

ELEANOR H. PORTER

MISS BILLY'S
DECISION

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About this eBook

MISS BILLY'S DECISION

Eleanor H. Porter

Eleanor H. Porter, 1913

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CHAPTER I.

CALDERWELL DOES SOME TALKING

Calderwell had met Mr. M. J. Arkwright in London through a common friend; since then they had tramped half over Europe together in a comradeship that was as delightful as it was unusual. As Calderwell put it in a letter to his sister, Belle:

„We smoke the same cigar and drink the same tea (he's just as much of an old woman on that subject as I am!), and we agree beautifully on all necessary points of living, from tipping to late sleeping in the morning; while as for politics and religion – we disagree in those just enough to lend spice to an otherwise tame existence.“

Farther along in this same letter Calderwell touched upon his new friend again.

„I admit, however, I would like to know his name. To find out what that mysterious ‚M. J.‘ stands for has got to be pretty nearly an obsession with me. I am about ready to pick his pocket or rifle his trunk in search of some lurking ‚Martin‘ or ‚John‘ that will set me at peace. As it is, I confess that I have ogled his incoming mail and his outgoing baggage shamelessly, only to be slapped in the face always and everlastingly by that bland ‚M. J.‘ I've got my revenge, now, though. To myself I call him ‚Mary Jane‘ – and his broad-shouldered, brown-bearded six feet of muscular manhood would so like to be called ‚Mary Jane‘! By the way, Belle, if you ever hear of murder and sudden death in my direction, better set the sleuths on the trail of Arkwright. Six to one you'll find I called him ‚Mary Jane‘ to his face!“

Calderwell was thinking of that letter now, as he sat at a small table in a Paris café. Opposite him was the six feet of muscular manhood, broad shoulders, pointed brown beard, and all – and he had just addressed it, inadvertently, as „Mary Jane.“

During the brief, sickening moment of silence after the name had left his lips, Calderwell was conscious of a whimsical realization of the lights, music, and laughter all about him.

„Well, I chose as safe a place as I could!“ he was thinking. Then Arkwright spoke.

„How long since you've been in correspondence with members of my family?“

„Eh?“

Arkwright laughed grimly.

„Perhaps you thought of it yourself, then – I'll admit you're capable of it,“ he nodded, reaching for a cigar. „But it so happens you hit upon my family's favorite name for me.“

„Mary Jane! You mean they actually call you that?“

„Yes,“ bowed the big fellow, calmly, as he struck a light. „Appropriate! – don't you think?“

Calderwell did not answer. He thought he could not.

„Well, silence gives consent, they say,“ laughed the other. „Anyhow, you must have had some reason for calling me that.“

„Arkwright, what does ‚M. J.‘ stand for?“ demanded Calderwell.

„Oh, is that it?“ smiled the man opposite. „Well, I’ll own those initials have been something of a puzzle to people. One man declares they’re ‚Merely Jokes‘; but another, not so friendly, says they stand for ‚Mostly Jealousy‘ of more fortunate chaps who have real names for a handle. My small brothers and sisters, discovering, with the usual perspicacity of one’s family on such matters, that I never signed, or called myself anything but ‚M. J.,‘ dubbed me ‚Mary Jane.‘ And there you have it.“

„Mary Jane! You!“

Arkwright smiled oddly.

„Oh, well, what’s the difference? Would you deprive them of their innocent amusement? And they do so love that ‚Mary Jane!‘ Besides, what’s in a name, anyway?“ he went on, eyeing the glowing tip of the cigar between his fingers. „A rose by any other name – you’ve heard that, probably. Names don’t always signify, my dear fellow. For instance, I know a ‚Billy – but he’s a girl.“

Calderwell gave a sudden start.

„You don’t mean Billy – Neilson?“

The other turned sharply.

„Do you know Billy Neilson?“

Calderwell gave his friend a glance from scornful eyes.

„Do I know Billy Neilson?“ he cried. „Does a fellow usually know the girl he’s proposed to regularly once in three months? Oh, I know I’m telling tales out of school, of course,“ he went on, in response to the look that had come into the brown eyes opposite. „But what’s the use? Everybody knows it – that knows us. Billy herself got so she took it as a matter of course – and refused as a matter of course, too; just as she would refuse a serving of apple pie at dinner, if she hadn’t wanted it.“

„Apple pie!“ scouted Arkwright.

