

BALLOON No. 7

It Clears Away the
Cloud

By CLARISSA MACKIE

Maisie Pomeroy dismissed her pupils and locked the door of the little school-house. It lacked three days of the long vacation, and the last hours of the school year dragged heavily, for June weather was insistently calling. Her homeward walk led along pleasant country lanes and through clover fields crisscrossed with narrow footpaths.

In Maisie's pocket was her last month's salary, and in spite of June weather and the calling bobolink her heart was heavy with disappointment, though her face wore its usual expression of unruffled sweetness. Just the amount of that month's salary would take her to a large summer resort, where she might have two weeks of such enjoyment as she had never known in her monotonous life. She had read of the pleasures of this city by the sea, she had known girls whose parents were well to do to spend several months there, and now Ella Shaw had written to say they were going and wished Maisie to join them. It was to be "Dutch treat," and she knew that meant each girl was to pay her own expenses.

She had not even mentioned the matter to her mother, for she knew that their resources were badly strained this year. There was an uncle who had been bedridden for two years, and they were now maintaining his declining days in the hospital, where he could be best cared for. As Maisie was the only wage earner in their family of two, it was important—prohibitive, rather—that not one penny be wasted.

"If Bloomfield were not so dull," she murmured wistfully. "Ever since I can remember there has never been any unusual happening here. No new families ever move here, and nobody ever marries anybody that lives farther than Fairmount. I don't wonder there are so many maiden ladies in this village." She smiled as she pushed open the front gate, for there on the front piazza sat her mother, dispensing cake and root beer to five of Bloomfield's spinsters. Some day she, too, would form one of a similar group.

"Lots of news, Maisie," cried Emma Risley as the girl sat down on the top step and sipped a glass of the cool beverage.

"News?" repeated Maisie; then she added quickly: "Oh, you mean the new flagpole in front of the town hall? I saw that yesterday."

"No, indeed; that's old! What do you think is going to happen in Bloomfield?" Emma was bursting with importance, and the four other spinsters nodded their heads significantly.

"A circus?" There were painfully few things that ever had happened in Bloomfield, and Maisie's imagination was starved.

"No, sir! What do you think of balloon races here?" Miss Risley's voice was triumphant.

"Balloon races?" echoed Maisie blankly.

"Ten balloons all starting at once from Cabot's big hayfield?"

"When is it going to be?" asked Maisie.

"In three weeks. The men have been here and looked over the grounds, and the lumber is on the way. All the rooms at the hotel have been engaged for the workmen. You see, I knew about it the first one because I hold a first mortgage on Cabot's big field," explained Emma Risley importantly, "and Joshua Cabot spoke to me about the matter."

When they had chatted themselves away Maisie and her mother sat on the piazza until the sun went down. They talked about the coming of the balloonists and how it had been learned that Bloomfield was chosen because of some special advantage it possessed for the purpose, and everybody said that once the city excursionists saw what a beautiful spot Bloomfield really was there would start an influx of summer boarders and possibly a land boom.

"Mother, dear," half sighed Maisie. "I was complaining this very afternoon of the dullness here, and as I walked home through Cabot's field I was wishing almost anything would happen to break the monotony. Now that something is going to happen I am feeling sorry about the clover fields. They are so beautiful."

Mrs. Pomeroy laughed softly and caressed her daughter's bronze hair. "That's the way with all of us, my dear. I have known for a long time that you were weary of the monotony of your life, and I cannot blame you. When I was a girl somehow we seemed to get more out of life even if we never went away from the village. There were parties every week and socials and spelling classes and skating parties. The winter was always too short for all the good times we had. Nowadays the girls and young men go away to the cities, and those that remain and marry here don't seem to care for the old simple pleasures."

"Perhaps after the balloon races are over we will rejoice in our old time quiet. But somehow I would like to have just a taste of life and pleasure before"—Maisie flushed and bit her lip.

"Before what, dear?"

"I know I'm horrid, mother, but I

was going to say before I settled down into a regulation Bloomfield old maid," cried the girl, hiding her face in her mother's lap.

Mrs. Pomeroy smiled indulgently. "You are sure of that, Maisie? Did you tell Walter Avery never to come back to Bloomfield?"

