

Morrison Gertrude W.

**The Girls of Central High on
the Stage: or, The Play That
Took The Prize**



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CHAPTER I – WHAT THE M. O. R.’S NEEDED

The M. O. R. house was alight from cellar to garret. It was the first big reception of the winter and followed closely the end of the first basketball trophy series and the football game between the Central High team and that of West High.

The M. O. R. was the only girls’ secret society countenanced by Franklin Sharp, the principal of Central High. Until you belonged to it you never knew what the three initials stood for; after you were lucky enough to belong, the name of the society became such a deep and dark mystery that you never dared whisper it, even to your very closest “spoon.”

Therefore, in all probability, we shall never learn just what “M. O. R.” stands for.

Among the boys of Central High, their sisters and the other girls belonging to the secret society were spoken of as “Mothers of the Republic.” But the boys were only jealous. They were entirely shut out of the doings of the M. O. R.’s, which long antedated the Girls’ Branch Athletic League; the boys never were allowed within the sacred precincts of the “House” save on the occasion of the special reception at Easter.

The house was a narrow slice of brownstone front in the middle of a block of similar dwellings, within sight of the schoolhouse, and in the Hill section of Centerport. The Hill was supposed to be very exclusive, and rents were high. And the rental of the thirteen-foot slice of brownstone had become a serious problem to the Board of Governors of the M. O. R.

Some M. O. R.’s had gone to college, many of them had married, some had moved many, many miles away from Centerport. But most of them remembered tenderly the first school society of which they had been members. The alumnae were loyal to M. O. R.

And some of the alumnae were on the present Board of Governors, and were – on this reception night – discussing seriously with the more active members of the board the financial state of the society. The owner of the house had notified them of a raise in rent for the coming year to an absolutely impossible figure. The M. O. R.’s must look for new quarters.

“If we could only interest the pupils of Central High, as a whole, members and those who are not in the M. O. R.,” sighed Mrs. Mabel Kerrick.

The presence of this widowed lady, daughter of one of the wealthiest men in Centerport, and an alumna of the school, upon the Board of Governors of the M. O. R. needs an explanation that must be deferred.

“I don’t see how we can interest the boys – they only make fun,” said a very bright looking girl sitting upon the other side of the room, and beside another very bright looking girl who looked so much like her (they were dressed just alike) that unless one had seen her lips move one could never have told whether Dora Lockwood, or Dorothy Lockwood, had spoken.

“And how are you going to interest the girls who haven’t been asked to join the M. O. R. – and are not likely to be asked?” demanded the other twin. “The very exclusiveness of the society makes it impossible for us to call upon the school in general for help.”

“Just raise the fees and we can pay the higher rent,” remarked another girl, briskly.

“And then, at the end of next year, Mr. Chumley will raise it again. He owns more rentable property than any other man on the Hill, and just as soon as he is sure his tenant is settled he begins to put up the rent on him,” observed a fourth girl.

“That is just it,” Mrs. Kerrick responded, slowly. “The society should not pay rent. We should own our own house. We should build. We should raise a goodly sum of money this winter toward the building fund. But we must find some method of interesting everybody in our need.

“A membership in the M. O. R. has always been a reward of merit. Freshmen cannot, of course, be ‘touched’ for the M. O. R., and few sophomores attain that enviable eminence. But by the time a girl has reached her senior year at Central High it is her own fault if she is not a member.

“Therefore, the girls of the younger classes should be interested in the stability of the society, irrespective of whether they are members yet, or not. And naturally, if the girls are interested, they can interest their brothers and their parents.”

“Suppose, Mrs. Kerrick, a girl hasn’t any brothers?” demurely asked a quiet girl in the corner.

“Very well, then, Nellie Agnew!” said the lady, laughing. “You go and interest some other girl’s brother. But we haven’t heard from little Mother Wit,” added Mrs. Kerrick, turning suddenly to a pretty, plump girl, all in brown and with shining hair and eyes, who sat by herself at the far end of the room. “Haven’t you a thing to say, Laura Belding?”

“Won’t it be a little difficult,” asked the girl addressed, diffidently, “to invent anything that will interest everybody in the building fund of the M. O. R.?”

“That’s what we’re all saying, Laura,” said one of the other members of the Board. “Now you invent something!”

“You give me a hard task,” laughed the brown girl. “Of course, all members – both active and graduate – will be interested for their membership’s sake. The problem is, then, in addition, to interest, first, the girls who *may* be members, and, second, the boys and general public who can never be members of the M. O. R.”

“Logically put, Laura,” urged Mrs. Kerrick. “Then what?”

“Why wouldn’t a play fill the bill?” asked Laura. “Offer a prize for an original play written by a girl of Central High, irrespective of class or whether she is an M. O. R. or not – that will interest the girls in general. Have the play presented by boys and girls of the school – that will hold the boys. And the parents and general public can help by paying to see the performance.”

The younger members of the committee looked at one another doubtfully; but Mrs. Kerrick clapped her hands enthusiastically.

“A play! The very thing! And Mr. Sharp will approve that, no doubt. We will appoint him chief of the committee to decide upon the play. And we will offer a prize big enough to make it worth while for every girl to try her best to produce a good one.”

“But that prize must be deducted from the profits of the performance,” objected the practical Nellie Agnew.

“No,” replied Mrs. Kerrick, promptly. “That will be my gift. *I* will offer the prize – two hundred dollars – for the best play submitted before New Year’s. How is that? Do you think it will ‘take’? Come, Laura, does your inventive genius approve of that suggestion?”

“I think it is very lovely of you, Mrs. Kerrick,” cried Mother Wit. “Oh, my! Two hundred dollars! It is magnificent. Let us find Mr. Sharp at once and see if he approves. He is still in the house, I know,” and at her suggestion somebody was sent to hunt for the principal of Central High, who was one of the guests of honor of the M. O. R. on this particular evening.

