

# London Night's Entertainment

By Margery Sharp

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IN TWO PARTS—PART ONE

As the girls from the dress shop ran downstairs for the last time their high heels rattled unnaturally on bare wood; for the carpets had been taken up only that morning.

To Miss Croy, following more slowly behind, the sound seemed painfully appropriate: heel-taps, she thought, drum-taps, muffled drums at a military funeral; and this was the funeral of the Maison Masque, a war-time casualty, because no one now wanted the exclusive designs, the personal models, which had brought so much fame and prosperity to the little salon in Bond Street. The Maison Masque was dead.

"But I didn't go bankrupt," thought Miss Croy grimly; Maison Masque had at least gone down—to change the metaphor from the military to the naval—with flying colors. "The fashionable colors this year, to be flown while going down, will be acajou and Sahara . . ."

From the hall below came the voice of Miss Ponter, the kind and efficient head of the work-room.

"Have we forgotten anything, Madame?"

"No," called back Miss Croy. "I'm coming."

What she had almost forgotten herself was that she was taking the entire staff out for a farewell supper. She would have given much to avoid it, but she never shirked her obligations, and this last melancholy feast was one of them. Miss Croy continued slowly downstairs. She had rented the upper part of the house only; the ground floor belonged to Hugh Brocard, photographer; and now, as she joined the group of girls in the hall she saw that he too was flitting. On his elegant cream door was pinned a large notice: "CLOSED." It wasn't even printed, it was scrawled in a big sprawling hand. It looked almost light-hearted. But then Hugh Brocard was quite young.

"So Mr. Brocard's going too!" exclaimed Miss Ponter.

"Yes," said Miss Croy. "The house will be empty."

The little girl who matched patterns ran to open the door. But some one was there before her, a small, wiry, elderly body whom Miss Croy recognized as the Scotch char-woman. She lived in the basement with two grandchildren, and had the whole house spotless before nine each morning. Miss Croy felt in her bag for a couple of pound notes.

"Good bye, Mrs. Bridle, and thank you."

"Good bye, my leddy, and thank you."

So that was that, and it was all over, and Miss Croy stepped briskly out and did not look behind.

At the big table in the Coronation Restaurant the rules of precedence were strictly observed as at any Ambassadorial banquet: on Madame's right sat Miss Ponter, on her left Miss Dawlish, head of the show-room; the foot was taken by Mrs. James, the cutter, and in between were ranged seven girls and the tiny matcher. "Thank heaven I haven't to worry about them," thought Miss Croy, observing the cheerful faces; for the girls were going all together into the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, Miss Ponter intended to train as a nurse, the beautiful and languid Miss Dawlish was simply getting married, and Mrs. James had been snapped up by a mass-producing dress factory. Even the matcher had found herself in demand; she was going to be a Mother's Help to a very nice lady with four children . . .

"I am the only one unprovided for," thought Miss Croy, lending a polite ear to the glories of the Dawlish troupeau. The catalogue of nightgowns and panties flowed steadily on, the whole table was genuinely and professionally interested, and Miss Croy was able to spare a moment for the dispassionate consideration of her own prospects.

They struck her as poor. She was 45, and looked 10 years younger, but with a heart that fluttered and paused at any physical exertion. The incessant work that had gone to build up her business had been possible only on certain conditions: a rest every afternoon, for example, frequent taxis, a constant husbanding of strength; the obvious forms of war work in munition factory, or hospital, or government office, were simply out of the question.

She was an excellent woman of business and a brilliant designer, but these now seemed to be peace-time assets only. She was essentially an executive, and the thronging new organizations wanted not executives of 45, but husky young 20-year-olds ready to run about and obey orders . . .

"You look tired, Madame," said kind Miss Ponter.

"I am, a little," admitted Miss Croy. She would have given much to be able to order champagne, but the work-room girls were too young. "When do you start your training?" she asked. "On Monday? You will find it a great change."

"I expect I shall," agreed Miss Ponter cheerfully. "But we've got to do our bit. And I'm looking forward to it: there'll be lots of other girls starting, and I've always been one to make friends."

"Whereas I," thought Miss Croy, "have not." Acquaintances, yes—hundreds of them: in business, in the theater, among the gay elegant party-givers who wore her designs and relied on her taste; but for friendship she had always been too fastidious, too aloof, and above all too busy. Certainly too busy for love. The building up, and then successful running, of Maison Masque had fully occupied her. Maison Masque had been her lover and her friend and her family and her life.

