



# The dime-a-dance girl

BY JOAN CLAYTON



## CHAPTER I

A milk wagon rattling along Pine street brought Ellen Rossiter wide-awake. The Rossiter apartment was five floors above the street, but Ellen thought irritably even in the moment of waking that the clanking below was sufficient to wake the dead!

It was going to be another scorching day. The girl's face, rosy from sleep, was faintly damp and her thick tawny hair was live and beautiful with heat curls. She was conscious only of discomfort as she thrust it back and rolled over hastily to look at the clock.

Only 20 minutes to seven. Twenty blessed minutes more. Ellen stretched luxuriously, assured herself that the alarm was set for seven, and snuggled down again. As she was closing her eyes she noticed that the adjoining bed was empty. Myra had already risen and slipped quietly from the room. Ellen had sleepily decided that her sister intended to bathe before leaving for the library when she heard from the kitchen Myra's voice raised high in expostulation. Something was wrong again. Ellen did not know quite what, but that particular note in Myra's voice always meant trouble.

And trouble in the Rossiter household meant inevitably a difference of opinion between Myra Rossiter and Molly Rossiter.

Ellen sighed, tossed back the sheet and in one leap was out of bed. She grabbed a green cotton crepe negligee and streaked for the bathroom. The door was locked. Michael, aged 12, was inside. The one male of the family, the adored and spoiled little brother, he had special prerogatives and was not timid in enforcing them.

"I'm studying," he called out.  
"In the bathroom!"  
"In the tub."

He added plaintively, "I'll get out if you want me to. Only it's so cool in here and I'm always being interrupted no matter where—"

"All right, darling. Stay where you are for 10 minutes. But after that I'll have to rout you."

Ellen Rossiter was three days past 20 on that morning in late July—three days past 20 and already beginning to be afraid that the wild and careless dreams of her teens would not be fulfilled in her twenties. It was money, of course. The Rossiters had more than their share of good looks, from Molly Rossiter who had once been Molly O'Reilly, the prettiest girl in the whole of County Cork, to baby Mike, but they had nothing else.

The three children—Myra, the eldest, and Ellen and Mike—had from their father their thick copper hair and wide, thick-lashed blue eyes, and from their mother their creamy skin. The peculiar, arresting way they walked and stood, the nervous movements of their hands, the confident, arrogant ease with which they faced the world—all those were Rossiter ways, as Molly, who was a Rossiter by marriage, said so often. The unconscious air of distinction that was shared by all of them was from their father, too. It was Charles Michael Rossiter who had given them an unmistakable look of race.

There was no denying that the young Rossiters were unlike the young Blacks downstairs, or the young Rordans in the basement, or the Shannenbergers who sprawled through the two floors above. They were different and suspect, Ellen had often reflected bitterly, as people always are who have a past and no future.

But Molly Rossiter, an incurable optimist, had never once admitted the secret fears of her two daughters. Even when she had her crying spells she always insisted hysterically that her children were better looking than any of the English Rossiters, better qualified to move in that mysterious world whose doors had shut to them abruptly when Charles Rossiter, unable to forget green English fields and misty country English mornings even in the love of his wife and children, had closed his eyes and died of a common cold.

There once had been money. Myra at 26 could remember surroundings quite different from the down-at-heel Brooklyn apartment, could, with a pang in her heart, remember the glorious years before her father's death, the soft spoken servants, the gleam of candle-light on old silver (sold long since), and rugs so deep that all sound of footsteps was lost in them.

Charles Rossiter had met Molly O'Reilly on a trip to Ireland. He had married her before his father and mother and many brothers and sisters could rush in to point out the impossibility of marriage between the fourth son of Lord Harmstead and a tenant farmer's daughter.

They had never forgiven him that.

They were, as anyone except Molly Rossiter would admit, scrupulously fair. Charlie's share of the Harmstead estate had been settled upon him at once. The condition was that he leave England. His father and mother had refused to meet his bride. And Charles Rossiter, stiff-necked with pride, had been glad enough then to leave England. He had come to America and had never gone back. He had often longed for England but no one of his brothers or sisters had ever learned that. No one of them had shown the slightest interest in what he might have been thinking during those long years of exile. No one of them except his youngest sister, Myra, for whom his eldest daughter was named, had shown in the years following his death any recognition of the fact that he had left a family. His sister Myra, perhaps held back by the pressure of her brothers and sisters, had never seen any member of his small family but she did from time to time send boxes of clothing, discarded by her own daughters.

