young man catapulted away from the chair as though a bomb suddenly had sprung from the fan blades. Backed against Betty's desk, he stared, then grinned. Mr. Humphreys, flown to the rescue, was mopping his brow again, but not from heat.

"That," he said, shakily, "was a narrow escape." He disconnected the fan and stood, bewilderedly, holding it.

Her composure regained now that catastrophe had been averted, Betty became once more all cool efficiency. She glanced at the card. She chuckled. She could not help it.

"Would you," she asked, "have had coverage for THAT?"

The card read, "John J. Thomas, Insurance."

The young man chuckled, too. "I came here," he remarked, "to talk to Mr. Humphreys about accident insurance."

"Sure, sure," murmured Mr. Humphreys, still shaken. "Come right in. Have one of the boys put that thing on a bracket for you," he said to Betty, indicating the fan.

When they emerged from Mr. Humphreys' sanctum, John Thomas had a pleased expression on his face and, no doubt, a policy in the bag.

"It was really her fault, you know," he remarked to Mr. Humphreys, loitering at the door. "She looked so cool, I didn't even see that chair."

"Miss Barclay always looks cool in summer," said Mr. Humphreys proudly, "and neat all the year 'round."



Muggsy gave her a broad grin, the more effective for three missing teeth. "You're pretty," she said. "I like you."

"Like she's just stepped out of a bandbox," John continued.

Betty flushed. She had had the expression applied to her before. Since her first days with the company, she knew she had been familiarly referred to by the other employees as "Bandbox Betty," but it was disconcerting to be discussed in this fashion.

"The least she can do," he teased, "is give me a dinner date."

"That's fair enough," echoed Mr. Humphreys, "if it's all right with Miss Barclay."

"Well," conceded Betty, "but I warn you, I have all the insurance I need."

Dinner with John Thomas was distinctly pleasant. It was cool in the Orchid room and the table appointments were perfect. The floor show was good, the food even better. From cocktail to parfait, the courses were faultless. John himself met every requirement as an escort. Betty began to be glad Mr. Humphreys had put the fan on a chair.

"Not a hair out of place," John commented.

"They drill it into you," countered Betty, "at secretarial school. White collars, tidy fingernails, all that."

"TLL BET," John said, suddenly, eyes twinkling. "YOU WOULDN'T EVEN GET MUSSUED AT A PICNIC!"

She had a number of dates with John, their tempo always smooth and pleasant. Her work suffered no

misplaced commas, Mr. Humphreys was happy, John seemed happy and Betty was almost happy. Only—that was all that ever happened. Never once had John attempted to kiss her or even hold her hand. He was, she concluded finally, a confirmed bachelor.

"Just as I," she thought, poking savagely at the typewriter keys, "am a confirmed old maid."

It was a Saturday, almost noon quitting time. John had not called, and the future suddenly became a whole series of weary calendar pages, neatly torn off day by day and deposited in the wastebasket.

As she walked from the building, there was John's convertible parked at the entrance.

"Get in," he called, "we're going on a picnic!"

It was amazing how his red hair could brighten up the day! Betty was happy in the car before she even noticed his female companion. "Oh!" she gasped. For there, huddled between John and a bulging picnic basket, was a startling apparition—a little girl with freckles, wide blue eyes and the same red hair!

"Relax," smiled John. "Muggsy is just my niece. Every year, about this time, I take her on a picnic."

"Oh," said Betty again, uncertainly. Muggsy gave her a broad grin

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the fire smoked, ashes fell into the coffee, the charred stick forks made smudges. Betty did her best to stay neat, but Muggsy was everywhere at once, dribbling steak-juice, mustard and catsup. A stinging sensation crept behind Betty's eyelids as she recalled John's admiring words, "TLL BET YOU WOULDN'T EVEN GET MUSSUED AT A PICNIC." She pulled ineffectually at her wrinkled frock, dabbed with a handkerchief at stains, wiped the dust from her shoes. It was unfair of John to put her to such a test.