"I am widowed," thought Miss Croy, "but left comfortably off." It was true; she had a modest income, the fruit of the last 10 years' soaring profits. She wouldn't starve. But Maison Masque was dead, and she felt as though the table should have been spread with funereal baked meats.

It was spread, in actuality, with the empty dishes of 12 peach melbas, now giving place to 12 cups of coffee. Miss Ponter caught the eyes of Miss Dawlish and Mrs. James, and suddenly rapped on the table with her spoon. "Madame, and ladies—" began Miss Ponter.

"(She's going to make a speech. This is dreadful!" thought Miss Croy.) "Before we all part—before we all

tread our new and different paths—"

"(She's enjoying it!)"

"I'm sure you'd all wish me to say how much we regret leaving Madame, and how we've all appreciated the privilege of working for her. It's dreadful to see a house like Maison Masque go under."

"But a war's a war, and when we've won it I hope we may all some day be working for her again. In the meantime, I'll just say, Thank you, Madame, and au revoir, and good luck to everybody."

Eleven coffee-spoons hammered as one. "Speech!" cried Mrs. James. "Speech!" echoed the matcher—greatly



"Please get inside at once," said the warden sharply, "don't you know there's a raid on?"

daring. They all cried out for a speech. Miss Croy's heart fluttered; then she drew a deep breath and held up her thin, capable, unemployable hand.

"All I have to say is, thank you very much. And if you work in your new jobs as you've worked for me, you will do very well, indeed. Good luck!"

It was Miss Dawlish who said it—the languid, beautiful Miss Dawlish who had somehow found in the Bond Street salon her spiritual home.

"Maison Masque!" said Miss Dawlish.

Eleven coffee cups were raised and emptied. That was the very end. Miss Croy signalled quickly for the bill. It was absurdly small—no cocktails, no wine. There was no need to wait for change. Then she turned to Miss Ponter.

"Miss Ponter, will you see that the young ones go home at once, before dark? You and Miss Dawlish and Mrs. James, of course, do as you please, but the young ones—"

"I'll see they catch their busses," said Miss Ponter, capably. "And I hope you'll go straight home yourself, Madame, and get a good night's rest."

"Thank you, said Miss Croy, "I shall." But she wasn't going home yet. She was going back to the dead, the empty shell of Maison Masque in Bond Street.

The hall was very dark. She felt her way to the lift and propelled herself up to the first floor. She dared not risk the stairs, and yet, when her life was over, how absurd, how fantastic, to take these precautions. She was just going to take a last look round; there was still a divan in the gutted show-room, she would just sit down on it a few minutes, and mourn a little, watch a little, before she went home.

"After all, I have only myself to worry about," thought Miss Croy. "I have no responsibilities." She left the elevator and put her key in the show-room door. The next instant she had the shock of her life.

There was someone there already. There were two people, a boy in uniform and a girl in tumbled hair. They were on the divan. As she pushed open the door they started up. But they were not alarmed, not guilty, they were simply angry with her.

"Go away!" said the girl sharply. Miss Croy took a firm hold on herself.

"These are still my premises," she said. "Who are you?"

"I worked for you last year," said the girl. "You sacked me for thieving. But I don't steal any more now. And this is my boy, and he has to go back tomorrow, and we had nowhere to be."

All at once Miss Croy remembered her: A red-haired baggage of con-

siderable charm but no morals. She stiffened.

"How did you get in?"

"I had a key made from yours." She threw it, and it tinkled at Miss Croy's feet. "I shan't need it now he's going. He's going to Palestine! Can't you leave us be?"

Automatically Miss Croy stooped, picked up the key, and left them. She felt outraged. She felt that the Maison Masque had been outraged. And she felt suddenly too tired to do anything about it. There had been a bitter passion in the girl's voice that was frightening; she had never been able to deal with emotion. So she stood there irresolute, shut out, at a loss; and at that moment the sirens wailed over London in warning of a raid.

"I must get home," thought Miss Croy.

The sky was full of searchlights. She halted a moment on the pavement, watching, and instinctively began to design an evening cloak—a rather exaggerated, first-night affair—of black cloth slashed with silver. Then she smiled wryly; not cloaks; but trousers, were now the midnight mode.