On that August morning Charles Rossiter had been dead 12 years. His death took place three days before his only son was born. He could never have foreseen that his two beautiful daughters would be forced to work, the one at an underpaid job in a public library, the other as an underpaid salesgirl in a great department store. He had left a sufficient sum to bring up his children in comfort, to educate them, and to provide for the lifetime of his young wife.

But Molly Rossiter, dazed with grief, had seen that money slip from her irresponsible hands within two years.

Ellen could remember only as of something dreamed those days when money was not a daily problem, a daily topic of conversation. She had gone to work at Barclay's department store when she was 14. She was still there.

As she walked to the kitchen she wondered a little hopelessly if she would always be there.

When she entered the small, heated room where the blue-checked linoleum had long since retreated into the corners, her mother turned from the stove. Molly's pretty, fading face was flushed and set in lines of determination. Ellen sighed again. She was afraid that her mother had hit upon another disastrous scheme which would make them all rich.

Myra was seated at a chipped porcelain table, her chin resting upon her elbows, the morning newspaper spread out before her. Her head, with its smooth braids of hair, lighter and less warmly colored than Ellen's, was bent over the society columns. But her mouth was set and

mutinous and it was plain she did not really see the printed words. Her eyes were full of angry tears.

"Myra and I have about decided—" Molly Rossiter began firmly.

Myra looked up quickly at that. "We haven't decided anything, mother," she interrupted in her long-suffering voice. "You only suggested—"

Both of them looked toward Ellen. Ellen crossed to the stove, relieved her mother of the eggs and began to beat with furious energy so that the yellow foam leaped up the blue sides of the bowl. Molly had been ready to pour them into the skillet.

Ellen was the one natural cook of the household. Molly's cooking was always overdone or underdone and invariably too highly seasoned. Myra, perhaps in compensation for her mother's lavish hand, never seasoned enough. Whatever she sent to the table came with the slightly indefinite taste common to second-rate hotels.

In the strained silence Ellen added to the omelet a few grains of pepper, a great deal of salt and a dash of paprika for the looks of the thing. She walked to the window to take parsley, chopped the night before, from a box-like contrivance suspended outside and serving as a refrigerator.

"Now what is it?" she asked the combatants, as she sprayed in the crisp green sprigs of parsley and poured the golden fluff into the hot skillet.

Molly and Myra Rossiter spoke simultaneously.

"Mother spent half the rent money yesterday buying things for Mike that he doesn't need," Myra said. "And now she has an idea for you. You're to make up the money working evenings."

"The things were on sale," Molly explained eagerly.

"Two pair of pants for what I usually have to pay for just one. I saved so much on them that I thought I could splurge a little. So I bought him some books he's been wanting for ever so long and a new cap and some under-



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wear." She added defensively, "You wouldn't want Mike to go shabby, would you?"

Ellen tested the omelet and lowered the flame beneath it. She turned off two flames which had been burning needlessly before she spoke.

"No, I wouldn't," she said patiently. "But how are we going to pay the rent? Tomorrow is Saturday but we already owe the grocer nearly all my salary. And Myra's isn't due for 10 days yet."

She did not suggest that the suit which Mike had not really needed would deprive her of a business dress which she did need.

"That's just it," Molly crowed, seizing her chance. "I have a marvelous idea for you. There's an ad in the morning paper from a dance place named Dreamland. It's a pretty name, isn't it? They want girls for dancing instructors. Look—here it is. I marked it for you."

Among classified advertisements, ringed in pencil, was a call for dancing instructors. But she knew Dreamland. She had passed it often on her way to work. And, although she had never been inside, she knew that "dancing instructor" was a polite name for a girl hired to dance with unattached men at a small payment for each dance—a taxi dancer. They did, in fact, call those girls taxi-dancers.

"The best part of it," her mother continued breathlessly, "is that you might meet a really nice man that way. I can't imagine why girls as pretty as my two haven't flocks of rich men trying to marry them. When I was young it was certainly different."

Ellen was uncomfortable as she was always uncomfortable when her mother talked that way. But Myra was frankly angry.

"New York isn't Ireland," she said flatly. "Rich men may grow on bushes there, I don't know. But rich men in New York marry rich girls. They don't meet any other kind. If you're thinking that Ellen might meet John Astorbilt at Dreamland, Mother, it just shows you don't know such places. The only result of Ellen's trying to work at night as well as all day would be that she would break down her health. And then where would we be?"

Molly Rossiter smiled mysteriously and, with characteristic optimism, overlooked all drawbacks.

"You can't tell how such things will happen," she remarked, still smiling. "I met your father in the most unexpected way. If we both hadn't happened to be at the same place that one night we'd never have met at all."

