GOOD REFERENCES

"But, please—*please*, let me explain about the references."

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CHAPTER I

Mary Decides

There was only one man in the office of the Brain Workers' Exchange and he was an obscurity who "kept" the books in the farthest corner of the room. Girls of various ages and women of all ages crowded him remorselessly out of the picture, so that when it was possible to obtain even a glimpse of him he served merely as a

memorandum of the fact that there are, after all, two sexes. A few of the girls and women sat at desks; they were the working staff of the Exchange. One of them was also the owner and manager.

Outside a railing that divided the room there were a few chairs, very few, because it was not the policy of the Exchange to maintain a waiting-room for clients. It was a quiet and brisk clearing house, not a loitering place nor a shop-window for the display of people who had brains to sell by the week or the month. The clients came and went rather rapidly; they were not encouraged to linger. Sometimes they were sent for, and after those occasions they usually disappeared from the "active-list" and became inconsequential

incidents in the history of the Exchange. The Exchange had pride in the fact that it made quick turnovers of its stock; nothing remained very long on the shelves. And in times such as these there were no bargain sales in brains.

Mary Wayne paused for a second on the threshold as her eyes swiftly reviewed the details of the picture; then she closed the door gently behind her, conscious of a distinct feeling of encouragement. She had been apprehensive; she had faced an expected sense of humiliation. There had been in her mind an idea that she was about to become one of a clamorous crowd. But things were very much otherwise in the Brain Workers' Exchange—gratefully so.

She walked over to a desk, where a small brass sign said "Registry," sensing that this must be her first port of call. A young woman who sat at the desk glanced up, saw a stranger, reached for a form-card that lay on top of a neatly stacked pile and dipped a pen.

"Name, please," she said.

"Mary Wayne."

"Address?"

The address was given; it was that of a boarding-house in the Eighties, but Mary Wayne hoped that it would not be so identified in the mind of the recording angel, if, indeed, she should prove to be such.

"Married?"

"Oh, no," hastily. It seemed an absurd question, but the answer went down in a place left blank by the printer.

"Age?"

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"Twenty-two."

"Occupation?"

"Stenographer." The answer had a faint note of defiance.

"Expert? We handle only experts, you know."

"Expert," said Mary Wayne.

There were other questions. Had she a knowledge of office management? No. Of bookkeeping? No. Of foreign languages? She knew French; a little Spanish. Did she understand filing systems? She thought so. Education? There had been two years in college; necessity compelled her to give up the remainder.

The woman behind the desk surveyed her from hat to shoes in a rapid, impersonal glance, then wrote something in another blank space. Mary wildly yearned to know what it was, but checked the impulse to lean forward and see.

"Now, your references, please."

"I have no references."

There was a sudden chill in the manner of the recording angel. She pushed the form-card away from her, so that it teetered perilously on the edge of the desk. If it passed the brink there was nothing to save it from the waste-basket below.

"All registrants must furnish references. Perhaps you did not observe the sign on the wall."

Mary had not seen it, but she now looked at it, apologetically.

"I didn't know," she said. "I'm sorry. But I can explain very easily."

"We never deviate from our rule, Miss Wayne. We

have our reputation to sustain. References are absolutely essential."

"But don't you see——"

"It would only waste your time and mine. We recommend no person for employment unless she can furnish at least two references. We even require employers to furnish them, unless they are known to us."

The recording angel was no longer angelic. She was polite, perhaps, yet peremptory. With a little gesture of finality, she tipped the card into the waste-basket. Mary caught her breath, almost desperately. References! Oh, she had heard that word before. A dozen times it had risen to mock her, like a grinning specter.

If asked to spell it, she felt that she would write it thus:

"D-o-o-m."

"But, please—*please*, let me explain about the references."

"Sorry. It would be quite useless."

"I can assure you I'm absolutely—all right," pleaded Mary. "I'm really a good stenographer—an expert. I'm honest, and——"

She paused in the humiliation of having to say things that ought to be obvious to anybody.

But the woman simply shook her head.

"You must listen; oh, surely you will. I suppose I should have explained in the beginning, but it didn't seem necessary. I didn't understand. This is the first time I was ever in—in—an intelligence

office."

The recording angel stiffened in her uncompromising

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desk-chair, and Mary instantly knew she had given unpardonable offense.

"This is *not* an intelligence office, Miss Wayne. An intelligence office is a place for cooks, chambermaids, waitresses, laundresses, chauffeurs, gardeners, and stable-hands. This is an exchange which deals in brains only, plus experience and good character. It is not even an employment agency. Good day, Miss Wayne."

Mary recoiled from the desk, numbed. She had sealed her own fate in two blundering words. She had not meant to say "intelligence office"; it slipped out in an evil moment of inadvertence. It was a forgotten phrase of childhood, come down from the days when her mother employed "help," and now flowing from the tip of her tongue in order to accomplish complete and unmerited disaster.

