

THE MYSTERY GIRL

By CAROLYN WELLS.

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(Continued from Yesterday.)

SYNOPSIS. John Waring, gentleman and scholar, has just won the hotly contested election to the presidency of Cornish college, a notable New England seat of learning. Before his inauguration, he plans to marry Elizabeth Bates, a charming and cultured widow. With his life's ambition achieved and a roof future assured, there is set on his mind the question, "Are you really happy?"

Into this quiet college town comes "Miss Mystery." Through her uncanny ability to compel others to do her bidding, she succeeds in establishing herself at Cornish's most exclusive boarding house kept by Mrs. Adams and her husband "Old Salt."

The other boarders appeared, the nearest Anita were introduced, and most of them considered her merely a pretty, new guest. Her manners were impeccable, her demeanor quiet and graceful, yet as Adams covertly watched her, he felt as if he were watching an inactive volcano.

The meal over, he detained her a moment in the dining room.

"Why are you here, Miss Austin?" he said, courteously. "What is your errand in Cornish?"

"I am an artist," she said, looking at him with her mysterious intent gaze. "Or, perhaps I should say an art student. I've been told that there are beautiful bits of winter scenery available for subjects here, and I want to sketch. Please, Mr. Adams, let me stay here until Letty comes."

A sudden twinkle in her eyes startled the old man, and he said quickly, "How do you know she is coming?"

"That, in turn, surprised Adams, but she only smiled, and replied, "I saw a telegram handed to Mrs. Adams at breakfast—and then she looked thoughtfully at me, and—oh, well, I just sort of knew it was to say, Letty couldn't come."

"You witch! You uncanny thing! If I should take you over to Salem, then I burn you!"

"I'll ride over on a broomstick some day, and see if they will," she returned gleefully.

And then alone came Nemesis, in the person of the landlady. "I'm sorry, Miss Austin," she began, but the girl interrupted her.

"Please, Mrs. Adams," she said, pleadingly, "don't say anything to make me sorry, too! Now, you want to say you haven't any room for me—but that isn't true; so you don't know what to say to get rid of me. But—why do you want to get rid of me?"

Esther Adams looked at the girl and that look was her undoing.

Such a pathetic face, such pleading eyes, such a wistful curl of the lip, the landlady couldn't resist, and against her better judgment, she said, "But you must tell me something about yourself. I don't know who you are."

"I don't know, myself," the strange girl returned. "Do we, any of us, know who we are? We go through this world, strange to each other—don't we? And also, strangers to ourselves." Her eyes took on a faraway, mystical look. "If I find out who I am, I'll let you know."

Then a dazzling smile broke over her face, they heard a musical ripple of laughter, and she was gone.

They heard her steps, as she ran upstairs to her room, and the two Adamses looked at each other.

"Daffy," said Mrs. Adams. "A little touched, poor child. I believe she has run away from home or from her keepers. We'll hear the truth soon—they'll be looking for her."

"Perhaps," said her husband, doubtfully. "But that isn't the way I size her up. She's nobody's fool, that girl. Wish you'd seen her give Bob Tyler his companionship."

"What'd she say?"

"Wasn't what she said, so much as the look she gave him! He almost went through the floor. Well, she says she's a painter of scenery and landscapes. Let her stay a few days, till I size her up."

"You size her up?" returned his wife, with good-natured contempt. "If she smiles on you or gives you a bit of fluffy-talk, you'll size her up for an angel! I'm not sure she isn't quite the opposite."

Meanwhile the subject of their discussion was arraying herself for a walk. Equipped with storm boots and fur coat, she set out to inspect Cornish. A jaunty fur cap, with one long, red quill feather, gave her still more the appearance of an elf or gnome, and many of the Adams house boarders watched the little figure as she set forth to brave the icy streets.

Apparently she had no fixed plan of procedure, for at each corner she looked about as though she had chosen at random. The snow had ceased falling the night, and it was very cold, with a clear sunshiny frostiness in the air that made the olive cheeks red and glowing.

Reaching a bridge, she paused and stood looking over the slight railing into the frozen ravine below.

Long she stood, until passers-by began to stare at her. She was unaware of this, absorbed in her thoughts and oblivious of all about her.

Pinkney Payne, coming along, saw her, and, as he would have expressed it, fell for her at once.

"Don't do it, sister!" he said, pausing beside her. "Don't end your young life on this glorified day! Suicide is a mess at best. Take my advice and cut it out!"

She turned, ready to freeze him with a glance more icy even than the landscape, but his frank, roguish smile disarmed her.

"Freshman?" she said, patronizingly, but it didn't abash him.

"Yes, Pinkney Payne, if you must know. Commonly called Pinky."

"I don't wonder," she noticed his red cheeks. "Well, now that you're properly introduced, tell me some of the buildings. What's that one?"

"Dormitories. And that," pointing, "is the church."

"Really? And that beautiful colonnade one?"

"That's Doctor Waring's home. Him as is going to be next prexy."

"And that?"

He replied to all her questions, and kept his eyes fastened on her bewitching face. Never had Pinky seen a girl just like this. She looked so young, so merry, and yet her restless, roving eyes seemed full of hidden fire and tempestuous excitement.

"Where you from?" he said abruptly.

"Where you staying?"

"At Mrs. Adams," she returned. "Is it a good house?"

"Best in town. Awful hard to get into. Always full up. Relative of hers?"

"No, just a boarder. I chanced to get a room some one else engaged and couldn't use."

"You're lucky. Met Bob Tyler?"

"No, you don't know him! I see that. Met Gordon Lockwood?"

"No; who's he?"

