

LAB GIRL

By Rene Ryerson Mart

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THE STORY: When Ned French announced that he had been drafted and refused to let his well-to-do father struggle a consolation for him, his sister Barbara secured a job in a plant that makes gas masks. She has been warned that it will mean incredibly dirty work.

SUE KELLER

CHAPTER V

PROMPTLY at 5:30 the next morning the shrill jangle of the alarm clock shattered Barbara's dreams. She struggled sleepily out of bed and tried to get her eyes open under a cold shower. The clocks in Wedgewood had been set ahead to war time and it was barely daylight outside.

In fact Barbara thought she had the entire world to herself as she hurried down the quiet street to the car line. The only sign of life stirring were the birds making an early morning clamor in the trees over her head. To her surprise the bus when it came was crowded. She managed to find a seat between an overjoyed fat woman and a man in overalls. She squeezed off when it was her stop, and walked hurriedly toward the gas mask factory. She didn't want to be late her first morning. She breathed deeply, glad to be off the crowded bus and in the open air again, and then she sniffed. There was a curious smell in the air, a sweetish, slightly sickening smell, the peculiar odor of carbon. It was a smell that was to haunt her days and nights.

DAVID KENT welcomed her with a good-natured smile. "Well, I see that you haven't changed your mind. Let me see—I believe I'll start you on the chlorine test with Susan Keller."

He led Barbara to a far corner of the lab where a blond girl with bright coloring and bold eyes was busy changing test tubes on one of the hooded machines. He waited until the girl was through. "See, this is Miss French, Barbara French," he introduced. "I'm going to have her work with you. Will you take her around and introduce her to the others."

Introductions in the lab amounted to a matter of first names. "Hey, Mary," Susan would call as they passed a worker's machine. "This is Barbara—Barbara French," "Madge—a new girl, Barbara French," "Rowena," "Carry," "Jean"—on and on.

Susan finally guided her back to her own machine. "Dave says you're to learn this test. So we might as well get started. You know what we do here, don't you?"

Barbara admitted that she had only the vaguest idea. "Testing charcoal in some way, isn't it?" "Charcoal to you—carbon to us," Susan explained, broadly. "You know what a gas mask looks like—that funny mask that fits over your face and the long hose running down to a can of carbon in the pouch. The air comes through that can and the carbon takes the gas out of the air before it's breathed. The carbon had better be good or the mask's no good. See?"

"Yes."

"So our job here in the lab is to test the carbon against poison gases to see that it is good."

BARBARA experienced a sudden faintness. "You mean, there's poison gas here—in the lab?" Susan carelessly tapped a large glass flask, filled with a dark brownish liquid, and set in a larger container which was half filled with cracked ice. "That's it. We keep it packed in ice to keep it in the liquid form. It's a very volatile chemical, if it becomes warm it turns into a gas. It would be hard to control then."

Barbara's knees grew weaker. She hadn't bargained for anything like this.

Susan went on breezily. "I've got a lot of tests to make this morning, so perhaps you'd better just watch. Later when I'm not so busy, I'll show you how to do a run."

By "run" Barbara began to understand that Susan meant the number of samples that could be tested at one time. She watched while the blond girl expertly filled a series of test tubes with the black carbon, attached them to the complicated testing machine, and

made several intricate adjustments to the machine itself.

But in spite of her busy fingers, Susan's flirtatious eyes never missed anything. She hailed every man who came into the lab, and the younger ones seemed inclined to tarry in her corner. One of these was the young man who had pumped into Barbara the day before.

Susan noticed his frank stare at Barbara. "Barbara, this is Ken Carter."

Barbara nodded briefly. "We've already met," Ken Carter said in his soft southern voice.

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