For a long time Maisie was silent. Then she threw up her head and tossed the straying locks from her flushed cheeks. Her brown eyes were very bright.

"I told him things that I am sure he will never forgive," she said slowly. "I said I would never marry a Bloomfield boy and settle down into a humdrum existence. I said I could never think of him seriously; that every time I looked at him he seemed to be the same chubby faced, apple cheeked little boy I went to school with years ago."

"What did Walter say to that?" Mrs. Pomeroy's face was grave, though her brown eyes were shining, too, and they looked much like Maisie's.

"He didn't say anything. He just nodded his head in that awkward way of his and went off. The next I heard he was in New York studying to be a doctor. You know he has never been home since." Maisie's tone was unconsciously wistful.

The days before the great event that was to transform Bloomfield from a sleepy country village into a fashionable rendezvous for a day were filled with preparations for the balloon races. As if by magic all the daisies in Cabot's field were laid to the ground and grand stands were erected and huge gas tanks put in place. School was ended, and Maisie walked in other directions when she chose to be outdoors. Now, she only remembered Cabot's field as the place where Walter had met her one day and confessed his love among the daisies, which are supposed never to tell lovers' secrets.

Maisie was disturbed by these memories that forced themselves upon her. She did not wish to think of Walter Avery, and she had dismissed him from her mind for four years and resented that she could not banish him from her memory. She felt sure that out there in the big world there was waiting for her an ideal lover, handsome, courtly, polished, rich.

At last came Bloomfield's great day. The road to Cabot's field was black with vehicles of every description. By 10 o'clock every seat in the stands was filled, and the four sides of the great field were lined with carriages, motor-cars and farm wagons. Maisie and her mother were there and by good fortune and the kind offices of Emma Risley had secured front row seats in one of the stands. Ten big balloons swayed slowly, tugging at their anchor ropes. There was a smell of escaping gas, the music of a band and the sound of many voices. Maisie found herself enjoying the excitement. If this was life she would like a taste of it!

Emma Risley leaned across Maisie and spoke to Mrs. Pomeroy. "I hear Walter Avery's going up in one of the balloons. You know he's quite an amateur balloonist. Mrs. Avery is worried almost to death about it."

"Ballooning is a dangerous sport," returned Mrs. Pomeroy's calm voice, "but I suppose Walter finds it a relaxation from his professional work."

"I guess he deserves all the fun he gets. They say he worked like a Trojan to get his degree, and now he's to go in partnership with a city doctor," Emma Risley sat back in her seat. "There, they're off, Maisie! I wonder which is Walter's balloon. Let me see your program—No. 7 that's a lucky number, anyway. Dr. Avery! Isn't that funny? Seems as if I could see Walter as he was when he came to school to me years ago. Think of his being a doctor!"

Maisie was thinking entirely too much for her own good. She was thoroughly frightened at the idea of Walter Avery's ascension in the balloon. She could see No. 7 now. That was Walter, tall, slender, supple of form, his dark hair blowing back from his forehead. He was looking their way. Was he looking at her? She told herself that he could merely see the crowd of white faces; that he could not pick out individuals. Still he stared, and then, just as the anchors were cast adrift and he started up, he waved a handkerchief toward them. Suddenly Maisie's little handkerchief broke into a fluttering signal. The fresh breeze tore it from her hand, and it whirled upward with balloon No. 7.

Walter leaned out, deftly caught the bit of white, tucked it in his breast amid the cheers of the crowd went up to an altitude that caused hearts to throb and cheeks to pale with apprehension. When the last airship had become a mere speck in the sky the crowd dispersed to other directions, and Maisie and her mother went home. It would be late in the afternoon before the balloons might be sighted on the return trip, provided they were not driven before adverse winds. Then their return would be uncertain indeed. There was an excellent chance that some of them would never come back.

Maisie Pomeroy never forgot that waiting time. In those hours died all the foolish longing and discontentment that had possessed her. There was only one thing she craved, and that was the life of Walter Avery, whether he loved her now or not. She knew that she loved him.