Centerport was a lively, wealthy inland city situated on the shore of Lake Luna, and boasting three high schools within its precincts. The new building of Central High was much finer and larger than the East and West Highs, and there was considerable rivalry between the girls of the three schools, not only in athletic matters, but in all other affairs. Out of school hours, basketball and other athletics had pretty well filled the minds of the girls of Central High; and Laura Belding and her particular chums had been as active in these inter-school athletics as any.

In fact, it was Mother Wit, as her friends and schoolmates called Laura, who interested Colonel Richard Swayne, Mrs. Kerrick's father, in the matter of girls' athletics and so made possible for the girls of Central High the finest athletic field and gymnasium in the State.

Incidentally she had interested Mrs. Kerrick in the girls of Central High, too, and reminded the widowed lady that she was an alumna and a member of the M. O. R. In her renewed interest in the affairs of the secret society and in the Girls' Branch Athletic League, Mrs. Kerrick had become very different from the almost helpless invalid first introduced to the reader in the first volume of this series, entitled "The Girls of Central High; Or, Rivals for All Honors."

In that first volume was related the establishment of athletics for girls at Central High, and introduced Laura Belding and her especial chums in their school trials and triumphs. In the second volume, "The Girls of Central High on Lake Luna; Or, The Crew That Won," were narrated the summer aquatic sports of the same group of girls and their boy friends.

"The Girls of Central High at Basketball; Or, The Great Gymnasium Mystery," the third volume of the series, told of the girls when they had become juniors and related the struggle of the rival basketball teams of the three Centerport highs, and the high schools of Keyport and Lumberport, at either end of Lake Luna, for the trophy cup. That series of games had just been finished and Central High had won the trophy, when Laura and her friends, as members of the M. O. R., are again introduced to the reader's notice at the opening of this chapter.

CHAPTER II – WHAT JOSEPHINE MORSE NEEDED

In spite of the bright lights illuminating the windows of the M. O. R. house – and many other larger and finer houses at that end of Whiffle Street – outside it was dark and dreary enough. Especially was this so at the “poverty-stricken end,” as Josephine Morse called her section of the street. Jess and her widowed mother lived on the fringe of the wealthy Hill district, where Whiffle Street develops an elbow, suddenly becomes narrow, and debouches upon Market Street.

It was raining, too. Not an honest, splashing downpour, but a drizzling, half-hearted rain that drifted about the streets as though ashamed of itself, leaving a deposit of slime on all the crosswalks, and making the corner street-lamps weep great tears. The gas-lamps, too, seemed in a fog and struggled feebly against the blackness of the evening.

Under a huge umbrella which snuffed her almost like a candle, Jess had made her way into Market Street and to Mr. Closewick’s grocery store near the corner. She carried a basket on her arm and she had given the clerk rather a long list of necessary things, although she had studied to make the quantities as modest as possible. The clerk had put them all up now and packed them into the basket and stood expectantly with the list checked off in his hand.

“Two dollars and seven cents, Miss Jess,” he said.

“I’ll have to ask you to add that to our bill,” said the girl, flushing. “Mother is short of money just now.”

“Wait a moment, Miss Jess; I’ll speak to Mr. Closewick,” said the clerk, seemingly as much embarrassed as the girl herself, and he stepped hastily toward the glass-enclosed office at the rear of the store.

But the puffy old man with the double chin and spectacles on his forehead, the height of which the wisp of reddish-gray hair could not hide, had observed it all. He got down ponderously from his stool and squeaked out behind the long counter in his shiny boots.

“I sent my bill over to your mother this morning, Miss Jess,” he said. “It is more than twenty dollars without this list of goods to-night,” and he shook the modest little paper in his hand, having taken it from the clerk.

“Mother is short of money just now,” repeated Jess.

“So’m I. You tell her so. I can’t let you increase your indebtedness,” and his pudgy hand lifted the basket and put it on the shelf behind him.

“You pay me something on account, or pay for these goods you’ve ordered this evening. I’m needing money, too.”

“Mr. Closewick! I hope you won’t do that,” gasped Jess, paling under his stern glance. “We will pay you – we always have. Mother sometimes has to wait for her money – a long time. We spend many a twenty-dollar bill in your store during the year – ”

“That ain’t neither here nor there,” said the grocer, ponderously. “It’s a rule I have. Never let a bill run more than twenty dollars. Specially where there’s no man in the family. Hard to collect from a woman. Makes me bad friends if I press ’em. I can afford to risk losing twenty dollars; but no more!”

“How can you!” cried Jess, under her breath, for there was somebody else entering the store. “We have bought of you for years – ”

“And if I hadn’t stuck to the few business rules I have, I wouldn’t have been here selling you goods for years,” returned Mr. Closewick, grimly. “The sheriff would have sold me out. I’m sorry for your mother, and I don’t want to lose her trade. But business is business.”

“And you cannot favor us for this single occasion?” choked Jess.

“It would lead to others; I can’t break a rule,” said the grocer, stubbornly. “Come now, Miss Jess! You go home and tell your mother how it is. I’ll keep this basket right here for you, and you come back with the two-seven, and it will be all right.”

“That would be useless,” said Jess, clinging to the counter for support, and feeling for the moment as though she should sink, “We haven’t any money – at present. If we had I should not have asked you for any extension of credit. Please give me back my basket.”

“So?” returned the grocer, frowning. “Very well,” and he deliberately unpacked the parcels and handed her the basket – making a show of so doing in the presence of the newly arrived customer. “And what can I do for *you*, this evening, Mrs. Brown?” he asked, blandly, speaking to the new arrival while he handed Jess her basket without a word.

“And that woman will tell about it all over town!” thought the girl, as she hurried into the street. “Oh, dear, dear! whatever shall I do?”

For the cupboard at the Morse cottage was very bare indeed. Mrs. Mary Morse had some little standing as a contributor to the more popular magazines; but the returns from her pen-work being her entire means of income, there were sometimes weary waitings for checks. Jess had been used to these unpleasant occasions ever since she was a very little girl. Her mother was of a nervous temperament and easily disturbed; and as Jess had grown she had tried to shield her mother, at these times of famine, from its most unpleasant features.