"He's Doctor Waring's secretary, but he's mighty worthwile on his own account. I say, may I come to see you?"

"Thank you, no. I'm not receiving callers—yet."

"Well, you will be soon—because I'm coming. I say my aunt lives next door to Adams. May I bring her to call on you?"

"Not yet, please. I'm not settled."

"Soon, you say the word, then. My aunt is Mrs. Bates, and she's going to marry Doctor Waring—so you see we're the right sort of people."

"There are no right sort of people," said the girl, and, turning, she walked away.

Apparently Miss Austin's statement that there were no right sort of people was her own belief, for she made no friends at the Adams house. Nor was this the fault of her fellow-boarders. They were more than willing to be friendly, but their overtures were invariably ignored.

Not rudely, for Miss Austin seemed to be a girl of culture and her manners were correct, but, as one persistent matron expressed it, "you can't get anywhere with her."

She was a mystery—and mysterious provoke inquiry.

The house was not a large one, and the two score boarders, though they would have denied an imputation of curiosity, were exceedingly interested in learning the facts about Miss Mystery, as they had come to call her.

Mrs. Adams was one of the most eager to know the truth, but, as he did on rare occasions, Old Salt Adams had set down his foot that the girl was not to be annoyed.

And let alone she was—not so much because of Adams' dictum as because "postering" did little good.

The girl had a disconcerting way of looking an inquisitor straight in the eyes, and then, with a monosyllabic reply, turning and walking off as if the other did not exist.

"Why," said Miss Bascom, aggrievedly relating her experience. "I just said, politely, 'Are you from New York or where, Miss Austin?' and she turned those big, black eyes on me, and said, 'Where.' Then she turned her back and looked out of the window, as if she had wiped me off the face of the earth!"

"She's too young to act like that," opined Mrs. Welby.

"Oh, she isn't so terribly young," Miss Bascom returned. "She's too experienced to be so very young."

"How do you know she's experienced? What makes you say that?"

"Why," Miss Bascom hesitated for words, "she's sort of sophisticated—you can see that from her looks. I mean when anything is discussed at the table she doesn't say a word, but you can tell from her face that she knows all about it—I mean a matter of general interest, don't you know. I don't mean local matters."

"She's an intelligent girl, I know, but that doesn't make her out old. I don't believe she's 20."

"Oh, she is! Why, she's 25 or 27."

"Never in the world! I'm going to ask her."

"Ask her!" Miss Bascom laughed. "You'll get well snubbed if you do."

But this prophecy only served to egg Mrs. Welby on, and she took the first occasion to carry out her promise.

She met Anita in the hall, and smilingly detained her.

"Why so awof, my dear?" she said playfully. "You rarely give us a chance to entertain you."

As Mrs. Welby was between Anita and the door the girl was forced to pause. She looked the older woman over, with an appraising glance that was not rude, but merely disinterested.

"No!" she said, with a curious rising inflection, that somehow seemed to close the incident.

But Mrs. Welby was not so easily baffled.

"No," she repeated, smilingly. "And we want to know you better. You're too young and too pretty not to be a general favorite among us. How old are you, my dear child?"

"Just 100," and Miss Austin's dark eyes were so grave and seemed to hold such a world of wisdom and experience that Mrs. Welby almost jumped.

Too amazed to reply, she even let the girl get past her, and out of the street door, before she recovered her poise.

"She's uncanny," Mrs. Welby declared, when telling Miss Bascom of the interview. "I give you my word, when she said that, she looked 100!"

"Looked 100? What do you mean?"

"Just that. Her eyes seemed to hold all there is of knowledge, youth, and of evil—"

"Evil! My goodness!" Miss Bascom rolled this suggestion like a sweet morsel under her tongue.

"Oh—I don't say there's anything wrong about the girl—"

"Well? If her eyes showed depths of evil, I should say there was something wrong!"

The episode was repeated from one to another of the exclusive clientele of the Adams house, until by exaggeration and imagination it grew into quite a respectable arrangement of Miss Mystery, and branded her as a doubtful character if not a dangerous one.

The Adamses, between themselves, decided that Miss Austin was more of a respectable arrangement of Miss Mystery, and branded her as a doubtful character if not a dangerous one.

They were more than shown by her disinclination to make friends. They concluded she was transacting important business of some sort, and

that her sketching of the winter scenery, which she did every clear sky, was merely a blind.

Though Mrs. Adams resented this and urged her husband to send the girl packing, Old Salt demurred.

"She's done no harm as yet," he said. "She's a mystery, but not a wrong one, so far as I can make out. Let her alone, mother. I've got my eye on her."

"I've got my two eyes on her, and I can see more'n you can. Why, salt, that girl don't hardly sleep at all. Night after night, she sits up looking out of the window, over toward the college buildings—"

"How do you know?"

"I go and listen at her door," Mrs. Adams admitted, without embarrassment. "I want to know what she's up to." "You can't see her."

"No, but I hear her moving around restlessly, and putting the window up and down—and Miss Bascom—her room's cornerways on the ell, she says she sees her looking out the window late at night 'most every night."

"Miss Bascom's a meddling old maid, and I'd put her out of this house before I would the little girl."

"Of course you would! You'd all get up because she makes so much of you!"

"Oh, come now. Either, you can't say that child makes much of me! I wish she would. I've taken a fancy to her."

"Yes, because she's pretty—in a gipsy, witch-like fashion. What then see in a pair of big black eyes and a dark, sallow face, I don't know."

"Not sallow," Old Salt said, reflectively. "olive, rather—but not sallow."

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Mrs. Adams and with that cryptic remark the subject was dropped.

(To Be Continued Tomorrow.)

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