"It was at a dance, too," she concluded triumphantly. Ellen laughed. "Don't try to marry me off too soon," she pleaded. "After all," she added, "I'm only 20. I

might be touring Europe with my husband by the time I'm 21."

"I was married at 17. And Myra here—" "Yes, I've been engaged to Bert ever since I was 17—nine years," Myra conceded bitterly. "And perhaps by the time I'm 70 we'll have enough money so that he and I can hobble to the altar."

The very blackness of the picture she drew was irresistibly funny. All three of them burst out laughing. For a moment they were like children and Molly Rossiter was the youngest of the three.

When Ellen succeeded in dragging Mike from the bathroom and his book, when they were all seated at breakfast, the subject arose again. Where was the \$60 for rent coming from?

"It was due last Tuesday and this is Friday," offered Molly.

She had half forgotten by now that the money had been dissipated by her fault. Ellen was willing she should forget it. But not Myra.

"I'll go to Mr. Farnham and explain," she said, her lips straight, her eyes stern. "We just have to cut down on everything till we get the money again. But one thing's sure—Ellen can't carry two full time jobs."

"I'm not sure—" Ellen began.

"It's all wrong," Myra fiercely stopped her. "Mike could make as much selling papers after school as you could dancing all evening."

"Mike can't do that," Molly burst out in alarmed haste. "He's carrying double school work now. You know what your father would have said."

"He might have said something about Ellen's working in a cheap dance hall, too!"

It was an old difficulty, Molly's partiality for her only son. She was pathetically anxious that he should miss nothing because of his father's death, pathetically anxious that he should have what other boys had. To that end she was willing to make any sacrifice. She saw no



LARRY HARROWGATE

reason why her daughters should not do the same.

Before Myra's indignation could force a real quarrel, Mike himself clamorously interrupted. He was wildly eager for the freedom of the corner news-stand and for the chance to earn his own money. But Ellen entered a firm denial and his protests died. He knew he could not get around Ellen. She looked sharply at his eyes, heavy with fatigue.

"Did you go to bed at nine last night?" she demanded. Mike and his mother exchanged a guilty look.

"He was in bed," said Molly hastily.

She and Mike shared the same bedroom. Ellen knew then that Mike had persuaded his mother to leave the lights burning while he studied. But she was too tired to bring that up. She folded her napkin, tucked it into the heavy silver ring left over from better days, and rose from the table.

"I'll go at noon to see about getting that job," she announced in a tone that settled the matter. "I dance well enough so there shouldn't be any trouble. There's no use arguing, Myra," she said to her sister. "There's a limit to cutting expenses. We've reached it. We can't cut down any more without giving up eating entirely and the rent must be paid. I can carry both jobs until we catch up."

"I knew that was the thing to do," said Molly in deep satisfaction. But a moment later she added wistfully, "I'm sorry, Ellen, that things are so hard for you. But I still think that at Dreamland you might—"

Ellen checked her. "Don't be so romantic so early in the morning, darling," she begged and wished again that Molly understood things better.

Molly reached out and tousled her son's curly head. "When you get through school you'll make us all rich, won't you, son?" she asked. "Then our troubles will be over."

She really believed this. Mike, wriggling with pleasure, bursting with pride, believed it, too. But as Ellen looked down at her 12-year-old brother she thought the time when they would all be rich was a long way off.

Myra and Ellen were fonder of each other than sisters usually are. They were proud of their friendship and glad to be together. Both of them worked a great deal harder than most girls and because of their mother's childish irresponsibility they had early been forced to take up the burden of keeping the family together.

Myra at 26 had all the maturity that Molly would lack at 66. That morning after breakfast she dressed quickly so she could walk the three blocks to the subway with Ellen. All her indignation spilled out again as the two

linked arms and walked along Pine street, cruelly shabby in the hot summer sunshine. She felt a fierce, burning, helpless rage that her young sister should miss so many of the pleasant things of life. She felt also a fear that Ellen at 20 would step into the same blind alley she herself had stepped into at 17.

Nine years before she had fallen in love with Bert Armstead. She still loved him. But his job at the library where they both worked was almost as poorly paid as hers. And Myra had seen the first rapture of love wear away in nine years of endless waiting.

She felt she could not bear to see Ellen start in the way that she had started: to see Ellen lose the freshness of her love as she waited for an impossible \$35 a week to climb to a possible \$50. She feared what Molly had innocently hoped for—that Ellen would meet someone at Dreamland. But she tried to hide that fear.

"It makes me furious," Myra began fiercely, her blue eyes blazing, "that you should have to take this job, work yourself to death just because—"

"Boo!" Ellen scoffed. "I'm not an old lady. It might be a lot of fun, you never can tell. It would be grand if you didn't have to work nights at the library and we could both go."