As witness her passage-at-arms with the grocer, Mr. Closewick. No money in the house, an empty pantry, their credit cut off at the store where they had always traded, and no credit established at any other grocer’s shop! The situation looked desperate, indeed, to Jess Morse.

Jess shrank from trying the butcher’s and the dairy store, too. At each shop an unpaid bill would stare her in the face and to-night she felt as though each proprietor would demand a “payment on account.” It was a black night indeed. November was going out in its very mournfullest and dimmest manner.

And for Jess Morse there was an added burden of disappointment and trouble. She was not able to attend the M. O. R. reception, although she was a member. Laura Belding, her very dearest friend, would be there and would wonder why she, Jess, did not appear. And after the reception Chet Belding, Laura’s brother, would be waiting to take Jess home – she hadn’t had the heart to tell Chet that she would not need his escort from the reception.

But, as Jess had told her mother, that blue party dress had become impossible. Let alone its being months behind the fashion, it was frayed around the bottom and the front breadth was sorely stained. And she hadn’t another gown fit to put on in the evening. She did so long for something to wear at a party in which her friends would not know her two blocks away. So she had “cut” the reception at the M. O. R. house.

All this was a heavy load on Jess Morse’s mind as she approached, with hesitating steps, the butter and egg shop kept by Mr. Vandergriff.

“Certainly,” thought the troubled girl, “I either need a whole lot of courage, or a lot of money – either would come in very handy to-night.”

Just then Jess was aroused from her brown study by hearing somebody calling breathlessly after her.

“Hi! Hi! Aren’t you going to look around? Jess Morse!”

A girl smaller than herself, and dressed from neck to heels in a glistening raincoat, ran under Jess’s umbrella and seized her arm. She was a laughing, curly-haired girl with dancing black eyes and an altogether roguish look.

“Jess Morse! don’t you ever look back on the street – no matter what happens?” she demanded.

“For what was Lot’s wife turned to salt, Bobby?” returned Jess, solemnly.

“For good! Now you know, don’t you?” laughed Clara Hargrew, whose youthful friends knew her as “Bobby.”

“Why aren’t you at the ‘big doin’s’ to-night,” demanded the harum-scarum Bobby. “You’re a Mother of the Republic; what means this delinquency?”

“Just supposing I had something else to do?” returned Jess, trying to speak lightly. “I’m on an errand now.”

She wished to shake Bobby off. She dared not take her into Mr. Vandergriff’s store. Suppose the butter and egg man should treat her as the grocer had?

“Say! you ought to be up there,” cried the unconscious Bobby. “I just came past the house and it was all lit up like – like a hotel. And Mr. Sharp was just coming out with Mrs. Kerrick. Mrs. Kerrick is going to do something big for us girls of Central High.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jess, only half interested in Bobby’s gossip.

“Going to give us a chance to win a prize, or something,” pursued Bobby.

“Oh! how do you know?” Jess showed more interest now.

“Why, I heard Mr. Sharp say, as he was helping Mrs. Kerrick into Colonel Swayne’s auto:

“‘The girls of Central High should be delighted, Mrs. Kerrick – and very grateful to you, indeed. Two hundred dollars! And a chance for any smart girl to win it!’ – just like that. Now, Jess, you and I are both smart girls, aren’t we?” demanded Bobby, roguishly.

“We think we are, at any rate,” returned Jess, more eagerly. “Two hundred dollars! Oh! wouldn’t that be fine!”

“It would buy a lot of candy and ice-cream sodas,” chuckled Bobby.

But to herself Jess Morse thought: “And it would mean the difference, for mother and me, between penury and independence! Oh, dear me! is it something that I can do to earn two hundred dollars?”

And she listened to Bobby’s surmises about the mysterious prize without taking in half what the younger girl was saying. Two hundred dollars! And she and her mother did not have a cent. She looked up and saw the lights of the butter and egg store just ahead, and sighed.

CHAPTER III – WHAT MR. CHUMLEY NEEDED

“Well, old Molly-grubs, I’ve got to leave you here,” said Bobby Hargrew, pinching the arm of Jess. “You’re certainly down in the mouth to-night. I never saw you so before. I’d like to know what the matter is with you,” complained Bobby, and ran off in the rain.

Jess was heartily glad to get rid of her; and it was seldom that she ever felt that way about Bobby. Bobby was the double distilled essence of cheerfulness.

But Jess felt as though nothing could cheer her to-night but the finding of a big, fat pocket-book on the street – one that “didn’t belong to nobody!” There wasn’t such an object in sight, however, along the glistening walk – the walk that glistened in the lamplight from Mr. Vandergriff’s store.

She positively *had* to try her luck at the butter and egg shop. The man could do no more than refuse her, that was sure.

But when Jess had lowered her umbrella and backed into the shop, she found several customers waiting at the counter. Mr. Vandergriff and his son, whom the boys called “Griff” and who played fullback on the Central High football team, were waiting upon these customers. Soon Griff was through with the man he was waiting on and came to Jess.

“What’s yours to-night, Miss Morse?” he asked, and was so cheerful about it that the girl’s heart rose. They didn’t owe Mr. Vandergriff such a large bill, anyway. The proprietor was waiting upon the lady who stood beside Jess as she gave her order to Griff. The lady was a very dressy person and she laid her silver-mesh purse on the counter between herself and Jess. The latter saw the glint of gold coins between the meshes of the purse and her heart throbbed. She moved quietly away from the lady. Wasn’t it wicked – seemingly – that one should have so much money, while another needed the very necessities of life?

“Thank you, Griff,” Jess heard herself saying to the younger Vandergriff, as he packed her modest order in the basket. “I shall have to ask you to charge that.”

“All right, Miss Morse. Nothing more to-night?”

