

Kitty Burns Her Fingers

by

Talbot Mundy

Kitty Crothers perennially hard up — working at her profession for a few months, doing one-night stands all over the country, and returning to spend her hard-earned savings along Broadway — we all of us knew and understood; but Kitty Crothers with money was something to make the gods on Olympus sit up and take notice.

There was absolutely no knowing what she would do with it, and the problem interested her friends for days. No doubt it amused the gods as well.

The money she brought back with her from England was a considerable sum when reckoned in English pounds; when she had it transferred into francs in Paris the amount of it took her breath away; and on her return to New York it was not the rate of exchange that worried her, for she completely ignored that, but the fact that the money sounded less in dollars than it did in francs.

“I wish they’d trade in francs on Broadway,” she said plaintively. “I’d have five times as much money.”

“Why didn’t you stop in Paris?” somebody asked her, “You’d have had it all in francs then, and it would have lasted much longer with Paris prices to pay for everything.”

“They haven’t a Broadway over there, though,” she answered reminiscently.

When she is in that reminiscent mood her eyes half close dreamily, and her lips take on the faintest shadowy suspicion of a smile that always foreshadows wisdom. She draws out her brightest epigrams dreamily, so that you

don’t notice that they are epigrams until it is too late to applaud; that is probably the reason why she was never in the first flight as an actress.

“They have the loveliest frocks in Paris, and the loveliest restaurants, but I haven’t any use for their boulevards. They’re all right for men, but not for women. In Paris nobody bumps into you, and if a man happens to be in your way he bows and raises his hat and makes way for you at once, and when you’re past him he follows you.

“I’d rather be bumped into at the corner of Forty-Second Street by fifty honest men in a hurry any day of the week. No, sir! When they transfer Broadway, and the Broadway crowd, and the Broadway atmosphere to Paris, I’ll go and live there — but not before.”

“Well, what are you going to do, Kitty, now you’re rich?”

“I’m going to be addressed as Mrs. Crothers, for one thing, by all nonentities, and most other people.”

The nonentity retired, abashed.

“What are you going to do, Mrs. Crothers?” I ventured.

“You’re a nonentity, too; but you’re not included in the bunch of ‘other people.’”

“What are you going to do, Kitty?”

She sat still for a while, thinking; then she lit another cigarette. She refuses to smoke mine since she came back from Europe; she has a brand of her own — Russian — with her initials on them. She says they taste better with her initials on them.

“Out with it, Kitty; I know you’ve got a plan.”

“I’ve a plan, but I don’t see any sense in unfolding it to you; you wouldn’t approve.”

“As if that made any difference.”

“Oh, well, as long as you realize that, I’ll tell it to you; but, remember, I’ve quite made up my mind.”

I got ready to listen, and Ugly did the same, putting his great nose on her lap. He always pretends to listen to her, though as a matter of fact he is only watching for biscuits or candy. Dogs are hypocrites just like the rest of us.

She gave him quite a quarter of a pound of expensive candy before she began to unfold her plan.

“You see,” she said at last, “I’ve got to have some object in life. I hate work just as much as you do, and now that I can afford to be lazy I’m going to make up for lost time. I wouldn’t go on the stage again if they offered to star me in ‘Romeo and Juliet.’”

“Well?”

“Of course, when one’s a capitalist there are heaps and heaps of ways of making money without working.”

“Heaps of ways of losing it, too, Kitty.”

“True for you! And they’re all of them either troublesome or dishonest. I can afford to be honest, and I never did enjoy trouble, anyhow.”

“You’re not thinking of going into business, then?”

“Not just at present. I’ve bought some bonds and locked them up in a safe-deposit place, and hidden the key. All the business I’m going to do for the present is cutting off the coupons twice a year.”

“That’s not half a bad idea. I thought you said I would be sure to object? I think you’ve been really wise!”

“Oh, but that isn’t going to be my object in life; I’m not going to live just for coupon cutting. I’ve decided to be of some use in the world.”

“You’re surely not going to write a novel?”

“And become a nonentity like you for the rest of my life? No, sir! I had to sell my brains when I was an actress, and I got just about as much money for them as you do for yours.

“I’m going to use them myself now, thank you. I’m going to pick out a young man of promise, and use my influence and experience, and money if necessary, to help him become a great man.”

“Run a sort of salon, you mean?”

“No. One at a time to begin with.”

“Who’s to be the first victim? How would I do?”

“As if anybody could do anything with you! I’ve chosen Paul Gurwicz.”

“This certainly is the place where I object! I’m more or less responsible for Gurwicz. You met him at my flat, and you’ve no right to try your experiments on him. Choose somebody I don’t know.”

