

Love's Help

By W. R. Gilbert

Chapter I.

AND we'll all be off to Cowry Bay for the holidays on Wednesday, and Mirabelle's no nearer knowing her own mind about me," complained Roddie Hastings, his handsome grey eyes glowering disconsolately through the haze of cigarette smoke with which he and his companion were filling the typical Chelsea studio. "Can't get her to say 'Yes' or 'No.'"

"I thought you did not mean to take 'No' for an answer."

"I don't if I can jolly well get any other; but I tell you she won't even vouchsafe me that definitely. Says she 'thinks' she likes me better than most of the fellows who buzz round her. 'Better than most,' mark you. Doesn't so much as let me know whether she includes that drivelling ass Sinclair, who practically lives at their place. He is going away with 'em, too, confound his inf—his ineffable impudence; so she'll have two strings to her bow always in the house, to say nothing of the extra people who always do turn up in the country, interrupting and interfering, and spoiling sport at every turn. I shan't even see as much of her as I've done in London," pursued the love-sick swain, for, on the subject of her, otherwise Mirabelle (whose other name doesn't matter, her first being so like her, frivolous, pretty and absurd), Roddie was rapidly becoming a bore. However, his companions was seldom bored by Roddie.

"And when I tell her it's not fair on a chap, she laughs and well—you've seen the ways her eyes sparkle like black diamonds set in that little ivory face of hers?"

"Well, it's sending me absolutely crazy. The holidays—in that ripping place of her people's—are going to be positive torture for me."

"Poor old Roddie. Poor boy! You know I'd help you if I could."

"I know you would, dear old pal." Roddie's "dear old pal" gave a queer little smile. She—yes, by the way, it was a "she"—a girl with blue eyes and a blue cotton painting pinny. A blue-eyed woman should always wear some blue about her, but not in a smudge of ultramarine paint over her nose, as Madge had now.

But she was a hard-working little person, earning her living by designing the lids of expensive chocolate boxes that became presents for pretty ladies of leisure like Mirabelle. And her appearance had to stand aside for her work.

Consequently her thick fair hair was quickly "done," and worn in a pushed-back uncompromising style; Chinese white and charcoal spoiled her finger nails; and the painting pinny concealed a business-like tweed skirt, an unalluring flannel blouse, a polo collar and a man's tie.

There was "no nonsense" about Madge. But Mirabelle, who was practically all "Nonsense," they adored.

"She can't help being rather spoilt, Roddie, by all the attention she gets. From what you tell me, it seems a matter of course to her. One man's adoration is much the same to her as another's."

She's like the girls who work in candy factories, and who may eat as many sweets as they like. I believe they never want to touch one. Mirabelle knows she's only got to put her hand out and help herself to all the admiration that's going. She's never wanted anything she couldn't get. But—Madge spoke portentously—"there are other girls in the world, Roddie."

"Not for me, Madge."

"Oh, you, silly old thing; I never thought so," retorted his companion quickly. "I meant, couldn't you let Mirabelle imagine there were? She'd think so much more of you if you—well, took a leaf out of her own book. Show her that two could play at that game. Flirt with someone else."

"With whom?" doubtfully.

"Oh, what does it matter? With anyone. Introduce a third person; it's an ancient ruse, but it still works wonders, I believe," Madge told him, beginning to put the leadless-glaze tea cups away in her typical little bachelor-girl cupboard. "I mean, if I can, to see you en-

They had been real "pals" for two years now. People didn't believe in platonic friendship; said it always ended in something warmer, but Roddie knew better. There were exceptions. Look at himself and Madge!

"You are a little ripper to suggest helping me," he added, half-doubtfully; "but I don't see that you are—"

"Not pretty enough?" put in his platonic pal, bluntly. "Looks don't matter. It would make her all the more furious to have her nose put out of joint by such a plain girl."

"Perhaps that might work," said Roddie, with apparent brutality. But as there was no "nonsense" about Madge, she knew she was jolly plain beside a girl like Mirabelle, and wouldn't expect to be contradicted. So they went on discussing the plan, and Roddie found himself becoming persuaded.

"But, then, you were going sketching in Brittany for your holiday?"

"I'll come sketching to Cowry Bay instead."

"You are a brick—you are really. You're most awfully good-natured Madge—"

"Not a bit. I'm interested in this affair. I mean, if I can, to see you en-

Chapter II.

"Plenty of things," Madge had said, "may happen in the country."

Pretty Mirabelle had begun to find out that this was true. She discovered that the country was not nearly so enjoyable this year. Something had gone wrong with the tennis lawn. Some other holiday makers—odious cockneys—had erected a bathing hut in her (Mirabelle's) own favorite and particular bay.