“No,” said Jess, and went back and unhooked her umbrella from the edge of the counter where she had hung it, and started for the door. A bright-eyed man in a long blue raincoat who had been waited upon by Griff already was just then going out, and he held open the door for her. As she stepped out the girl saw that the rain was no longer falling – merely a mist clung about the street lamps. She did not raise her umbrella, but hurried toward home.

There was enough in her basket for breakfast, at least. She would wait until to-morrow – which was Saturday – before she went to the butcher’s. Perhaps something would happen. Perhaps in the morning mail there would be a check for her mother instead of a returned manuscript.

And all the time, while her feet flew homeward, she thought of the prize of two hundred dollars that Mrs. Mabel Kerrick was to offer for the girls of Central High to work for. What was the task? Could it be something that *she* excelled in?

Jess was almost tempted to wait up until the reception was over and then run to the Belding house and see her chum before Laura went to bed. Laura might know all about it.

Two hundred dollars!

Jess saw the words before her in dancing, rain-drop letters. They seemed to beckon her on, and in a few minutes she was at the cottage, just at the “elbow” of Whiffle Street, and came breathlessly into the kitchen.

The room was empty, and the fire in the stove was but a spark. Jess tiptoed to the sitting-room door and peered in. Her mother, wearing an ink-stained jacket, was busy at her desk, the pen scratching on the big sheets of pad paper. The typewriter was open, too, and the girl could see that the title and opening paragraphs of a new story had already been written on the machine.

“Genius burns again!” sighed Jess, and went back to remove her damp hat and jacket, and replenish the fire. Mother would want some tea by and by, if she worked late into the evening, and Jess drew the kettle forward.

She stood her umbrella behind the entry door, and removed her overshoes and put them under the range to dry. She had scarcely done so when a stumbling foot sounded on the porch. She opened the door before the visitor could knock, so that Mrs. Morse would not be disturbed.

“Why, Mr. Chumley!” she exclaimed, recognizing the withered little man who stood there.

“Oh! you’re home, are ye?” squeaked the landlord. “I was here a little while ago and nobody answered my knock, though I could hear that typewriter going *rat, tat, tat* all the time.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Chumley,” said Jess, hastily. “But you know how mother is when she’s busy. She hears nothing.”

“Humph!”

“Won’t you come in?” hesitated Jess, still holding the door. The rent was not due for a day or two, and he usually gave them a few days’ grace if they did not happen to have it right in the nick of time.

“I guess I will,” squeaked the landlord.

He was a little whiffet of a man – “looked like a figure on a New Year’s cake,” Bobby Hargrew said. His mouth was a mere slit in his gray, wrinkled face, and his eyes were so close together that the sharp bridge of his nose scarcely parted them.

Some landlords hire agents to attend to their property and to the collection of rents. Not so Mr. Chumley. He did not mind the trouble of collecting, and he could fight off repairs longer than any landlord in town. And the one-half of one per cent. collection fee was an item.

“Think I’ve come ahead of time, eh?” he cackled, rubbing his blue hands – as blue as a turkey’s foot, Jess thought – over the renewed fire. “It ain’t many days before rent’s due again. If ye have it handy ye can pay me now, Miss Josephine.”

“It isn’t handy, Mr. Chumley. We are shorter than usual just now,” said Jess, hating the phrase that comes so often to the lips of poverty.

“Well! well! Can’t expect money before it’s due, I s’pose,” said the old man, licking his thin lips. “And I’m afraid ye find it pretty hard to meet your bills at ’tis?” he added, his head on one side like a gray old stork.

Jess flushed and then paled. What had *he* heard? Had that Mrs. Brown, in the grocer’s shop, told him already that Mr. Closewick had refused to let her increase the bill? The girl looked at him without speaking, schooling her features to betray nothing of the fear that gripped her heart.

“Hey?” squeaked Mr. Chumley. “Don’t ye hear well?”

“I hear you, sir,” said Jess, glancing quickly to make sure that she had closed the door tightly between the kitchen and the room in which her mother was at work.

“Well, I’m willin’ to help folks out – always,” said Mr. Chumley, his withered cheek flushing. “If you’re finding the rent of this house too much fer ye, why, there’s cheaper tenements in town. I own some of ’em myself. Taxes is increased this year and I gotter go up on all rentals – ”

“But, Mr. Chumley! we’ve lived in this cottage of yours ever since I can remember. We’ve paid you a lot of rent. You surely are not going to increase it now?”

“I am, after December, Miss Josephine,” declared Mr. Chumley. “I gotter do it. Beginnin’ with January first your mother will have to pay three dollars more each month. You kin tell her that. I’m giving you a month’s warning.”

“Oh, Mr. Chumley! Surely you won’t put us out – ”

“I ain’t sayin’ nothing about putting you out, though your mother ain’t as sure pay as some others. She’s slow. And she’s a woman alone. Hard to git your money out of a widder woman. No. She can stay if she pays the three dollars increase. Otherwise, I got the cottage as good as rented right now to another party.”

He moved toward the door, without lifting his eyes again to Jess's face.

"You'll tell her that," he said. "I'd like to do business with her instead of with a half-grown gal. Don't suppose you *could* let me have the next month's rent to-night, eh?"

"It isn't due yet, Mr. Chumley," Jess said, undecided whether to "get mad" or to cry!

"Well – Hello! who's these?"

There was another clatter of footsteps upon the porch as old Mr. Chumley opened the outer door. Jess looked past him and saw a female and a male figure crowding into the entry. For a moment she recognized neither.

"That's the girl!" exclaimed the woman, and her voice was sharp and excited.

"Hello!" muttered Mr. Chumley, and stood aside. "Here's young Vandergriff."

Jess looked on, speechless with amazement. She now recognized Griff, and the woman with him was the fashionably attired lady who had stood beside Jess at the counter in the butter and egg store.

"Miss Jess! Miss Jess!" exclaimed Griff, quickly. "Did you open your umbrella on the way home?"