“I’m not going to experiment at all; I’m going to make his fortune.”

“He’ll fall in love with you.”

“Well? Will that hurt him?”

“No. It’ll do him good. But he’ll want to marry you.”

“Nonsense — I’m old enough to be his mother.”

“I’ve heard of old women of twenty-eight — or is it twenty-seven — marrying children of twenty-two before now.”

“I dare say you have. But when the right time comes I’m going to marry him to some one else, which settles that difficulty.”

“Going to act as a sort of deputy to Providence, eh?”

“If you like to put it that way.”

“When do you begin?”

“I’ve begun. He’s in love with me already.”

She blushed guiltily as she said it, but when I laughed she flared up at once indignantly.

"I don't see that it concerns you, anyhow. In what way are you responsible for him?"

"I'm the only friend the boy's got in New York."

"Nonsense! You're not his friend. You let him come and sit in your room, and talk about his plans and ambitions, and then when you get bored you throw cold water on him."

"You'll have to see the janitor about that, Kitty; there's never any hot water to be had. Besides, I've got to work sometimes—"

"Good afternoon!" said Kitty. "I didn't know your work was so important." And out she went, leaving me to study out this new phase of Mistress Kitty Crothers.

It was not her plan that worried me; it was the victim she had chosen. Any ordinary victim would have been a lucky man, whatever the outcome; but with Gurwicz it was different.

As his name implies, he is a Russian, and Russians are always volatile, and often dangerous. They are like dynamite — useful enough if they are handled properly, and quite dependable; but awfully dangerous in the hands of a beginner. And at this game Kitty Crothers was distinctly a beginner.

I knew quite a lot about Gurwicz, for his least noticeable characteristic is reticence about himself. His grandfather was a Russian peasant with ideas on the rights of man that were beyond his station in life and years ahead of his time. Like his grandson, he was a genius and a fluent talker, so that the Russian government came to hear about his enlightenment, and sentenced him to death.

He seems to have had the sense, though, to choose his friends wisely, because they had influence enough to get his sentence transmuted to one of imprisonment for life in one of the Siberian lead-mines, and he was thrown into jail with a gang of fellow unfortunates to await transportation. Being a genius, he invented a brand-new way of breaking out of jail, and escaped over the border to Germany. He went to Breslau,

where he married the daughter of another political exile.

His son was a still greater genius, with still less common sense, however, for he became a social democrat and got himself shot by the German police in the course of an unauthorized demonstration.

But he had married a German woman — almost the only sensible thing he ever did — and their son Paul managed in some way to combine his father's and grandfather's genius and fire with his mother's Teutonic phlegm, and grew up into a man to be seriously reckoned with.

When a man like that falls in love something usually happens. Either he wins the woman that he wants, or else he goes utterly to the deuce and takes a considerable number of quite inoffensive people with him.

And here was Kitty Crothers, serenely unconscious of her unwisdom, deliberately encouraging Paul Gurwicz to fall in love with her!

The worst of it was that I reckoned myself a friend of Kitty Crothers, and cared nothing for Gurwicz, and yet I could not see how to prevent her from burning her fingers.

Not many days passed before she came to my flat again, and this time she brought Gurwicz with her. He was painfully shy and awkward, and tripped over nearly everything in the room before he at last subsided into a corner, where he sat watching Kitty.

If ever a boy was in love, Paul Gurwicz was, and he was the most awkward and uncomfortable lover I have ever seen. I tried to draw him into conversation, and so did Kitty, who wanted to show him off, but we both failed until I remembered that the basis of his ambition was aeroplanes, and asked him some question or other about them.

After that we had to sit and listen to a fervid monologue on aeroplanes, while he waved his arms, and spilled his tea over the

carpet, and made a most unusual ass of himself.

He told us all he knew about aeroplanes, which was a surprising amount; and he lectured us on the folly of trying to build flying-machines without first of all thoroughly mastering the theory and making the necessary mathematical calculations on paper.

After about twenty minutes of it the flood of his enthusiasm swept away the barrier of his shyness altogether, and he told us how he, Paul Gurwicz, had really studied the theory of flying, and knew how to calculate every stress and strain to which a flying-machine could possibly be subjected. And Kitty kept looking across the room to me with an expression on her face which meant: "There! Isn't he clever?"

Two other fellows who had dropped in said it was dashed interesting, and dropped out again, and after that I no longer cared what Kitty did to him. I felt sorry for her, though, because I felt certain that she was storing up trouble for herself.