The picnic dragged mercilessly on to an amusement park where Muggsy wanted to ride a roller coaster. Betty shuddered. She hated roller coasters, she hated flying turns, but she found herself hurtling through space with John and Muggsy in any number of crazy fashions. When they emerged, her bun was quite gone, the blonde hair hanging loosely about her shoulders. Her shoes were full of shavings from the amusement park grounds, she had a run in her hose and her face was smudged and devoid of makeup.

John stared at her and laughed aloud. "What," he asked, "has become of Bandbox Betty?"

Someone, she thought, should slap his face, but before she could put the impulse into effect, he had seized her hands and pulled her close. To her amazement, he kissed her fiercely, before all the people in the amusement park, with Muggsy giggling at them both. Everything seemed to fade away as she kissed back.

"That," he breathed, "is more like it."

"I couldn't have stood it," he said, "to have you respond with nothing but a neat little peck."



NEW STAMP DESIGN

"President Signs Bill for Stamp Honoring Poultry Industry."—News item.

Postmaster General—Well we have to get out another stamp.

Designer—What do we honor this time, the discovery of gold, the inventor of the walkie-talkie or the discoverer of lipstick?

P. G.—The hen.

Designer—Hen Wallace?

P. G.—No; the other egg layer.

Designer—What has it done now?

P. G.—I guess it's a matter of recognition of past performances. The hen has been around a long time and always done its best.

Designer—Do you want her on a postage stamp settin', layin' or roostin'?

P. G.—That's for discussion.

How about her with a brood of chicks?

Designer—Is there room on a three-cent stamp?

P. G.—There is on the kind we are turning out these days.

Designer—If we are going to honor a hen, how about working in an egg?

P. G.—Hard-boiled or soft?

Designer—Possibly a festoon of omelettes for a border.

P. G.—We mustn't emphasize the food angle, especially at present levels of chickens and eggs. I think we should limit the design to the chicken alone.

Designer—Now the question of what kind of chicken arises. What would you say to southern fried?

P. G.—With waffles?

Designer—I'm asking about a stamp, not taking a dinner order.

P. G.—My mistake. Cancel the southern fried. We don't want to have another war between the North and South all over a three-cent stamp.

Designer—Hmm. Did congress specify any particular breed of hen?

P. G.—I hear the Republicans were for the white Leghorns, but the Democrats favored the buff Cochins.

In committee conference they finally compromised on a hen combining the best features of each, with a touch of Plymouth Rock to please New England.

Designer—Very well. I'll get busy and submit some designs.

P. G.—How will I know when you have accomplished something?

Designer—I'll cluck.

An Editor's Diary

Rufe Goggins, Buckport, Me., hotel man, while cleaning up the garret, ran across some observations of a newspaper editor back in 1877:

Been asked to have a drink . . . 11,392

Accepted . . . 11,392

Requested to retract statement . . . 416

Ignored request . . . 416

Invited to parties by people expecting puffs . . . 3,333

Took the hint . . . 33

Threatened with horsewhipping . . . 48,000

Been whipped . . . 0

Whipped the other fellow . . . 4

Gave to charity . . . \$5

Gave for a terrier dog . . . \$25

Cash on hand after years in newspaper business . . . \$1.

Henry Wallace and Glen Taylor will be nominated in Philadelphia and make their acceptance speeches in the ball park there. From the "bull" pen?

The office Tory says that Hank and Glen will accept in a baseball field in order that they may get the feel of being left on bases.

"Havana—Two were killed and four wounded as two high school groups shot it out in front of the Havana institute today. The shooting began when one group of teenage students emerged simultaneously."—News item.

So they get "Inner Sanctum" down there, too, eh?

Joseph J. Koenig, a 41-year-old manufacturer, has completed a college course with high honors and will return for a diploma from the graduate school. He says he entered college as a diversion. But it is just possible that as a businessman suffering the harassments of today all problems put up to him by college professors seemed infinitesimal.

We can't understand the labor troubles at the Oak Ridge atomic plant. That would seem to me to be one place where money would seem the last thing to worry over.

Sometimes we get the feeling that if anybody anywhere these days would cease firing it would be a big help.

The list of Reds cracked down on under the Mundt bill will be known as the Book of the Mundt.

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