"I – I – "

"Stupid!" exclaimed the woman.

"Why, Griff, I didn't open it."

"And you haven't opened it yet?"

"Why – no," admitted the puzzled Jess.

"Where is it?" cried the young man. "Now, you wait, Mrs. Prentice. I know it will be all right."

"That's all very fine, young man. But it isn't your purse that is lost," exclaimed the woman, tartly.

At last Jess understood. She started forward and her face flamed.

"Oh!" she cried. "Did you lose that silver mesh purse?"

"You see! She remembers it well enough," said the woman.

"I could scarcely forget it. You laid it on the counter between us. And it was heavy with money," said Jess.

"Now, wait!" cried Griff, interposing, while old Chumley listened eagerly, his little eyes snapping. "Did you set your umbrella aside without opening it, Miss Morse?"

"Yes, I did," repeated Jess.

"And you had it hanging by the hooked handle on the edge of the counter right beside this lady, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did."

"I saw it. It's just like a story book!" laughed Griff. "Get the umbrella, Miss Morse. I knew it would be all right – "

"I am not convinced that it is 'all right,' as you say, young man," spoke Mrs. Prentice, eyeing Jess's flushed face, suspiciously.

"Get it from behind the door there, Griff," said the girl, hurriedly. She, too, had heard of such an incident as this. Perhaps the purse had been knocked from the counter into her open umbrella. But suppose it was *not* there?

CHAPTER IV – WHAT MRS. PRENTICE NEEDED

“Here it is! here’s the umbrella!” squeaked the officious Mr. Chumley, coming out from behind the entry door, where he had been listening.

All three of them – Jess, Griff, and the excited loser of the purse – reached for the umbrella; but Griff was the first.

“Hold on!” said he to the landlord. “Let me have that, sir. The purse was lost in our store. We’re just as much interested in the matter as anybody.”

“I fail to see that, young man,” said Mrs. Prentice, tartly.

She was not naturally of a mean disposition; but she was excited, and the explanation Griff had given her of the loss of the purse had seemed to her unimaginative mind “far-fetched,” to say the least.

The boy half opened the umbrella and turned it over. Crash to the floor fell the purse, and it snapped open as it landed. Out upon the linoleum rolled the glistening coins – several of them gold pieces – that Jess had noted so greedily in the egg store.

“What did I tell you?” cried Griff, looking at Mrs. Prentice.

That lady only exclaimed “Oh!” very loudly and looked aghast at the rolling coins. Jess half stooped to gather up the scattered money. Then she thought better of it and straightened up, looking straight into the face of the owner of the purse.

But old Mr. Chumley could not stand the lack of interest the others seemed to show in what – to him – was the phase of particular importance in the whole affair. There was real money rolling all over the Widow Morse’s kitchen. He went down on his rheumatic old knees and scrambled for it. Mr. Chumley worshipped money, anyway, and this was a worshipper’s rightful attitude.

“My, my, my!” he kept repeating. “How careless!”

But Mrs. Prentice’s expression of countenance was swiftly changing. She flushed deeply – much more deeply than had Jess; then she paled. She picked up Mr. Chumley’s phrase, although she allowed the old man to pick up the money.

“I certainly *have* been careless,” she said. “I – I must have nudged that purse off the counter with my elbow. I – I – My dear girl! will you forgive me?”

She stepped forward and opened her arms to Jess. She was not only a well dressed lady, but she was a handsome one, and her smile, when she chose to allow it to appear, was winning. The anger and indignation Jess had felt began to melt before this apology and the lady’s frank manner.

“I – I suppose it was a natural mistake,” stammered Jess.

“Not if she’d known you, Miss Jess,” Griff said, quite sharply for him. “Nobody who knew you or your mother would have accused you of taking a penny’s worth that didn’t rightfully belong to you.”

Jess, whose heart was still sore from the blow she had received at Mr. Closewick’s grocery, thought this was very kind of Griff. And they owed his father, too! If there were tears standing in her eyes they were tears of gratitude.

“You see, my dear,” said the lady, her voice very pleasant indeed now, “I did not know you as well as young Mr. Vandergriff seems to.”

“We – we go to school together,” explained Jess, weakly, and found herself drawn into the arms of the lady.

Mr. Chumley rose up with a grunt and a groan; he had the purse and all the coins.

“Very careless! very careless!” he repeated. “And here is nearly a hundred dollars, madam. Think of carelessly carrying a hundred dollars in a silly purse like that! It is astonishing – ”

Mrs. Prentice had implanted a soft little kiss on Jess’s forehead and shaken her a little playfully by both shoulders.

“Don’t you bear malice, my dear,” she whispered. Then she turned briefly to the old man.

“You’re very kind, I’m sure,” she said, taking the purse into which Mr. Chumley had crammed the money. “Thank you.”

“Money comes too hard for folks to scatter it around,” complained the landlord.

Mrs. Prentice seemed to be much amused. “I should be more careful, I suppose. I presume, now, I ought to count it to see if – if you gathered it all up, sir?” she added, her eyes dancing.

A little breath of red crept into the withered cheeks of the miserly old man. “Well, well!” he ejaculated. “One can’t be too careful.”

“I presume not,” said the lady.

“And if the gal had known the money was there she might have been tempted, ye see.”

Jess flushed again and Griff looked angry; but Mrs. Prentice said, coolly:

“Were *you* tempted, sir? Perhaps I had better count my money, after all?”

“Ahem! ahem!” coughed the old gentleman. “Perhaps you don’t know who I am? There is a vast difference between me – my condition, I mean – and the gal and her mother.”

“Ah! Do you think so?” asked Mrs. Prentice, and then turned her back upon him. “I should like to know you better, my dear – and your mother. I hope you will show me that I am really forgiven by allowing me to call some day – Oh! I couldn’t face your mother now. I know just how I would feel myself if I had a daughter who had been accused as I accused you. I certainly need to take care – as our friend here says.”