During the months that followed I was forced into being anything but a disinterested spectator. Kitty did not want him to make any new friends, for fear they might lead him astray; so she encouraged him to visit me whenever he had the time. She dared me to discourage him, knowing well that I would not lose her friendship for a dozen men like Gurwicz.

So I had to listen to the man, and take an interest in his infernal aeroplanes.

The result of my listening to him, and my apparent interest, was that he gave me a certain measure of his confidence; and the time came when he admitted to me that he was in love with her and intended to marry her when he had saved his first ten thousand dollars.

He was awfully foolish about her, describing all her faults as virtues, and all her virtues as faults which he meant to eradicate

when he had married her. It was no joke having to listen to him; but I got some fun the following day, for I repeated his conversation to Mrs. Crothers word for word, and she wilted at the notion of being reformed by Gurwicz.

I rubbed it in, and it did me good. I think it did her good, too; but it did not turn her aside from her plan, as I had hoped. She came into my flat one day shortly after that, bubbling with laughter, to tell me of his proposal to her.

"His nerve is getting better," she said, "or worse — I don't know which. He's beginning to take quite a preparatory interest in me, instead of worshipping me from a distance.

"How d'you think he began? He objected to my coming so often to your flat. He said people would talk about it. As if anybody would ever dream of talking about you! I asked him if he didn't think you were respectable, and he said no, he was sure you were not. He's learning to talk English awfully well, but he's not quite sure of the difference between respectable and respectful yet.

"He said he had watched your face very closely whenever he had mentioned my name to you, and that he had noticed that you always smiled in a mysterious sort of way that he didn't like — a cynical sort of smile, as though you could tell all sorts of tales if you only cared to — or dared. I think it was 'dared' he said."

"Never mind whether he said 'dared' or not, Kitty; he's going to stop your smoking cigarettes after he's married you. He told me so. But go on — tell me how he proposed."

"I'm coming to that; don't be in such a hurry! I asked him what it could possibly matter if people did talk about my going to your flat, and he said that it mattered very much, because he hoped some day to make me Mrs. Gurwicz, and he hated like anything

to have people talking about his future wife in any way but with the utmost respect.”

“Didn’t he go down on his knees, or anything? I thought foreigners always did that.”

“Indeed, no! He talked all the time as though he were conferring a favor on me.”

“What did you say?”

“I couldn’t say anything at first for laughing.”

“Did he see you laugh?”

“I don’t think so — in fact, I’m sure not. I pretended to be embarrassed — and so I was, awfully. I told him, after I had recovered my equanimity a little, that he was much too young to think of marrying me, and that I should be an old woman when he was still only in the prime of life and just beginning to be famous. That made him awfully angry.

“You know how he goes up in the air when he’s in earnest about himself? Well, he went up in the air then, only more than usual. He treated me to a complete synopsis of his achievements up to date — the boy really has done well for himself, even you must admit that — and he tried to prove that he was at least twice as wise and twice as old as most men are at his age. I’m not at all sure that he’s not right about that.”

“You mean that he’s wise to be in love with you? I know at least ten men who’re just as wise as he is.”

“No, I didn’t mean that. Don’t interrupt. Well, it was no use discouraging him for the present; that wouldn’t have fitted in with my plan at all.

“I want to see him a big man — right at the top of the tree — and I want to know that it was I that goaded him into getting there. So I told him that I would never marry a man who was a nonentity, and that he must win his spurs before daring to propose to me.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He tried to make out at first that he had won his spurs already, but I laughed at that

idea. Then he argued that he would have a much greater incentive to work if I would definitely promise to marry him; and at last he got on his dignity, and said that if I didn’t promise him he would throw up his job and go to Canada, and lose himself somewhere in the Northwest.

“I had half a mind to take him at his word, because the boy is so clever that I’m sure he’d make good even if you dumped him down right in the middle of a desert.”

“Why on earth didn’t you, then? Wasn’t it a splendid chance to be rid of him?”

“Can’t you understand that I don’t want to be rid of him? I want to be able to give myself the credit for his success. Of course, it would be awfully romantic to follow him up to Canada, but I had more than enough of Canada when I went there with touring companies, and, besides, it would have probably led to complications — and the business is getting complicated enough already without any extras!”

“I can imagine that Mr. Paul Gurwicz up in the northwest of Canada, or anywhere else for that matter, might prove a bit of a handful once he discovered that there was a lady on his trail. If I’d been you I’d have let him go to Canada, or to the deuce for that matter, until he chose to come to his senses.”

“That’s exactly where you’d have been wrong. Men have no perception at all. I put him off for a year. That gives him one year in which to make good, and it gives me a whole year to think up a good way out of the difficulty. I told him I would give him a definite answer one year from now.”