Dismay and irresolution held her motionless for a moment, outside the inexorable railing that divided the room. It had not yet occurred to her to walk out of the office of the Brain Workers' Exchange; she was thralled in the inertia of an overwhelming despair.

"Good morning, Miss Norcross. Thank you for being prompt."

A woman who sat at another desk was speaking, in crisp, satisfying tones. Mary turned mechanically to observe the person to whom the words were addressed. She saw a girl apparently of her own age crossing the floor with an eager, nervous step; a girl dressed with a certain plain severity that unmistakably helped to give her an air of confidence. Mary was easily as well dressed herself; perhaps more expensively. Yet she

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felt herself suddenly lacking in every essential quality embodied in the person who had been addressed as "Miss Norcross."

"We have an excellent opportunity for you," the woman at the desk was saying. "That is why I sent an urgent message. A lady wishes a competent, well-bred young woman to perform secretarial work. It is of a social character. She will pay a good salary to the right person. We are giving you the first opportunity because of the unusually good references you possess."

There it was again. References! Mary's soul winced.

"The lady, Miss Marshall—here is her address—is known to us by reputation. We have given her an outline of your qualifications. She will wish, of course, to see your references, so take them with you. She expects you to call at three o'clock this afternoon."

"Oh—thank you!"

There was something so fervent in the words that even Mary, dulled with her own woes, did not fail to observe it. She was conscious of a faint sense of surprise that such a confident and evidently competent person as this Miss Norcross should yield to an ardent protestation of gratitude. She had good references; unusually good ones, the woman said. Why, therefore, be so eagerly thankful?

"It's nothing at all, if you have references," whispered Mary to her inner self, as she walked toward the door. It was a bitter, hopeless whisper.

Once in the outer hall, Mary Wayne paused. She had closed the door behind which crouched that cold-blooded

monster—the Brain Workers' Exchange. Again she read the neatly lettered sign. What a mockery it was! Brain Workers, indeed! It was merely a meeting-place for the elect, for those who had the mystic password to the inner shrine. And she—she had everything but the mere password.

Abruptly she brushed her hand across her eyes, then began

fumbling in a beaded bag.

"I'm going to cry," she said, half aloud. "And I *won't*!"

Yet she would and did, and she certainly was crying when the door of the Brain Workers' Exchange opened again and closed with a joyous click behind the young woman who had the unusually good references.

"Oh—I'm sorry," said the young woman, looking at Mary.

Mary hated herself and loathed the weakness of her tears.

"I saw you inside," continued the person named Norcross. "You've had bad luck, of course."

It was not a question, but an assertion. Mary fought against a sob.

"N-no luck," she managed.

"Never mind. You'll have better luck very soon."

"I—I'll never have any luck. I'm doomed. I—oh, it's so silly of me—but I haven't any references."

A hand was slipped within Mary's arm; she felt a gentle pressure of reassurance.

"Don't let luck down you," said the lucky one. "It always changes. Mine did; so will yours. I've just had a wonderful piece of luck and it doesn't seem right that somebody else should be unhappy."

"But you had ref—ref—references. I heard."

"Yes, my dear; I had references. They're good things to have. Come—cheer up. I've simply got to celebrate. Please come and have lunch with me. Honestly, I insist."

Mary looked wonderingly at the girl with the magic key. She wiped her eyes bravely, then shook her head.

"I'll—I'll be all right. Thank you."

"You'll be better for lunch; so will I. Please come. I want

somebody to talk to. My name is Norcross—Nell Norcross."

She was still gripping Mary's arm, with an insistence that surprised the tearful one, for Miss Norcross did not appear like a resolute and robust person, but rather one who was somewhat frail and worried, despite all her jaunty assurance of manner.

"I'm Mary Wayne—but—oh, what's the use? Thank you, just the same."

"Come along," said Miss Norcross. "I know a dandy little place. It's cheap, too. You see, I'm not very strong financially, even if I am getting a job."

She walked Mary to the elevator and down to the street level they went. Mary felt very weak of will, yet somehow comforted, as she suffered herself to be marched for several blocks to an obscure little restaurant in a basement. The strange young woman chattered all the way, but Mary had no very clear notion of what she talked about. It was not until they were seated on opposite sides of a table that she began to pay close attention.

"You must always have references," Miss Norcross was saying with an energy that was strangely in contrast

with the pale, drawn cheeks and very bright eyes. "You must find a way to get some. People are so silly about them; they think more of references than of what you can really do."

"But how can I ever get them?" asked Mary. "You see, I've never worked; that is, I never worked for anybody except father. And he is dead. I'm really a very good stenographer; I can do over one hundred and twenty-five words a minute. But there isn't anybody who knows I can. And there isn't a business place that will give me a chance to prove it. I've tried; and every time they ask for references."