“I am sure mother would be pleased to meet you,” stammered Jess.

“You know, I am Mrs. Prentice. My brother-in-law, Patrick Sarsfield Prentice, is editor and proprietor of the *Centerport Courier*.”

Jess’s interest was doubly aroused now. So *this* was the rich Mrs. Prentice, whom they said really backed Centerport’s newest venture in the newspaper field?

“My mother has met Mr. Prentice – your brother-in-law,” she said, diffidently. “You know, mother writes. She is Mary Morse.”

“Ah, yes,” said the lady, preparing to follow Griff out. “I am really glad to have known you – but I am sorry we began our acquaintance so unfortunately.”

“That – that is all right, Mrs. Prentice,” returned the girl.

Griff called back goodnight to her over his shoulder. And at the gate he parted from the lady whose carelessness had made all the trouble.

“That’s just what I told you, Mrs. Prentice,” he said. “They’re all right folks, those Morses. Yes, Mrs. Prentice, I’ll remember to send all those things you ordered over in the morning – first delivery,” and he went off, whistling.

CHAPTER V – THERE IS A GENERAL NEED

Mrs Prentice would have turned away from the gate of the Morse cottage and gone her homeward way, too, had she not heard a cackling little “ahem!” behind her. There was the wizened Mr. Chumley right on her heels.

“Very fortunate escape – very fortunate escape, indeed,” said the landlord.

“It was,” agreed the repentant lady. “I might have gone farther and done much worse in my excitement.”

“Oh, no,” said he. “I mean it was fortunate for the girl – and her mother. Of course, they’ve got nothing, and had the money really been missing it would have looked bad.”

Mrs. Prentice eyed him in a way that would have made a person with a thinner skin writhe a little. But Mr. Chumley’s feelings were not easily hurt.

“You evidently know all about those people?” said the lady, brusquely.

“Oh, yes. They’ve been my tenants for some years. But rents are going up in this neighborhood and – Well, I can get a much more satisfactory tenant.”

“You have been warning them out of the cottage?” asked Mrs. Prentice, quickly.

“Not just that,” said the old man, rubbing his hands together as though he had an imaginary cake of soap between them and was busily washing the Morse affair from his palms. “You see, I’ve told them I shall be obliged to increase their rent at New Year’s.”

“What do they pay you now?”

Mr. Chumley told her frankly. He wasn’t ashamed of what he took for the renting of that particular piece of property. In a business way, he was doing very well, and business was all that mattered with Mr. Chumley.

“But that’s better than *I* can get for the same sort of a cottage in this very vicinity,” exclaimed Mrs. Prentice.

“Ah! these agents!” groaned Mr. Chumley, shaking his head. “They never will do as well as they should for an owner. I found that out long ago. If I was a younger man, Mrs. Prentice, I would take hold of your property and get you twenty-five per cent. more out of it.”

“Perhaps,” commented the lady. “And you intend to raise the rent on these people?”

“I have done so. Three dollars. I can get it. Besides, a woman alone ain’t good pay,” said Chumley. “And they’re likely to fall behind any time in the rent. Most uncertain income – ”

“Is it true that Mrs. Morse writes for a living?”

“I don’t know what sort of a livin’ she makes. Foolish business. She’d better take in washing, or go out to day’s work – that’s what she’d better do,” snarled the old man. “This messin’ with pen, ink, an’ a typewriter an’ thinkin’ she can buy pork an’ pertaters on the proceeds – ”

“Perhaps she doesn’t care for pork and potatoes, my friend,” laughed the lady, eyeing Mr. Chumley whimsically.

But a flush had crept into the old man’s withered cheek again. He was on his hobby and he rode it hard.

“Poor folks ain’t no business to have finicky idees, or tastes,” he declared. “They gotter work. That’s what they was put in the world for – to work. There’s too many of ’em trying to keep their hands clean, an’ livin’ above their means. Mary Morse is a good, strong, hearty woman. She’d ought to do something useful with her hands instead of doing silly things with her mind.”

“So she writes silly things?”

“Stories! Not a word of truth in ’em, I vum! I read one of ’em once,” declared Mr. Chumley. “Widder Morse wants to ape these well-to-do folks that live ’tother end o’ Whiffle Street. Keeps her gal in high school when she’d ought to be in a store or a factory, earnin’ her keep. She’s big enough.”

“Do you think that’s a good way to bring up girls – letting them go to work so early in life?”

“Why not?” asked the old man, in wonder. “They kin work cheap and it helps trade. Too much schoolin’ is bad for gals. They don’t need it, anyway. And all the fal-lals and di-does they l’arn ’em in high school now doesn’t amount to a row of pins in practical life. No, ma’am!”

“But do these Morses have such a hard time getting along?” asked Mrs. Prentice, trying to bring the gossip old gentleman back to the main subject.

“They don’t meet their bills prompt,” snapped the landlord. “Now! here I was in the house to-night. I suggested that the gal pay the rent for December; it’ll be due in a day or two. And she didn’t have it. They’re often late with it. I have to come two or three times before I get it, some months. And I hear they owe the tradesmen a good deal.”

“They are really in need of sympathy and help, then?”

“How’s that?” demanded Mr. Chumley, with his cupped hand to his ear as though he could not believe his own hearing.

The lady repeated her remark.

“There you go! You’re another of them folks that waste their substance. I could see that by your keerless handlin’ of money,” croaked Mr. Chumley. “The Widder Morse don’t need help – she needs sense, I tell ye.”

“And do you know what you need, Mr. Chumley?” asked the lady, suddenly, and with some asperity.

“Heh?”

“You need charity! We all need it. And we’ve gossiped enough about our neighbors, I declare! Good night, Mr. Chumley,” she added, and turned off through the side street toward her own home, leaving the old man to wend his own way homeward, wagging his head and muttering discourteous comments upon “all fool women.”