“How did he take that?”

“He didn’t say a word. You know that nasty little black note-book that he always carries about in his pocket? Well, he pulled out his watch first, and then he opened his note-book and set down the exact hour and minute.

“Then he bowed — you know how he bows? — with a stiff back, as though he were

hinged in the middle — and stalked out of the room to go and win his spurs. The boy was really impressive, and I feel sure he'll do something big. He's certainly determined enough."

"He'll probably make some big kind of trouble."

"Not he! I've made a man of him. I know I have."

The next I heard of Gurwicz he had thrown up his job. Up till now he had been clerk to a contracting engineer, and his salary had been raised twice because of his almost uncanny genius for calculating quantities and other complicated things connected with a section of the new Subway. He told me he wanted a job now in some factory where they made the engines of automobiles. He didn't seem to care a rap about salary. He said, in fact, that he had saved enough to keep him for a year if necessary.

But he wanted to learn all there was to know about internal combustion engines before looking for a job in an aeroplane factory. So I gave him a letter to a man I knew who was foreman in an up-State automobile factory.

Three weeks later I received a letter from the foreman telling me if I knew of any more youngsters of the same type to send on a car-load at once "collect." So it seemed that Mr. Paul Gurwicz was busy making good.

During the six months that followed Kitty Crothers was restless and, I thought, unhappy. She seemed to miss having Gurwicz to order about.

He wrote to her regularly — long, passionate letters, in which he reiterated his undying devotion — and I know she wrote to him, because she used to show me her letters before she sealed them up. She wanted to be sure that they were affectionate enough without being too affectionate.

When Gurwicz came back to New York with a finger missing and the best part of six

months' pay in his pocket — they had put him on a salary within a week of his arrival at the automobile factory — I offered to put him up. It seemed possible that the tension might grow a little acute, and I wanted to be on the scene when the trouble started.

He was as much in love with Kitty as ever, and hardly ever left my flat, he was so anxious to be in when she called. He talked about her until I lost my temper, and then sat on a chair in the corner and thought about her, and in the end she had to remind him that his career was still to make.

After that he used to stay out all day hunting a job, and one evening he told me that he had signed a contract to work for a man whose name was already world-famous as a maker and manipulator of aeroplanes.

He started work the following day without saying a word to Kitty, and it was I who broke the news to her. She grew serious at once, and said it was time to get busy.

"He's bound to make good," she said, with a return of her old enthusiasm. "Now that he's started on his chosen career, he'll never look back. Remember it was I that goaded him into it."

"Yes, but you haven't got yourself out of it yet. I've a notion that that won't be quite so easy. He'll be back for his answer when the year's up, and then look out for squalls!"

"Not he! He'll be engaged to some one else. I know the girl already. The only thing is to arrange for them to meet at your flat."

"Not if I know it. Gurwicz by himself was bad enough, but Gurwicz and his sweetheart billing and cooing round here would be too much altogether. This is your funeral, and you must stage-manage it. I'm not going to have anything to do with it at all. I'm merely a looker-on."

She was angry with me, and called me a shirker, and lots of other things, but a few days afterward she invited me to dinner to meet Paul Gurwicz and a Miss Maud

Gillespie — her niece or cousin or some such relation.

When I got to the restaurant she and Gurwicz were already there, and I was in time to hear Gurwicz tell her that his future as an aviator was already assured. I never knew a man who had less doubt as to his eventual success.

He went up in the air and waved his arms about in his usual emphatic way, but she seemed scarcely to be paying any attention to him. When he left off boasting to get his breath she told him for the first time who the fourth member of the party was to be.

“And I want you to look after her for me, Paul,” I heard her say. “It’s almost her first dinner away from home, and she’s dreadfully shy with strangers. I want you to draw her out and make her feel as though she were among friends. I’d ask him to do it, but he’s much too stupid.”

When she said “him” she meant me, and Gurwicz had the indecency to look as though he agreed with her; but the niece arrived before I could think of anything suitable to say in self-defense.

The girl was the absolute antithesis of Gurwicz. He was tall and very thin. She was of medium height, at the most, and plump. Never having seen her mother, it was of course only guesswork, but I was prepared to swear that by the time she was forty she would be fat.

He had blond hair that stood up straight on end as so many Germans wear it; her hair was very dark-brown — almost black. He was a visionary, a dreamer — with the strength and ambition to make his dreams come true; she was a woman of the domestic type, who would only dream when she had indigestion.