Calderwell shrugged his shoulders.

„My dear fellow, you don’t seem to realize it, but for the last six months you have been assisting at the obsequies of a dead romance.“

„Indeed! And is it – buried, yet?“

„Oh, no,“ sighed Calderwell, cheerfully. „I shall go back one of these days, I’ll warrant, and begin the same old game again; though I will acknowledge that the last refusal was so very decided that it’s been a year, almost, since I received it. I think I was really convinced, for a while, that – that she didn’t want that apple pie,“ he finished with a whimsical lightness that did not quite coincide with the stern lines that had come to his mouth.

For a moment there was silence, then Calderwell spoke again.

„Where did you know – Miss Billy?“

„Oh, I don’t know her at all. I know of her – through Aunt Hannah.“

Calderwell sat suddenly erect.

„Aunt Hannah! Is she your aunt, too? Jove! This is a little old world, after all; isn’t it?“

„She isn't my aunt. She's my mother's third cousin. None of us have seen her for years, but she writes to mother occasionally; and, of course, for some time now, her letters have been running over full of Billy. She lives with her, I believe; doesn't she?“

„She does,“ rejoined Calderwell, with an unexpected chuckle. „I wonder if you know how she happened to live with her, at first.“

„Why, no, I reckon not. What do you mean?“

Calderwell chuckled again.

„Well, I'll tell you. You, being a ‚Mary Jane,‘ ought to appreciate it. You see, Billy was named for one William Henshaw, her father's chum, who promptly forgot all about her. At eighteen, Billy, being left quite alone in the world, wrote to ‚Uncle William‘ and asked to come and live with him.“

„Well?“

„But it wasn't well. William was a forty-year-old widower who lived with two younger brothers, an old butler, and a Chinese cook in one of those funny old Beacon Street houses in Boston. ‚The Strata,‘ Bertram called it. Bright boy – Bertram!“

„The Strata!“

„Yes. I wish you could see that house, Arkwright. It's a regular layer cake. Cyril – he's the second brother; must be thirty-four or five now – lives on the top floor in a rugless, curtainless, music-mad existence – just a plain crank. Below him comes William. William collects things – everything from tenpenny nails to teapots, I should say, and they're all there in his rooms. Farther down somewhere comes Bertram. He's the Bertram Henshaw, you understand; the artist.“

„Not the ‚Face-of-a-Girl‘ Henshaw?“

„The same; only of course four years ago he wasn't quite so well known as he is now. Well, to resume and go on. It was into this house, this masculine paradise ruled over by Pete and Dong Ling in the kitchen, that Billy's naïve request for a home came.“

„Great Scott!“ breathed Arkwright, appreciatively.

„Yes. Well, the letter was signed ‚Billy.‘ They took her for a boy, naturally, and after something of a struggle they agreed to let ‚him‘ come. For his particular delectation they fixed up a room next to Bertram with guns and fishing rods, and such ladylike specialties; and William went to the station to meet the boy.“

„With never a suspicion?“

„With never a suspicion.“

„Gorry!“

„Well, ‚he‘ came, and ‚she‘ conquered. I guess things were lively for a while, though. Oh, there was a kitten, too, I believe, ‚Spunk,‘ who added to the gayety of nations.“

„But what did the Henshaws do?“

„Well, I wasn't there, of course; but Bertram says they spun around like tops gone mad for a time, but finally quieted down enough to summon a married sister for immediate propriety, and to establish Aunt Hannah for permanency the next day.“

„So that's how it happened! Well, by George!“ cried Arkwright.

„Yes,“ nodded the other. „So you see there are untold possibilities just in a name. Remember that. Just suppose you, as Mary Jane, should beg a home in a feminine household – say in Miss Billy's, for instance!“

„I'd like to,“ retorted Arkwright, with sudden warmth.

Calderwell stared a little.

The other laughed shamefacedly.