"My dear, if you can do one hundred and twenty-five you're a

better stenographer than I am; lots better. In your case it's only a question of getting started. After that, you'll go like wildfire."

"But it's the references," sighed Mary. "You've got them, you see."

"Simply because I've worked before; that's all." Miss Norcross sipped hastily from a glass of water and shook her head with a little frown of annoyance. "I'm just a bit dizzy; it's my eyes, I think—or perhaps the good luck. The thing for you to do is to get some references; surely there must be somebody who can help you out. Now, when I started——" She shook her head again. "When I started——" Another drink of water. "It's quite easy if—my dear, I'm afraid I'm going to be ill."

She announced the fact with a gasping sigh of resignation. Mary arose from her chair, startled, and walked around the table.

"I've—I've been afraid of it," said the lucky one of

the references. "I haven't been very strong. Worrying, I suppose. I worried about a job. It's my head; it aches in such a funny way. Just my luck, I suppose. I—I—oh, please don't leave me!"

"I shouldn't dream of leaving you," said Mary, stoutly. "Let me take you home. Where do you live?"

"It's——" Miss Norcross whispered an address; Mary observed with conscious surprise that it was on the lower East Side. "It's written on a piece of paper—in my bag—in case you forget it—or I faint. You'll find money there—for the check. I'm sorry. I——"

The sick girl leaned forward and rested her head on her folded arms.

"Just get me home," she muttered. "After that——"

Mary took command. She paid the check out of her own purse and sent the waiter out into the street to hunt for a taxi. With responsibility so suddenly thrust upon her there was no opportunity to brood upon her own troubles or the meager state of her finances.

This girl had been kindly; she could do no less than be a Samaritan herself.

The ride in the taxi was swift and, for the most part, through streets whose pavements had deteriorated in keeping with the neighborhood itself. Mary sat rigid, her feet braced in front of her, with her arm tightly clasped around the girl of the references, who sagged heavily against her, her eyes closed, her forehead and cheeks cold and damp. The cab stopped at what was evidently a boarding-house; Mary could tell a boarding-house through some queer sixth sense, developed

out of cheerless experience. It was an acquired faculty in which she took no joy or pride.

A nervous and wholly pessimistic landlady assisted in the task of conveying Miss Norcross to her room, which was up three flights.

"I been expectin' it," observed the landlady. "It's been comin'. She ain't been feedin' herself right. I ain't complainin', y' understand; she's paid her bills—so far, anyhow. I hope to goodness it ain't contagious. I got my house to think about. If it's contagious——"

"Go down and telephone for a doctor," said Mary shortly.

"It's a good thing she's got a friend. If she has to go to a hospital—__"

"Where is the telephone?"

"Oh, I'll go. I'll send for my own doctor, too. There isn't anybody better. I'll ask him if it's contagious and——"

Mary pushed her out of the room and turned to the patient, who was lying on the bed.

"Don't be a bit frightened," said Mary. "I don't believe you're very sick. Keep still and I'll undress you."

She felt quite composed and wholly in command of herself; it was

as if she were doing something entirely commonplace and all planned in advance.

"It—it isn't just being sick," said Miss Norcross weakly. "I'm not afraid of that. It's the job—the money. I need it so. Oh, please—don't bother. I can take off my own shoes."

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"Keep still," ordered Mary. "We'll have the doctor very soon."

"Doctor!" moaned the patient. "That's more money."

"Stop talking about money. Be quiet. Would you like a drink of water?"

When Mary returned with a glass she found her patient sitting up, staring at her with frightened eyes that were luminous with fever.

"I've got to talk about money!" she exclaimed. "Why, I haven't even five dollars to my name."

"There, there, my dear," said Mary. "Don't let it worry you. Neither have I."

It had cost her nearly three dollars to pay the restaurant check and the taxi-driver, but that pang had passed. She was amazed at her own indifference.

"But, don't you understand? I'm going to be sick—sick! And who's going to pay for it all? I *won't* be a charity patient; I *won't* go to a hospital. And my job! I've been trying so long and—and just when I get one—such a wonderful chance—I—oh, it's going to drive me mad, I tell you."

"Never mind; there'll be other chances. Perhaps the lady will wait. Drink your water."

But Miss Norcross pushed the glass aside.

"Jobs never wait," she moaned. "People always have to wait for jobs. That's what I've been doing, and now—now—oh, isn't it simply fiendish? And my head aches so!"

"Of course, dear. But never mind. I'll see you through. Perhaps I'll get a job myself, and——"

The sick girl gripped Mary's arm tensely.

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"My job!" she whispered. "You'll take mine!"

Mary smiled rather wanly.

"I couldn't do that, of course," she said. "I haven't references—and they're expecting you. But I'll find something else; I'm sure of it."