Even then she would only dream that her house was not in order. She was no more shy than a domestic cow is shy. She was a ruminant.

He was restless and ambitious; she was placid. He had a face that was positively ugly, redeemed, though, by the obvious intelligence that flashed and flickered over it incessantly, and only slumbered when he slept; she was good-looking in a sleepy, wax-madonna sort of way, but her expression never varied.

They were utterly unlike.

And yet, from the way that Kitty Crothers behaved, it seemed that this was the female that she intended should supplant her in the affections of Paul Gurwicz. She talked to me at one end of the table, and left the niece and Gurwicz alone at the other.

I tried once to engage the girl in conversation, but Kitty kicked me so violently on the shin that for the next few minutes I was hard put to it not to swear.

“I was only trying to make her feel as though she were among friends; it seems, though, she’s come to a game of football,” I remarked.

Kitty only laughed, and by the time my shin-bone had left off tingling Miss Gillespie was too busy listening to Gurwicz for me to be able to get a word in edgewise.

He told her all the most interesting things he knew, and they were all about himself. She proved to be a good listener — a thing he had grown unaccustomed to of late. Instead of raillery and chaff and openly expressed unbelief, he met with silent approval and wonder.

He found himself accepted for the first time in his life at his own valuation. Even Kitty Crothers, during her most valiant efforts to encourage him, had found it difficult to conceal her amusement at his egoism. But Miss Gillespie frankly considered him a superior being, and evidently felt more like burning incense to him than laughing at him.

So Gurwicz enjoyed himself, and the two of them forgot all about us. Gurwicz’s way home and mine lay together for part of the distance, and we walked it together. During

the walk he asked me how old I supposed Mrs. Crothers was, and I snubbed him promptly and properly — with the fiat of a metaphorical shovel on his impudent mouth — but he scarcely noticed it.

I saw little of him after that, though I often saw his name in the papers as a daring and successful aviator and once, when I went to Belmont Park, I saw him make a flight.

Miss Gillespie was there, too, and so was Kitty Crothers.

After the flight Gurwicz stood with his back toward us, talking to Miss Gillespie, and it was she who pointed us out and brought him over to speak to us. He was a trifle condescending, and I thought the least little bit in the world annoyed.

He paid more attention to me than he did to Mrs. Crothers, and I tried to drive him up to her gun by belittling his attempts to fly. But he avoided her carefully, enduring my raillery as the lesser of two evils, and Miss Gillespie glared defiance at me in a way that betokened more than a passing interest in him.

His relief when he was called away to attend to one of his machines was too evident to be mannerly, and I turned to Kitty with a smile and some little joke about ingratitude.

To my amazement, she was on the verge of tears.

“Please take me away from here,” was all she would say, and I took her away, wondering.

“The little beast!” she burst out presently.

“Which of ‘em?” I ventured.

“Paul, of course. I can’t blame her. I meant her all along to marry him. She’s just what he needs. She’ll worship him, and be blind to his follies and conceit; and she’ll nurse him when he’s sick, and keep house for him, and think he’s a superior sort of god.

“Even if he beats her, she’ll forgive him. I’m not sure he won’t beat her! I almost hope he will! I’m sure he’s beast enough. Fancy

his leaving me like that without a word of apology or regret!”

“But didn’t you want to marry ‘em off? Wasn’t that the idea all along?” I remarked inquiringly.

“Of course it was.”

“Well, you’ve got your own way, so what’s the trouble? There’s nothing left to do but choose the wedding presents. Mine’s going to be an art pepper-pot — a small one, to hold red pepper.”

“I believe I shall get mine at the ten-cent bazaar.”

“I would if I were you. But what are you so dreadfully annoyed about? You married him just as soon as you chose to the girl you picked out for him. I don’t see.”

“Oh, how stupid men are! Can’t you see that he broke loose before I intended him to, and not in the way I meant him to at all. Instead of my despising him, as I really did all along, he despises me. The little beast thinks I was in love with him, and that he turned me down. Oh, I could kill myself!”

“You will have better luck next time. You will have more experience, and will know how to manage the next campaign better.”

“Never again! Men aren’t worth the trouble. If you’re good to them and take an interest in them, they despise you for it, and imagine that you do it simply because you’re in love with their superior souls. They haven’t got any souls! Oh, I hate men!”

“Try keeping chickens, Kitty — they might be more grateful, and you’d have the satisfaction of wringing their necks if they weren’t.”

“I believe I shall follow your advice. I’d do anything that would help me to forget Paul Gurwicz.”

“Believe me, Kitty, we’ll forget him this evening at dinner. Come on, let’s get back to Broadway.”