Mrs. Prentice was a widow herself. But she had no mawkish sentimentality. She had lived in the world too many years for that. She was not given to charities of any kind. But the thought of Jess Morse and her widowed mother clung to her mind like a limpet to a rock – even after she had dismissed her maid that night and retired.

“Just think!” she muttered, with her head on the pillow. “If that purse had been really lost I might have made that young girl a lot of trouble – and her mother. And she is such a frank, courageous little thing!

“We *do* need more charity – the right kind. Somehow – yes – I *must* do something to help that girl.”

CHAPTER VI – IT ALL COMES OUT

Before morning old Jack Frost snapped his fingers and the whole world was encased in ice. The sidewalks were a glare, the trees, and bushes, to their tiniest twig, were as brittle as icicles, and a thin white blanket had been laid upon the lawns along Whiffle Street.

It was the first really cold snap of winter. Chet Belding came clumping down to breakfast that Saturday morning.

“Skating shoes!” exclaimed his sister, Laura. “What for, Sir Knight?”

“I bet a feller can skate in the street – on the sidewalk – almost anywhere this morning,” declared Chet, with enthusiasm.

“You don’t mean to try it?” cried Laura.

“I’ll eat my honorable grandmother’s hat if I don’t – ”

“Chetwood!”

The horrified ejaculation came from behind the coffee percolator. Mrs. Belding had been perusing her morning mail. Mr. Chetwood chuckled, but graduated it into a pronounced cough.

“Yes, ma’am!” said Chet, meekly.

“What *kind* of language is this that you bring to our table? Your grandmother certainly was honorable – ”

“That’s an imitation of the stilted expressions of the Japs and Chinks,” interrupted Chetwood. “Thought you’d like it. It’s formal, abounds in flowery expressions, and may not be hastened. Quotation from Old Dimple,” he added, sotto voce.

“Please leave your grandmother out of it,” said Mrs. Belding, severely. “And if you mean Professor Dimp, your teacher at Central High, do not call him ‘Old Dimple’ in my presence,” which showed that Mother Belding’s hearing was pretty acute.

“Anyhow,” said Chet, “I’m going to try the ice after breakfast. Going to get Lance and we’ll have some fun. Better get your skates, Laura.”

“No. I’m going to the store with father – if we don’t both tumble down and roll to the bottom of the hill at Market Street, like Jack and Jill,” laughed his sister.

“Teams can’t get over the asphalt this morning,” said her brother. “We can coast clear to the elbow, I bet you.”

He hurried through his breakfast and some time after Laura and her father started for the jewelry store, in which the girl had certain Saturday morning tasks to perform, the voices of Chet and his friends awoke the echoes of the street as they skated on the asphalt.

Whiffle Street was an easy slope toward the elbow, where Jess Morse and her mother lived. Although the keen wind blew pretty strongly right up the hill, when Laura and her father started for the store the boys were holding hands and in a line that swept the street from curb to curb, sailed gaily down the hill upon their skates.

“That’s fun!” exclaimed Laura, her cheeks rosy with the wind, and her eyes sparkling.

“It’s just like life,” said her father, “It’s easy going down hill; but see what a pull it is to get up again,” for Chet and his comrades had then begun the homeward skate.

Lance Darby, a fair-haired, rosy-cheeked lad, who was Chet’s particular chum, was ahead and he came, puffing, to a stop just before Laura.

“This is great – if it wasn’t for the ‘getting back again.’ Good-morning, Mr. Belding.”

“Why don’t you boys rig something to tow you up the hill?” asked Laura, laughing, and half hiding her face in her muff.

“Huh!” ejaculated her brother, coming up, too. “How’d we rig it, Sis?”

“Come on, Mother Wit!” laughed Lance. “You tell us.”

“Why – I declare, Chet’s got just the thing standing behind the door in his den,” cried Laura, her eyes twinkling.

“What?” cried Chet “You’re fooling us, Laura. My snowshoes – ”

“Not them,” laughed Laura, preparing to go on with her father.

“I know!” shouted Lance, slapping his chum suddenly on the back. He was as familiar with Chet’s room as was Chet himself.

“Out with it, then!” demanded Chet.

“That big kite of yours. Wind’s directly up the hill. We’ll get it and try the scheme. Oh, you Mother Wit!” shouted Lance, after Laura. “We’re going after the kite.”

And that suggestion of Laura’s was the beginning of Chet and Lance Darby’s “mile-a-minute iceboat” – but more of that wonderful invention later.

Laura was halted again before she reached Market Street, and her father went on without her, for it was now half-past eight. Jess Morse waved to her from a window, and in a moment came running out in a voluminous checked apron and a gay sweater-coat, hastily “shrugged” on.

“Where were you last night?” cried Laura. “We missed you dreadfully at the M. O. R. house.”

“I – I really couldn’t come,” said her chum, hesitating just a little, for it was hard not to be perfectly frank with Laura, who was always so open and confidential with *her*. “Mother is so busy – she worked half the night – ”

“Genius burns the midnight oil, eh?” laughed Laura.

“Yes, indeed. And now I’m about to make her toast and brew her tea, and she will take it, propped up in bed, and read over the work she did last night. Saturdays, when I am home, is mother’s ‘lazy day.’ She says she feels quite like a lady of leisure then.”

“But you should have come to the first big reception of the winter,” complained her chum.

“Couldn’t. But I heard that there was something very wonderful going to happen, just the same,” cried Jess.

“What do you mean?”

“About the prize.”

“My goodness me! Somebody is a telltale,” cried Laura, laughing. “We were not going to spread the news until Monday morning.”

Jess told her how the rumor of the prize had come to her ears.

“No use – it’s all out, and all over town, if Bobby Hargrew got hold of it.”

“But what’s Mrs. Mabel Kerrick going to give the two hundred dollars *for*?”

“Oh, Jess! it’s a great scheme, I believe – and it’s mine,” said Laura, proudly.

“But you don’t tell me *what* it is,” cried her chum, impatiently.

