

COPY BOOK STUFF

By Sophie Kerr
Illustrated by Arthur William Brown

Marie pushed through the crowd. "How did you get here?" she demanded.

There was electricity in the air, keen troubling. Mrs. Cleburne's paying guests, assembled at dinner, were aware of it, and ate their delicious orange custard in silence. They had heard the custard cups being thumped down on the serving tray out in the pantry. They had seen the scared eyes of Regina, the colored waitress, as she came in. Even the lovely quiet of the June evening, and the majesty of Mrs. Cleburne herself, did not reassure the guests.

The custard being finished, Miss Edwards and her married sister, Mrs. Worell, hurried away to the movies. Mr. Pentz thought he'd just step down to the store and look up one or two bad accounts.

Mr. Bert Green simply disappeared. Mrs. Ogleby, the high school teacher, also vanished. "I have some themes to correct," she said.

Remaining at the table, therefore, were only Mrs. Cleburne, her daughter Marie and Alec Lowden, who had eaten his custard and stayed for coffee, with no apparent cognizance of the human storm raging so near.

At 29 Alec Lowden had set out to become the great American painter. Now, at 32, he was commercial artist on the staff of the Star Advertising agency. For three summers he had come out and spent five months at Mrs. Cleburne's, commuting to the city, and was, therefore, almost like one of the family.

Marie Cleburne rolled her eyes significantly toward the pantry and said: "How did she find out?" "Why—you see—" hesitated Mrs. Cleburne. "I had the dress sent out C. O. D. I hadn't quite enough money with me, and when it came I simply said to Martha, 'Let me have \$10, dear, will you?' And at once she began to be disagreeable."

"But she gave it to you?" "Well—I've got the dress on," Mrs. Cleburne glanced down complacently at herself. "My dear, I had to have something. I was in rags, literally in rags. This is only a cheap little thing, but after your peach-bloom taffeta I felt that I couldn't afford anything better. We mothers must be unselfish, Mr. Lowden." She gave Alec Lowden a smiling, sweet glance.

"I don't know why she's so set on going to this dance, anyway," pursued Marie.

"Martha takes fancies like that sometimes. And it worries me to death to persuade her out of them." But Mrs. Cleburne's placid face didn't show a line.

"I'd be glad enough to have her

go," conceded Marie. "But she's got no dress, and nobody to take her, and I simply can't have her hanging along with me now that Gus Kramer—you know what I mean, mother."

Marie got up slowly. If she had ever applied to any theatrical manager for a job, she would have been described technically as "Big Blonde, Good Show-Girl Type."

Her mother's gaze dwelt on her fondly as she disappeared.

"It's my greatest delight just to look at Marie," she explained to Alec. "She's exactly what I was at her age, exactly. With her face—and her figure—she could marry any one—anyone! If we could only afford to go to some really fashionable summer resort for just one season—" She rose, with just a hint of haste. "You don't mind if I leave you? I want to speak to Marie."

"What she really wants is to get from under before Martha steps in," thought Alec. Aloud he said, "Oh, I mind, of course, Mrs. Cleburne, who wouldn't? But under the circumstances—" He rose and bowed.

He did not sit down again, but walked over and flung open the pantry door. "Come on in and get your dinner, Martha," he said. "You've scared 'em all away but me. Come in and tell me all about the row."

The girl who entered and dropped down wearily at the table was neither big nor blond, nor near to beauty. She was of no type, nondescript, medium height, with dark, untidy hair, a determined little chin, and lips drawn tight. Her pink calico dress was faded. Her sleeves were rolled up, her collar open. Only her eyes, almond-shaped, with flecks of green and brown in their shadowy depths, fringed with heavy lashes, intensely alive, intensely unhappy, redeemed her from insignificance.

"I don't want anything but a cup of coffee, Regina," she said to the waitress.

"Oh, eat some soup," urged Lowden. "That was wonderful soup tonight. You made it, didn't you?"

"I got the whole dinner. Amelia Ann has gone on strike."

"How come?"

"Ah, there you have it," said Martha. "My, that soup is good!"

"Bring some chicken and some rice and the fruit salad and hot rolls for Miss Martha, Regina," ordered Lowden.

"What was all the row about?" asked Lowden presently. "Why are you on the warpath? Everybody

sat here trembling, expecting to see you enter with war cries and tomahawks."

"I'd've liked to. I have got 'em terrorized, haven't I? But they stay. That's my cooking—mine and Amelia Ann's."

"You may as well tell me. It's something about your mother's new dress—and that club dance Marie's going to tomorrow night."

"So they've been talking. Then I suppose I may, too. It's a simple story. I paid the town tax yesterday and the insurance, and I hadn't a red left. And I'd promised Amelia Ann \$10 advance for an installment on her furniture set. By digging and scraping and stalling off the butcher I got the \$10, and then mother went into Baltimore, bought that new dress, and had it sent out C. O. D. I ought to 've made her send it back."

"Why didn't you?" "I hardly know. I was so tired and there was so much to do, and she cried and carried on so. So I gave her the \$10, Amelia Ann went on strike, and I had to get dinner. She'll be back tomorrow, though."