She was anything but sure of it; she was quite certain it would be otherwise. But it was her duty, she felt, to make a brave front.

"No, no, no! You *must* take mine. Oh, can't you see——"

There was a knock, followed by a doctor. He seemed to be in a hurry, yet for all that he was quite positive about things. No, it wasn't contagious. The landlady vanished from the threshold to spread the joyous news down-stairs. But she was a sick girl, none the less. There would be ten days in bed, at the very least. She needed medicine, of course he would leave prescriptions. And there must be a special diet. There really ought to be a nurse. And—well, he would look in again that evening; he would decide about the nurse then.

Miss Norcross was sitting up again as the door closed behind him.

"See!" she cried. "You've just got to do it! What's going to become of *me*—and of you? It's for three o'clock. Oh, please go! Take my references. Take——"

She fell back on the pillow in a seizure of weakness.

Mary Wayne walked to the window and looked down into the drab street. Would she do it? Dared she? Had she any right? And if she did—— The sick girl was whispering for water. Mary carried it

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to her, raised her head and steadied the glass at her lips.

"Oh, please! I'm frightened and worried—and——"

Mary made a decision.

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CHAPTER II

Aunt Caroline

Bill Marshall was home from college. He had fought his education to a finish, after a bitter battle that was filled with grueling rounds of uncertainty, and now he returned in triumph to show his prize to Aunt Caroline; not that he valued the prize itself, for it was merely a diploma, but because it represented the end of the business of learning things. He was free now; he could turn his mind and his talents to life itself. Work! Oh, not necessarily. He had not thought about work.

Bill—he was infinitely too large to be called Billy or Willie—had great respect for Aunt Caroline. He wanted her to think well of him. Her home was his. There was excellent reason for the expectation that some day her fortune would be his. There was nobody except Bill to whom it was likely to be given, except for those modest remembrances that go to the old servants who survive mistress and master. Yet Bill was neither mercenary nor covetous; he simply accepted conditions and prospects as they stood, taking it for granted that life was going to be good to him and that there was no need for anxious glances into the future. If Fate chose to make him a sole heir, why struggle against it?

"Why go to the mat with Destiny?" was the sum of

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Bill's philosophy. "Why go out of your class and get trimmed?"

Aunt Caroline Marshall lived in a once fashionable brownstone cave on lower Fifth Avenue. Her blood was of the bluest, which made her a conservative. She never "took part" in things. When Bill was in college there was nobody in the house except herself and the servants. She used a carriage and team, never an automobile, although she permitted Bill to have his own car as a reluctant concession to the times.

She was proud of her ancestral tree, wore lace caps and went to church every Sunday. She believed that there were still ladies and gentlemen in the world, as well as lower classes. She made preserves and put up her own mince-meat. But for all that there was no severity about Aunt Caroline. She was rather fat and comfortable and tolerant. She liked young people and somehow she had acquired a notion that Bill had a future.

"William," said Aunt Caroline, as she examined the diploma through her gold-rimmed spectacles, "I think you have done very well. If your father were alive I am sure he would say the same thing. I am going to give you a check."

"Oh, don't bother, Aunt Caroline," said Bill grandly. But he knew she would.

"It is so comforting to know that you stood at the head of your class, William."

She alone used "William."

"Why—what?"

"That out of two hundred you were the very first," remarked Aunt Caroline, smoothing her black silk.

Bill was blinking. Was he being joshed by his maiden aunt?

"Why, Aunt Caroline, who——"

"Oh, the young man you brought home told me," and she beamed benevolently. "But the Marshalls always have been a modest

family. We let our acts speak for themselves. I suppose I should never have found it out if your valet had not told me. His name is Peter, isn't it?"

So Pete had told her that!

"He appears to be a rather nice young man," added Aunt Caroline. "I am glad you brought him."

Bill was thinking of things to say to Pete.

"While he is, of course, your valet, William, I think we can afford to be rather considerate toward him. It seems so rare nowadays to find a young man with such high aims."

"So?" remarked Bill. This was bewildering. "Just—er—what did he say about his aims, Aunt Caroline?"

"He explained about his theological studies and how he has been earning his way through college, doing work as a valet. It was kind of you, William, to give him employment."

Bill was making the motions of swallowing. Theological studies! Why——

"He takes such a deep interest in the heathen peoples," Aunt Caroline was saying. "While I hate to see a young man bury himself away from civilization, it shows very high Christian principles. There have to be missionaries in the world, of course. He speaks so hopefully about his future life."

"Why—er—oh, yes; he's an optimist, all right, Aunt Caroline."

Bill's large bulk showed signs of considerable agitation, but his aunt did not observe them.

"I gather from what he said, William, that he is something more than just a valet to you. He told me about your talks together on theology. I feel sure that he is going to be a very good influence. He told me about how hard you worked in your classes, and the honors you won, and all the temptations you resisted. He did not