With the evening came the return of the balloonists, every one safe. Walter Avery winning the second prize, which he did not care a fig for, because a greater prize awaited him in Mrs. Pomeroy's old-fashioned garden. Bloomfield is a thriving suburb now, and life there is by no means dull and commonplace. The balloon ground is now a baseball field.

AN INTERRUPTION

By ANNABEL BRINSMADE

Preparations were being made for a funeral in the Margot family. The body of Betty Margot, aged eighteen, was to be buried at 11 o'clock, and it was now 10. A great deal of sympathy was shown the family, for there were very sad circumstances attending the young girl's death. In fact, it was considered a case of suicide.

About a year before Betty began to show signs of despondency. She had left school and was ready to take a social position among the young people of the town in which she lived. Her mother, partly to divert her from her condition of mind, did what she could to induce her to do so. Betty did not refuse to go among those of her own age, but when with them, instead of being the bright, cheery girl of a year before, she was listless. The young men and maidens who had grown up with her endeavored for awhile to draw her from her lethargy, but finding their efforts futile, at last gave up trying.

The family physician was, of course, consulted. He talked with Betty, asked her a great many questions, prescribed a tonic to be taken "three times a day before meals," but told her mother that he could find no organic disease. He thought that change of scene might be beneficial, but the Margots could not afford to take the patient away. Besides, she said she didn't care to go away. The doctor suggested that there might be a young man in the case, but Mrs. Margot declared that her daughter had never shown any preferences for any of her male acquaintances. To this the doctor replied that first love on the part of a young girl from sixteen to twenty was apt to assume very singular forms. He had treated cases of supposed physical malady which eventually had turned out to be simply lovelessness. One of his patients had shown signs of a breaking down in health simply because she could not make up her mind between two suitors and had finally eloped with a third, to whom her parent had no objection whatever.

One morning when the good lady went into her daughter's room with the usual toast and coffee—she would not permit Betty to arise before 11 o'clock—the room was empty. The bed had not been slept in. The frightened matron rushed from the room, calling her daughter wildly. The household, Betty excepted, responded, and eventually the whole town was roused.

The day passed with no word from the missing girl. She must have departed in the night, for no one had seen her go. Every village in the neighborhood received telephone messages describing Betty's personal appearance and inquiring if she had been seen. All her relatives far and near were notified. Not a hopeful word came from any point.

Mrs. Margot, after she became so far calmed as to express an opinion on the cause of her daughter's departure, said she believed that Betty's mind had been affected through some disease which "that stupid doctor" had failed to discover. The people of the town had many and diverse opinions. Mrs. Griffin, across the street, who had heard Mrs. Margot—an impatient, excitable woman—solder her daughter, averred that the latter had been driven away by cruelty. Some of the neighbors—old maids or married women who had adopted dogs in lieu of children—said that Betty had not been properly brought up and had gone to the bad.

One day a fresh impetus was given to these conjectures by the discovery of a body of a woman in the river. It was blotted beyond recognition, but it was about Betty's height, and the hair was about the same color as hers. The consensus of opinion was that it was her remains; that in a fit of temporary insanity she had escaped from home and drowned herself. The sight was so awful that the parents were persuaded not to look at it. An undertaker prepared it for burial, and this brings us to the beginning of our story, which is also the end.

Persons were assembling at the Margot home to pay their last respects to the dead. The clergyman had arrived, the undertaker was going about with soft tread giving directions in a modulated voice, when a young man and woman turned a corner and caught a view of the hearse and carriages standing before the door. The lady sank on the man's bosom with a gasp; but, recovering, the two pursued their way to the house of the funeral. The clergyman was mentioning some lovely traits of the deceased when the chief mourners uttered an exclamation of surprise and made a bolt for the hall, where stood the newcomers.

"Oh, Betty!" exclaimed both father and mother in a breath.

The obsequies were discontinued on account of the appearance of the object for which they were held, and a great relief, a great joy, reigned in their stead. This was Betty's explanation:

"George met me when I was a schoolgirl, and we loved. Then that horrid Kate Baxter came between us, and for a long while I was afraid she'd get him away from me. But one day he wrote me that she had been telling lies about me, and I concluded to go and give her a piece of my mind. The result was that George and I thought we'd better be married. So here we are."

The doctor's diagnosis of the case was, "The insanity of juvenile love."

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