"But what has all this to do with the dance tomorrow night?"

Something pitiful and young flashed across Martha's face, and was gone.

"Oh, I got a silly streak. I got it into my head, somehow, that I'd like to go to that dance. So I told mother to look around when she was in town and see if she could find a little dress for me at the sales. And—and when the box came this afternoon—at first—I thought—that was what it was." She stopped abruptly.

"Oh, well, it really doesn't matter," she went on, presently. "I'd have had a dull time, I suppose. But I'd just have liked to sit and look—lights and music and young people, and no clean towels to think about, nor grocer's orders, nor Amelia Ann. Oh, darn everything!"

She laughed. "I had a brain storm, I can tell you. Mother and Marie cringed, and as for poor Regina—she covered every time I touched a butcher knife. Anyway we've blown ourselves for a magnificent costume for Marie, and she certainly ought to be able to make Gus Kramer fall when he sees her in it. Oops, my dear! She sure do look malicious, as Regina says. And if she only can get Gus—that'll be one liability written off this establishment. But Gus is spoiled and Marie is a poison mushroom to talk to—one of the deadliest anan-

tas who ever killed a conversation. Give me a cigaret, will you?"

"Come outside and smoke it. You have to wash the dishes?"

"No, Regina will. Golly, it's fine to sit down and loaf with a sympathetic soul."

"There goes your mother down the street," said Lowden, as they sat on the side porch. "Where's she off to—the movies?"

"No; going down to play bridge with old Mrs. Granger and the Millses. She'll come home with thirty cents' winnings, and as pleased as Punch. Funny about Mother—she's one of those women who never look at the truth, never see it. When she was a girl she thought she'd marry money and live in a big house, and have lots of servants and entertain a lot. She married Father, who was as poor as poverty, and hounded him into buying this place and let him work himself to death trying to pay for it. Then we had to take boarders. But it's all the same to Mother. She's living in a big house, even if it is nearly tumbling down; she's got servants—me and Regina and Amelia Ann; she has guests—who pay their way, to be sure, but what difference does that make?"

"Are you sure," asked Lowden, "that you look at the truth? This dance, for instance. Can't you really go?"

"Without a man, and without a dress? Alec, wake up."

"So far as the man's concerned, I'll take you. If it will give you a moment's pleasure, I'll only be too glad to martyr myself."

"I don't mind in the least martyring you," said Martha, but even so, I can't go. I've only got that old white organdie I made myself."

"It won't do. You ought never to wear white, Martha. It's hideously unbecoming to you. Hasn't Marie got a dress you could snitch, in an emergency like this?"

"Marie would scream till you could hear her in Baltimore before she'd let me take a rag of hers."

"Need she know it—until afterward? She can hardly scream at the dance, before—the captious Gus."

Martha began to laugh. "Marie's got a white crepe de chine that will be perfectly all right for me. I'll have to hem it up."

"But it's white. Hasn't she got something in a brilliant color—flame, or Indian red, or orange, or henna?"

"They don't suit our dear Marie's simple girlish style."

"Bring down the dress anyway, and let me look at it."

"I can't get it yet. She's sitting upstairs at the front window waiting for Gus Kramer to come in his car and toot the horn for her. Believe me, Alex, if any man came for me in his car and sat and tooted the horn, I'd never run out to him, unless maybe I had a full-size hard-hitting brick in either hand."

"What a little tough you are."

"Yes, I am. I'm fed up with trying to run this place on a shoe string, and Mother and Marie nothing but a pair of parasites. Just when I get something laid aside for the plumber, dear Marie has to have new pumps—fourteen dollars, big; or Mother blows herself to a frock, as per today. And what do I get? Seven days a week of heavy toil. Well, pardon my ravings. . . . Listen—there's the Noble Gustus—"

A low, sporty car stopped well out in the street and the song of the hooter was heard in the land. They could hear Marie's rush downstairs, the flattering joy of her greeting. Inarticulate gutturals replied. The car 'chuffed,' slid away.

"May she be inspired to brilliancy—until she's got him," said Martha fervently. "Send her a thought-wave, Alec, maybe it'll help the poor old bean to spark."

"You skip up and get that dress," commanded Lowden.

Martha appeared with a limp whiteness spread on her arm. "Here it is," she said. "Come inside where we can see it."

It was a simple enough frock, milk white, the color turning Martha's dark skin to an ugly sallowness as she held it before her. "Nothing but a slip and a sash," she said. "But not bad when it's on, really."

Lowden fingered the soft stuff. "It ought to be flame color. The only thing to do is to dye it. Got any gasolene?"

"Now, what is all this?" said Martha. "You can't dye this dress. Marie would have a fit."

"What does it matter?"

"I'll dye this dress a color that will play put the eye out of everything at that dance. As for Marie—what can she do? Cry? She'll only get a red nose if she does, and red noses are so unbecoming to blondes. Come on, bring out that gasolene—quick."

Alec ran upstairs like a boy, pulled out his trunk and began a terrific rummaging therein. Ah—