Something small and swift slipped out of the darkness and rubbed against her foot. It was a kitten, a thin gray alley-kitten, as light when she picked it up, as a dead leaf. Miss Croy rather liked cats, admiring their elegance and self-sufficiency; she stroked the creature gently from ears to tail, and felt its bones under her fingers. The kitten purred loudly. It sounded rather like a Spitfire. "That would be a good name for you," said Miss Croy rashly; for she did not yet know that to give an animal a name is the first step towards adopting it. In fact, she intended to put Spitfire down at once, but at that moment the larger and more solid shape of a Warden diverted her attention.

"Please get inside at once," said the Warden sharply. "Don't you know there's a raid on?"

Miss Croy stiffened. She was used to giving, not taking orders.

"Thank you," she said. "I do know. And I am just going to take a taxi home."

"Where to?"

"Hampstead."

"You can't start for Hampstead now. Please go to the shelter at the end of the street."

The giving of orders had at least taught Miss Croy a respect for authority, and she at once moved in the required direction. But the Warden stopped her again.

"Can't take the cat, Madam. No animals allowed in public shelters."

It was one order too many. Miss Croy had originally had every inten-

tion of putting the kitten down and leaving it to take its chance. Now she tucked it more snugly within her arm and turned back to the door.

"I may take it, I suppose, into my own premises?"

"You may," snapped the Warden. "I should advise the basement. Be quick, please."

He was naturally impatient; he had spied another loiterer at the end of the street; but he waited to see her put the key in the lock, and open the door, and shut it behind her.

She could not go upstairs again, she could not stand in the empty hall. So she took the Warden's advice and went downstairs and knocked on the basement door.

"Come right in, sir!" called Mrs. Bridle.

(Continued Next Week)

## ASK MORE CASH FOR STATE AGED

The Montana board of public welfare asked all counties to increase old age assistance payments in accordance with 1941 session laws and promised to use "its best efforts" to see that increases are available as soon as possible.

Chairman O. A. Borgeson of Dillon and Board Members D. S. McCorkle of Conrad, Davis Graham of Missoula, Harry L. Burns of Chinook and Mrs. Belle Nye of Billings issued a statement pointing out an appropriation increase of \$260,000 made by the 1941 session of the legislature for increased old age pension payments.

The statement added: "These increases (in old age pensions) cannot lawfully be made by the board. . . . Old age assistance must be based on need. . . . All county welfare departments . . . have been requested to review old age assistance grants in accordance with the need of the individual. . . ."

"Since the federal government contributes 50 percent of the amount paid in old age assistance, any increase must be approved by the social security board. Further, the present test case pending in the Montana supreme court may affect the amount available to the various counties. For these reasons the board cannot at this time determine or fix the amount of increase. . . . The board believes that present grants are too low . . . and the allowances must be increased."

## MONTANA MAKES CASH ON BONDS

HELENA.—The Montana land board decided to sell one issue of government bonds and buy another, a transaction which would net the state a \$310,000 profit and increase the income from a \$3,000,000 investment by \$10,438 annually.

Commissioner J. W. Walker said the issue which will be sold is a nontaxable issue, while the issue to be bought is taxable, resulting in considerable

saving in market price. The state will not be required to pay taxes on the new issue.

The board, at its monthly meeting, also authorized Rutledge Parker, state forester at Missoula, to advertise for sale the timber on 1,240 acres of the Swan river state forest in western Montana.

The Big West Refining Co. was awarded oil and gas rights on 1,700 acres of state land in Toole county on a bid of \$2 an acre, plus royalties.

## Butte Stockyards Highly Praised

The Butte public stockyards, which was opened recently has one of the finest and most modern plants in the United States. That is the opinion of leaders in the livestock industry of the nation, who have inspected the \$200,000 plant south of the city.

"Butte has one of the finest stockyards in the nation today," was the opinion expressed by Tom Fife of Sioux City, Ia., manager of the Producers Commission association.

MILES CITY.—Fire of undetermined origin caused loss estimated at from \$45,000 to \$50,000 in the business district here.

Sea otters had not been seen off Southern California for 21 years when a herd of 100 was reported off Monterey in 1938.

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