„Oh, it's only that I happen to have a devouring curiosity to meet that special young lady. I sing her songs (you know she's written some dandies!), I've heard a lot about her, and I've seen her picture.“ (He did not add that he had also purloined that same picture from his mother's bureau – the picture being a gift from Aunt Hannah.) „So you see I would, indeed, like to occupy a corner in the fair Miss Billy's household. I could write to Aunt Hannah and beg a home with her, you know; eh?“

„Of course! Why don't you – 'Mary Jane'?“ laughed Calderwell. „Billy'd take you all right. She's had a little Miss Hawthorn, a music teacher, there for months. She's always doing stunts of that sort. Belle writes me that she's had a dozen forlornites there all this last summer, two or three at a time – tired widows, lonesome old maids, and crippled kids – just to give them a royal good time. So you see she'd take you, without a doubt. Jove! what a pair you'd make: Miss Billy and Mr. Mary Jane! You'd drive the suffragettes into convulsion fits – just by the sound of you!“

Arkwright laughed quietly; then he frowned.

„But how about it?“ he asked. „I thought she was keeping house with Aunt Hannah. Didn't she stay at all with the Henshaws?“

„Oh, yes, a few months. I never knew just why she did leave, but I fancied, from something Billy herself said once, that she discovered she was creating rather too much of an upheaval in the Strata. So she took herself off. She went to school, and travelled considerably. She was over here when I met her first. After that she was with us all one summer on the yacht. A couple of years ago, or so, she went back to Boston, bought a house and settled down with Aunt Hannah.“

„And she's not married – or even engaged?“

„Wasn't the last I heard. I haven't seen her since December, and I've heard from her only indirectly. She corresponds with my sister, and so do I – intermittently. I heard a month ago from Belle, and she had a letter from Billy in August. But I heard nothing of any engagement.“

„How about the Henshaws? I should think there might be a chance there for a romance – a charming girl, and three unattached men.“

Calderwell gave a slow shake of the head.

„I don't think so. William is – let me see – nearly forty-five, I guess, by this time; and he isn't a marrying man. He buried his heart with his wife and baby years ago. Cyril, according to Bertram, 'hates women and all other confusion,' so that ought to let him out. As for Bertram himself – Bertram is 'only Bertram.' He's always been that. Bertram loves girls – to paint; but I can't imagine him making serious love to any one. It would always be the tilt of a chin or the turn of a cheek that he was admiring – to paint. No, there's no chance for a romance there, I'll warrant.“

„But there's – yourself.“

Calderwell's eyebrows rose the fraction of an inch.

„Oh, of course. I presume January or February will find me back there,“ he admitted with a sigh and a shrug. Then, a little bitterly, he added: „No, Arkwright. I shall keep away if I can. I know there's no chance for me – now.“

„Then you'll leave me a clear field?“ bantered the other.

„Of course – 'Mary Jane,“ retorted Calderwell, with equal lightness.

„Thank you.“

„Oh, you needn't,“ laughed Calderwell. „My giving you the right of way doesn't insure you a thoroughfare for yourself – there are others, you know. Billy Neilson has had sighing swains about her, I imagine, since she could walk and talk. She is a wonderfully fascinating little bit of femininity, and she has a heart of pure gold. All is, I envy the man who wins it – for the man who wins that, wins her.“

There was no answer. Arkwright sat with his eyes on the moving throng outside the window near them. Perhaps he had not heard. At all events, when he spoke some time later, it was of a matter far removed from Miss Billy Neilson, or the way to her heart. Nor was the young lady mentioned between them again that day.

Long hours later, just before parting for the night, Arkwright said:

„Calderwell, I'm sorry, but I believe, after all, I can't take that trip to the lakes with you. I – I'm going home next week.“

„Home! Hang it, Arkwright! I'd counted on you. Isn't this rather sudden?“

„Yes, and no. I'll own I've been drifting about with you contentedly enough for the last six months to make you think mountain-climbing and boat-paddling were the end and aim of my existence. But they aren't, you know, really.“

„Nonsense! At heart you're as much of a vagabond as I am; and you know it.“

„Perhaps. But unfortunately I don't happen to carry your pocketbook.“

„You may, if you like. I'll hand it over any time,“ grinned Calderwell.

„Thanks. You know well enough what I mean,“ shrugged the other.

There was a moment's silence; then Calderwell queried:

„Arkwright, how old are you?“

„Twenty-four.“

„Good! Then you're merely travelling to supplement your education, see?“

„Oh, yes, I see. But something besides my education has got to be supplemented now, I reckon.“

„What are you going to do?“

There was an almost imperceptible hesitation; then, a little shortly, came the answer:

„Hit the trail for Grand Opera, and bring up, probably – in vaudeville.“

Calderwell smiled appreciatively.