Her dressmaker—idiot—had disappointed her over her summer muslins; and her wet-day "things" were a disappointment also; that Burberry hat, which looked so fetching in the illustration, was not becoming after all—hid too much of her hair.

Mr. Sinclair—wretched creature—had written to say that Somerset House could not spare him for another fortnight, so that Mirabelle was baulked of her favorite amusement, that of looking lovely as a "summer girl," while she played one admirer off against another.

Roddie Hastings—that nincompoop—would be positively the only man there to see what a charming picture Mirabelle's creamy skin and black hair made against the background of the pergola-covered with crimson ramblers. Worst

of all, even Roddie, the infatuated, had prepared an unpleasant surprise for his enslaver.

"A friend of mine," he informed the family the second day at breakfast, "has taken rooms at the post office here, going to do a fortnight's sketching."

"Oh, do bring him in to see us," said Mirabelle's mother, hospitably.

"Do," added Mirabelle, demurely; "it will be so much more amusing—for you of course—with another man."

"It happens to be another girl," "Thanks, I'll bring her over this afternoon."

"Another girl!" Could anything be more tactless of Roddie? He might have known that Mirabelle was bored to tears by other girls. An artist into the bargain. Mirabelle knew what women artists were—dingy dowds and frowzy frumps with clothes past praying for; dabs of oil paint on the ends of their noses, and hair all anyhow. There would not even be the fun of competition with another pretty girl, concluded the disgusted Mirabelle.

Consequently, when she first beheld the friend whom Roddie brought in from the whitewashed, honeysuckle-grown post office, she was more than amazed. So was Roddie.

He had scarcely been able to believe his own eyes at the sight of Madge when she appeared in her holiday get-up. Was it Madge? Or was it the get-up that had so transfigured her?

Gone was the prosaic figure in the strictly utilitarian clothes, gone the screwed-back coiffure, vanished utterly the stains of the untidiest of professions.

And framed in the honeysuckle-wreathed doorway there stood a smiling, dainty maiden in a delightfully-cut, cool cotton gown of blue-and-white check; the blue just matching her mischievous eyes, the white to suit the cluster of flowers in her big straw hat. She wore preposterous but pretty suede shoes and stockings of saxe-blue; her nails were pink and polished, her cheeks pinker under a suspicion of scented powder. Another grab had become a butterfly! Actually she carried a sunshade with a



War nurses in training at U.S. General Hospital No. 1, marching past St. Patrick's Cathedral in America's greatest Red Cross parade. They are members of one of the U.S. base hospitals.

joy your holiday in the society of some other girl."

"There are not going to be any there." "Well, confide in one you know up here, and get her to go down and help you, play up to you, pretend to be the other half of sudden attachment."

"My dear good Madge, how could I? I don't know any girls, well—except you, and you don't count. You're so—"

"Unfeminine."

"Oh, not in a horrid way, but—well, you've always fended for yourself like a man, haven't you? I often feel you're like another fellow. Besides, how could one possibly ask a girl to do that—to consent to be a sort of locum tenens in a love affair, eh?"

The little artist shook her table cloth out of the studio window, tied up a bulging portfolio of studies, and finally answered in her most matter-of-fact voice.

"You could ask me anything, Roddie."

"You? But—"

The young fellow gasped, gazing at the prosaic little figure of his confidante, sharer of so many studio teas and outings and concerts ever since they left the same village in the country to live, one in St. James Street rooms, one in a Chelsea studio.

gaged before the end of the holidays."

Oh, Madge! I say, how you do cheer a chap up. I've never known anyone like you. I'll bless you for ever. I can't tell you how—how sickeningly grateful I am to you. If I could ever do anything in that line for you. But, then, you're not that sort of girl, are you? You don't care about anything but your work, do you? You're so unsentimental; you're—"

"A born bachelor-girl," concluded Madge, drily. "However, don't let Mirabelle suspect that fact, once we all get down into Arcadia. And buck up, Roddie. Plenty of things may happen in the country."

And she dismissed her fellow-conspirator with a gay little nod.

But when Roddie, much cheered, had departed to his rooms to look out flannels, fishing tackle, and other holiday kit, this born bachelor-girl sank down on her studio lounge, buried her little ultramarine-smudged nose in a shabby Liberty cushion, and smothered a sob.

"A locum tenens," she muttered bitterly to herself. "A girl that's to be made love to for a fortnight, pretending that she's occupying the place of a prettier, luckier girl. That's all I'm ever to know of love."