"It's not fair at all," Myra persisted unhappily. "Not fair that you should miss so many of the things other girls have. Theatre parties and clothes and dances, dinners at the right places."

"Oh, don't fuss so, Myra," Ellen was silent a moment and then said casually, "Tom Shannenberger asked me to marry him last night."

"You didn't, Ellen! You didn't!"

Myra's slim, brown fingers tensed on Ellen's arm; her face was stiff with apprehension.

"No, I didn't accept him, if that's what you mean. I don't love him," Ellen responded carelessly. She added, "It seems to me that you're awfully anxious to keep me from falling in love. Isn't that one of the things that other girls do?"

She glanced innocently at her sister.

"Oh, Ellen, it's not that and you know it's not!" Myra protested helplessly, half-laughing. "It's only—Tom Shannenberger can't even support himself. He has nothing now and never will have anything. He's just one of those men."

"I know that. Still, if I loved him I don't believe I'd let it make any difference," Ellen said seriously.

A little pucker marked her low, broad forehead. Her eyes were sweet and thoughtful.

"I know money is important," she conceded. "Awfully important in lots of ways. But when you think of love—she flushed youthfully—"why all at once it's just nothing."

"Ellen," Myra spoke with desperate earnestness, "money is so important in love that without it—some money I mean, not a lot—love itself is nothing."

"I don't for a minute believe it!"

"Look at me and you'll believe it. Lack of money has robbed me of nine years of my life. If there had been any way under heaven for Bert and me to marry when we wanted to, by now I'd have had a home—children—all the things a woman wants. Instead—"

She broke off, appalled at what she had been about to put into words. Not even to Ellen could she admit that of late Bert had seemed oddly restless and changed, bored at talk of that far-away marriage. She laughed nervously, apologetically.

Ellen, uncomfortable but still vaguely holding her own opinion, hastened to change the subject.

"That dress looks awfully well on you," she said, looking approvingly at her sister. "Better, I'm sure, than it ever looked on whichever cousin wore it."

Myra glanced down at her light-blue voile, beautifully cut, freshly laundered and indeed becoming to her pale blondness.

"I wouldn't have bought it," she said. "I don't like short sleeves. But it has certainly been handy."

"That's the trouble with things given to you," Ellen agreed. She added loyally, "Still it's nice of Aunt Myra to keep on sending things. Most of them are scarcely worn."

She sighed a little at the vision of joyous youth presented by her own words, a vision of gay and pretty girls who could discard their frocks because they were tired of them. There were certainly points to having money.

"It's nice of her," Myra admitted in a low voice. "Even," she added with a laugh not so amused as she meant it to be, "if she never sends black and you have to wear black at the store."

Myra hesitated and went on with a sidewise glance at Ellen. "I do think she might come to see us sometime. She's been in New York several times, I know. I've read about her in the society columns. But then, we haven't a telephone."

Both girls were silent. Both knew that if their wealthy English aunt, whom neither had ever seen, really desired a meeting she could arrange one with the aid of a two-cent stamp. Myra's comment was only an evasion to save their pride. They strolled on, two pretty girls linked arm in arm, through the hot summer sunshine, down the dirty, shabby street. Ellen, in spite of herself, felt her spirits sinking. They reached the subway station that would part them.

"Do you still believe," Myra asked in a discouraged way, "that some day we'll have things? The things our cousins have? Cars and country clubs and a chance to enjoy being young? Or are we just fooling ourselves?"

"Something's bound to happen. Our ship will come in—it may be just around the corner," Ellen responded with vague, forced cheerfulness.

"That ship sank long ago," Myra said sharply, her bitterness and anger returning in full force. "We sank with it. How are you and I ever going to get married? Where are you going to meet a man good enough for you?"

"At Dreamland, maybe," Ellen flippantly tried to stop her sister. But Myra ignored the interruption.

"I believe we'll always be spending every nickel before it's earned. It'll be like this forever. Mother will get older and more irresponsible. Bert and I will go on and on. Mike will grow up and get the same sort of job we have. It's just no use trying."

"Oh Myra, Myra!" Ellen protested staunchly. "Where's your sense of proportion? All this because I'm going to work at night for a few weeks! Of course things will get better. We're only having our hard times now instead of later. It's been hardest on you. But you'll be married first thing you know and forget how long it was. Just wait."

"I'm 26."

"Then don't act as if you're 96."

Ellen ran down the subway steps and plunged through the turnstile.

(To Be Continued in The Klamath News and Evening Herald, February 10. Watch for the Next Chapter.)