„You can sing like the devil,“ he admitted.

„Thanks,“ returned his friend, with uplifted eyebrows. „Do you mind calling it ‚an angel‘ – just for this occasion?“

„Oh, the matinée-girls will do that fast enough. But, I say, Arkwright, what are you going to do with those initials then?“

„Let 'em alone.“

„Oh, no, you won't. And you won't be 'Mary Jane,' either. Imagine a Mary Jane in Grand Opera! I know what you'll be. You'll be 'Señor Martini Johnini Arkwrightino'! By the way, you didn't say what that 'M. J.' really did stand for," hinted Calderwell, shamelessly.

„'Merely Jokes' – in your estimation, evidently," shrugged the other. „But my going isn't a joke, Calderwell. I'm really going. And I'm going to work.“

„But – how shall you manage?“

„Time will tell.“

Calderwell frowned and stirred restlessly in his chair.

„But, honestly, now, to – to follow that trail of yours will take money. And – er –“ a faint red stole to his forehead – “don't they have – er – patrons for these young and budding geniuses? Why can't I have a hand in this trail, too – or maybe you'd call it a foot, eh? I'd be no end glad to, Arkwright.“

„Thanks, old man.“ The red was duplicated this time above the brown silky beard. „That was mighty kind of you, and I appreciate it; but it won't be necessary. A generous, but perhaps misguided bachelor uncle left me a few thousands a year or so ago; and I'm going to put them all down my throat – or rather, into it – before I give up.“

„Where you going to study? New York?“

Again there was an almost imperceptible hesitation before the answer came.

„I'm not quite prepared to say.“

„Why not try it here?“

Arkwright shook his head.

„I did plan to, when I came over but I've changed my mind. I believe I'd rather work while longer in America.“

„Hm-m," murmured Calderwell.

There was a brief silence, followed by other questions and other answers; after which the friends said good night.

In his own room, as he was dropping off to sleep, Calderwell muttered drowsily:

„By George! I haven't found out yet what that blamed 'M. J.' stands for!“

CHAPTER II.

AUNT HANNAH GETS A LETTER

In the cozy living-room at Hillside, Billy Neilson's pretty home on Corey Hill, Billy herself sat writing at the desk. Her pen had just traced the date, „October twenty-fifth,“ when Mrs. Stetson entered with a letter in her hand.

„Writing, my dear? Then don't let me disturb you.“ She turned as if to go.

Billy dropped her pen, sprang to her feet, flew to the little woman's side and whirled her half across the room.

„There!“ she exclaimed, as she plumped the breathless and scandalized Aunt Hannah into the biggest easy chair. „I feel better. I just had to let off steam some way. It's so lovely you came in just when you did!“

„Indeed! I – I'm not so sure of that,“ stammered the lady, dropping the letter into her lap, and patting with agitated fingers her cap, her curls, the two shawls about her shoulders, and the lace at her throat. „My grief and conscience, Billy! Wors't you ever grow up?“

„Hope not,“ purred Billy cheerfully, dropping herself on to a low hassock at Aunt Hannah's feet.

„But, my dear, you – you're engaged!“

Billy bubbled into a chuckling laugh.

„As if I didn't know that, when I've just written a dozen notes to announce it! And, oh, Aunt Hannah, such a time as I've had, telling what a dear Bertram is, and how I love, love, love him, and what beautiful eyes he has, and such a nose, and –“

„Billy!“ Aunt Hannah was sitting erect in pale horror.

„Eh?“ Billy's eyes were roguish.

„You didn't write that in those notes!“

„Write it? Oh, no! That's only what I wanted to write,“ chuckled Billy. „What I really did write was as staid and proper as – here, let me show you,“ she broke off, springing to her feet and running over to her desk. „There! this is about what I wrote to them all,“ she finished, whipping a note out of one of the unsealed envelopes on the desk and spreading it open before Aunt Hannah's suspicious eyes.

„Hm-m; that is very good – for you,“ admitted the lady.

„Well, I like that! – after all my stern self-control and self-sacrifice to keep out all those things I wanted to write,“ bridled Billy. „Besides, they'd have been ever so much more interesting reading than these will be,“ she pouted, as she took the note from her companion's hand.

„I don't doubt it,“ observed Aunt Hannah, dryly.