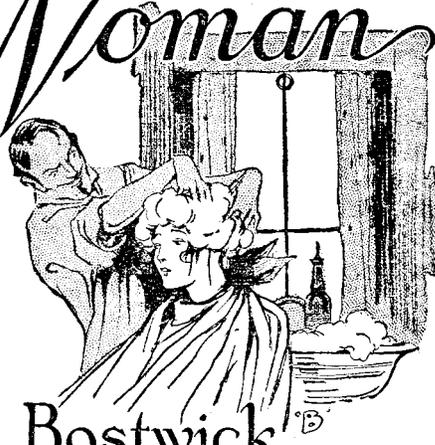


# Super-Woman Stuff

by Grace G. Bostwick



**T**HIS is the simple and unpolished story of a girl who possessed the glorious desire to be *free*—another Ninon de Enclos, or whatever her name was that pulled off that “many things to many men” stunt a couple of centuries or so ago. Now, I’m not saying a thing against the girl. There are a lot like her if you’ll take it from one who knows, being in pretty close touch with them first and last, as who shouldn’t be and him in the hair-dressing business? But most of them are quiet about it and don’t come right out into the open shouting their wishes, so to speak.

Poor Maimee—she got that French spelling out of one of those sassy magazines with a bifurcated swimmeress on the cover, and I guess that’s where she got her “super-notions” —couldn’t seem to make a go of it, no matter how she tried.

In the first place, she was a nice girl with a round, freckled face, like a kid, and big, blue eyes that looked more like they were hungry for doughnuts than devilishness. The sort of girl you want to cuddle under one arm while you dream about a baby-carriage and a front lawn with one of those cute little sprinklers cutting up on it. That’s what she was, and when it came to giving her the “once-over” why, a fellow’d do it on the sly and blush like Billy Blazes if he got caught at it.

“What’s the matter with me, M. Phileep?” she asks, chewing away at a fresh caramel—forty cents a pound; the kind I always keep on hand for a few favorite customers. “Why don’t men go crazy over me?”

“Nix on that Phileep stuff!” I says as I took the pins out of her hair. “Plain red, white, and blue is good enough for me!”

“Ouch!” She jerked away from me and I let her play, having an hour or so to the good. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Well,” I temporizes, hating to tell her the truth—that, as far as I could see, she hadn’t a chance in the world, “you’re pretty young and—”

“Wasn’t it Mme. de Maintenon that had been really living for five years and was the consort of a king when she was twenty?”

“Now what do you want to hand out dope like that to me for?” says I, worried at her notions in spite of myself. “If you’d leave such talk as that for the seasoned class, it would be better for all concerned,” says I. “Don’t I know how old you are, and it isn’t twenty by the hair of your head, either.”

“I’m going on nineteen and that’s almost twenty,” she grumbled as I shook out her glorious mane, “and I don’t believe you can tell a thing by my hair!”

“Can’t I, now?” I laughed. “It’s a dead

give-away every time. Don't you think I've been shampooing and bleaching and dyeing these fifteen years for nothing!"

Oh—dyeing!" she shrieks. "Yes, dyeing," says I, with a procession of dames in my mind's eye so long that it would reach from here to Seattle. And hair running all shades from deep-purple to the top that looked like a walking "ad" for a fussy pink powder-puff. But that last, of course, was a stage blonde who was never satisfied till she went one better, whether the game was for high stakes or low.

Maimee jerked her head and the bright locks flew out of my hands.

"Goodness!" she says. "I don't see how any girl could ever do a thing like that,"

"You would see," I grinned, "if you were one of those that's got to where perjury's second nature, when it comes to age and a few little things like that. Not that I blame 'em," says I. "Lord knows it's hard enough to be getting on to where young folks giggle when you pass, without the very hairs of your head going back on you."

"Well," she declared, as I got her ready for the plunge, "I wouldn't do it. I'd let 'em turn."

"Just exactly what they all do," I offered, sarcastic like, "but you don't mean to say that you, with your romantic nature, would allow yourself to show your age? Wait till you get to be thirty-five or forty."

"Yes?" Her head was in the suds and I was sousing it around to bring out those pretty golden lights when it dried, but her voice sounded interested.

"Why, you'll—you'll—" I stopped, for I had seen her as plain as though she had stood before me—a good bit stoutish, with plump cheeks and bright eyes, and I'll swear but I saw youngsters hanging onto her skirts. "You'll be married," says I, "like any other self-respecting woman, and you'll be too busy looking after the twins' measles to—"

"Phileep Jones," she choked, with a lot of suds in her mouth.

"That's all right," I comforted, "but to change the subject, did you see that mysterious-looking new fellow that came in from the West last night? A regular Lothario, if you leave it to me," says I, feeling her stiffen with interest.

"Where?" she gasped, sopping the soap out of her eyes.

"Sorry," I wipes it away with a soft towel, "but it was your fault. You ought to keep your eyes shut and your head down. I can't remember his name," I was laughing to myself, "but he's sure a good looker."