“It’s to be given for the best play written by a Central High girl, between now and the first of January. Any girl can compete – even the freshies. And then we’ll produce it, and get money for the M. O. R. building fund.”

“A play!” gasped Jess, her face flushing.

“That’s it. And the Lockwood girls are going to try for it – and so’s Nell Agnew. Will you, Jess? Just think of two hundred dollars!”

“I am thinking of it,” replied her chum. “Oh, Laura! I’m thinking of it all the time.”

She said it so earnestly that Laura stared at her in amazement.

“My dear child!” she cried. “Does two hundred dollars mean so much to you?”

“I – I can’t tell you how *hard* I want to win it,” gasped Jess.

“Well! I’m going to try for it, too,” laughed Laura, suddenly, seizing her friend’s arm and giving it an affectionate squeeze. “But I *do* hope, if I can’t win it, that you do!”

“Thank you, Laura!” replied her friend, gravely.

“And your mother’s a writer – you must have talent, too, for writing, Jess.”

“That doesn’t follow, I guess,” laughed Jess. “You know that Si Jones talks like a streak of greased lightning – so Chet says, anyway – but his son, Phil, is a deaf-mute. Talent for writing runs in families the same as wooden legs.”

“So you do not believe that even a little reflected glory bathes your path through life?” chuckled Laura.

“I am not sure that I would want to be a professional writer like mother,” sighed Jess, her mind dwelling on the trouble they were in. “There is a whole lot to it besides ‘glory.’”

“Well, if I can’t write the winning play, I hope you do, Jess,” repeated Laura, going on after her father.

Jess returned to her work indoors. From the window, after a little, she caught sight of a whole string of boys sliding up the hill of Whiffle Street on their skates, the big kite which Chet and Lance had raised supplying the motive power.

Chet beckoned her out to have a part in the fun; but much more serious matters filled Jess Morse’s mind. When her mother finally arose, and folded and sealed and addressed the packet containing her night’s work, Jess had to go out and mail it.

“I really believe that is a good story, Jess,” said her mother, who was sanguine of temperament. She had a childish faith in the success of every manuscript she sent out; and usually when her chickens “came home to roost” her spirits withstood the shock admirably.

“Now, don’t forget the list of things you were to get at Mr. Closewick’s,” added Mrs. Morse. Jess had kept her evening’s troubles strictly to herself. “I believe he sent in a bill, but you tell him how it is; we’ll have money in a day or two.”

“But, Mother, we owe other stores, too,” murmured Jess.

“I know it, child. But don’t remind me – ”

“And the rent will be due. Mr. Chumley was here last night – ”

“Not for his rent so soon?” cried the irresponsible lady.

“But he is going to raise our rent – three dollars more after January first.”

“Oh, how mean of him!” exclaimed Mrs. Morse.

“I don’t see how we are going to get it, Mother,” said Jess, worriedly.

“Well, that’s true. But we’ve got another month before we need to cross *that* bridge.”

That was Mrs. Morse’s way. Perhaps it was as well that she allowed such responsibilities to slip past her like water running off the feathers of a duck.

“And if Mr. Closewick shouldn’t want to – to trust us any longer, Mother?” suggested Jess. That was as near as she could get to telling the good lady what had really happened the night before.

“Why! that would be most mortifying. He won’t do it, though. But if he does, we’ll immediately begin trading elsewhere, I don’t really think Mr. Closewick always gives us good weight, at that!”

Jess could only sigh. It was always the way. Mrs. Morse saw things from a most surprising angle. She was just as honest – intentionally – as she could be, but the ethics of business dealing were not quite straight in her mind.

And something must be done this very day to put food in the larder. What little Jess had brought in from Mr. Vandergriff’s store would not last them over Sunday. And her mother seemed to think that everybody else would be just as sanguine of her getting a check as she was herself.

“I do wish you had been able to get steady work with the *Courier*,” spoke Jess, as she prepared to go out.

“That would have been nice,” admitted her mother. “And I am in a position to know a good deal of what goes on socially on the Hill. I am welcome in the homes of the very best people, for your father’s sake, Jess. He was a very fine man, indeed.”

“And for your own sake, too, Mamma!” cried Jess, who was really, after all, very proud of her mother’s talent.

“It would have been nice,” repeated Mrs. Morse. “And certainly the *Courier* is not covering the Hill as well as might be. I pointed that out to Mr. Prentice; but he is limited in expenditures, I suppose, the paper being a new venture.”

It was on the tip of the girl’s tongue to tell her mother of the visit of Mr. Prentice’s sister-in-law the evening before. But why disturb her mother’s mind with all that trouble? So she said nothing, kissed her fondly, and sallied forth to beard in their lairs “the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker.” And, truly, there were few girls in Centerport that day with greater lions in their way than those in the path of Jess Morse.

CHAPTER VII – THE HAND HELD OUT

When Jess came out of the house there was a group of her schoolmates – and not all of them boys – at the foot of the Whiffle Street hill. Being towed by Chet's big kite had become a game that all hands wanted to try. But the sun was getting warmer and the icy street would soon be slushy and the skates would cut through.

"I've had enough," said Bobby Hargrew, removing her skates when she spied Jess. "The policeman has warned us once, and he'll be mad next time he comes around if we're here still."

"Better get your skates, Jess, and try it just once," urged Chet Belding, who was very partial to his sister's closet chum.

"I can't, Chet," replied Jess. "I must do my Saturday's marketing."

"Hullo! here's Short and Long!" cried Bobby, as a very short boy with very brisk legs came sliding down the hill with a big bundle under his arm.

Billy Long was an industrious youngster who only allowed himself leisure to keep up in athletics after school hours, because he liked to earn something toward his family's support.

"Stop and try a ride, Billy," urged Lance Darby, holding the cord of the tugging kite.

"Can't. Going on an errand."

"Hey, Billy! how's your dyspepsia?" demanded another of the boys.

Billy grinned. Bobby exclaimed:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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