"Phileep," she squints at me with the tears running down her cheeks, "I want to meet him. Will you help me?"

"Sure," I agreed. "He's dropping in along about the middle of the afternoon. It's after two now." I glanced at the old clock, ticking away in the corner. "I'll give you a hair-singe and a new Marcel—got a dandy new wave in the other day and I waited to see how you liked it before I tried it on any one else." I could hear the half-dollars increasing with every word. Not that I'm mercenary by any means, but that's the way I make my living and there's no reason why folks shouldn't pay for their amusement as well as other things.

There was a hushed silence. "Is he dark," she asks as if we were in the church cellar, "with big eyes?"

"You've seen him!" I gasped.

She shook her head. "I knew he was coming. I felt it. Give me another caramel," she says, stretching out her hand.

I grinned to myself. This mixing caramels and romance doesn't sound like siren stuff to me.

Her hair was soft and shimmery with little curls slipping out here and there like a baby's. When I got through with her I was proud of myself. "You're an artist, Phileep," I says under my breath.

"What's that?" she pipes, with her eye stuck to the door.

"I say your head is a picture," I declared;

“there isn’t another in this burg that’s got hair like yours.”

She blushed with pleasure and it was just then, with cheeks like old-fashioned roses that can’t be beat for color and fragrance, that my guy blew in. Blew is the word. That fellow has energy enough to run the earth. He’s quick as chain lightning, whatever that is, and you’ll never catch him napping at the switch.

They stopped short, the two of them—and looked. I don’t like to say that their souls was in their eyes because I never saw a soul, so to speak, but they were surely giving good imitations of soul stuff, if I’m any judge.

“Mr.—ah—Kerrigan,” I stammers, “let me make you acquainted with Miss—ah—Gay.”

He held out his hand and she flutters to him, for all the world like a little bird that hasn’t learned how to fly, being charmed by a— but he wasn’t a bad fellow at that. “There’s going to be a bit of excitement,” says I to myself, “perhaps a bit of opera business. I suspicion,” says I, sober enough at that, “that Miss Maimee has run across her affinity or one of ’em. And it’s up to me to see that she sticks to the guide-book.”

They were chinning—both at once—and the things they didn’t say could be found only at a Wednesday night prayer-meeting.

“I say,” I coughed. Miss Maimee had forgotten to pay me and I had a new customer do that very minute.

She turned about and stared at me. There was an utter absence of any recognition whatever, and out she walks with *Prince Charming*.

I did some tall thinking during the next hour as I bleached the blond locks of one of the town’s elect. I could see plain enough that here was Maimee’s chance to gain her heart’s desire. Kerrigan was the sort that didn’t need references or anything like that. His swell tie and classy looks and the wave in his black hair had all them things beaten to a frazzle. But I felt uneasy. She had folks, of course, but they were the kind that was sure nothing could ever

happen in their family, and they gave her her head, not having any idea what was in it.

I stopped Kerrigan that night. “Say,” I says, casual like, “you don’t want to take a walk down to the grove?”

“Sure,” he says, quick as scat, “only I got to be back at seven thirty.”

“As soon as that?” I groaned. “You haven’t lost any time, have you?”

He flushed. “See here, Jones,” he says, and you could have knocked me over with a toothpick. “You’re a good fellow and I like you, but Miss Maimee tells me that you butt into every one’s business something fierce, and I want to tell you right at the start that I won’t stand for it!”

Me butt into—I gasped when I thought how she had spent hours in my place talking over every possible—and how it was me that introduced the two of ’em!

“It isn’t good form,” he continued, without the quiver of an eyelash, “to discuss ladies. You’ve got a nice place here,” he offers, just like that, as if—

“Nice people, too,” I says, sarcastic like, for his cut had gone through my hide, “though we are interested in our friends’ doings now and then.”

He laughed as he turned and looked at me and, darn it, but I melted in spite of myself. Those eyes were too much for me. And if they could put me on the mat, what would they do to a little innocent like the would-be superwoman?

The next few weeks were busy ones. Talk about romantic wooings! I’ve seen a few in my time, if I’m not keen about that sort of thing myself. But the way those two run up the record was a caution. He had a little machine—I wouldn’t call it a car exactly, though it did run pretty smooth with the two of ’em aboard, and I’ll bet there wasn’t a bit of territory an inch wide that they didn’t navigate within the sixteen-hours a day or thereabouts that they managed to peel off together, and folks began to talk like they will in one of

these pattern towns where they think every one ought to be cut out of the same piece of goods. Her folks sat back and smiled and patted each other on the back until I got nervous.

Of course, they didn't know what I did. To them she was a simple little girl that was having the time of her life with the handsomest stranger that had ever dropped from the skies.

I get so all-fired nervous that I had to do something, so I sent for him.

He walked into the place casual like, humming one of those weird love tunes that you get in the twenty-five cent movies.

"What's on your mind?" he asks, and at that my heart turns to water. Those eyes of his bore like a two-inch drill of cold steel. "I—I—just wanted—to—" I stammered, trying to keep from biting my tongue. "Not that I—mean—of course, you know," I started again.

He looked at me curiously. "You must be one of those guys that's got an ingrowing conscience," he says, "but you'd better lay off on it. There's nothing to worry about."

"I just wanted to—tell you," I began.

"Quit nagging," he smiled, "I think I've got all that's necessary. At least, I don't imagine that anything I need has passed me by."

I gave it up. "Kerrigan," I says, and I held out my hand, "dog-gone it, I like you and I can't believe—I won't—"

"Better pin your faith to a new creed," he laughs. "What do you know about me?"

Well, a day or so after that, she whirls in for a hair-dress. First time in all those weeks, and, whew! but the dust that was in that mop of hers! Pretty, even at that. Lord! What wouldn't women give if they could keep the hair they have at eighteen! She had changed to beat the band. There was a sparkle in her eyes and a curve to her lips that she never got at no Red Cross sewing-bee.

"You shouldn't wait so long," I scolded, "six weeks is enough to spoil any head, no

matter if it is healthy hair."

She laughed. "What do I care about a little thing like that?" says she, and it was as if she was singing. A little thrill ran through all her words. "I'm going away and—"

"You're going away!" I stops and stares at her.

"Um-hum!" she laughs.

"Where to?" I was trying to be careless and off-hand so she wouldn't think I was butting in, as she had told Kerrigan.

"The city—and, oh, the West—and, oh, I don't know—'most anywhere."

It was enchanted ground to her. You could see that.

"Alone, I suppose," I suggested carelessly.

"Do I look as if I'd go off alone?" She was watching herself in the mirror and her eyes danced as she spoke.

"I suppose you've forgot all about this army stuff," I put in lightly.

She frowned.

"He may be called any time," I ventured, "and, of course, you wouldn't want to be left alone—away from home and—and—all that."

"He says he's exempt," she declared. "He's working for the government, and he won't be needed at the front."

"Then you're going to be married?" I felt relieved to think I had got it out of her at last.

Her little face hardened as I soused her in the suds.

"I'm glad of that," I says, "it's what every girl ought to be. Now I hope this foolish superwoman stuff will take a rest."

"It's not foolish," she sputtered, lifting up her head with the water running down her face in two streams. "And I won't tell you another word! It's all a secret! We're going to elope!"

"No!" I gasps, forgetting my work in the excitement. That meant that she was going away without her folks knowing anything about it and I—there was no use talking. It was up to me to see that everything was all right. There wasn't any one else.

"I suppose you're going to New York." I

tried to keep the excitement out of my voice.

“No, we’re going to B—— where he has a college friend that’s going to meet us and—”

“When?” I asks real quiet.

“Oh, next week,” she sings out.

I could see the dimples and the rosy flush that tinted her neck like a pearly sea-shell.

I whistled. I knew what I had to do. I hurried through with her and I got into my duds and whacked out a little notice. “Called out of town, back to-morrow,” and I pulled out.

It took me some little time to locate that friend. I found that Kerrigan had been there the day before and that they had driven away together. They had been gone a couple of hours when they came back. The friend climbed out of the car, shook hands with Kerrigan and—he was not a minister of the gospel or even a notary public, as far as any one folks. He was just a sort of philosopher fellow that wrote stuff about scientific evolution or some such fool thing,

I didn’t send for Kerrigan. I hunted him up. And I waited at his room until twelve o’clock. It was a lovely night, with a full moon and the prettiest clouds you ever saw. But I was that nervous that I got impatient with everything. I sat and drummed on that window-sill till I know I wore the varnish loose. And then he came.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, sort of sharp.

“I’m waiting for you!” I snaps back.

“What’s the big idea?” he asks in his smooth way, lightin’ a cigarette. Now, I ain’t got a thing against cigarettes. But that sort of calm and unmoved way of his set me wild.

“I don’t call it much of an idea to take advantage of an innocent girl,” I spits out. “She may be young and foolish, but she’s got friends that ain’t going to let her do anything she’ll be sorry for all her days. Why, she doesn’t know a thing about life,” I says, getting real stirred up. “She’s like a four-year-old for knowledge of men and things.”

“So that’s the trouble?” He blew a whiff of smoke into the air. He didn’t say another word. He just sat there with his eyes narrowed up as though he was thinking. And I could see that I had struck something. He wasn’t happy like she was. He was uneasy and nervous, not a bit like himself. But he didn’t say another word.

I sat there quite a while. “Are you going to think twice about it?” I asks, as I got up.

He stirred. “I believe it’s time to turn in,” he says, real friendly like. “Don’t you want to bunk with me? It’s a long way home to that shack of yours.”

I flung out, mad as a hornet, and I heard him laughing to himself as I went down the stairs.

There was nothing to it but to see the old folks. And I went the first thing in the morning before the girl was out of bed. They wanted me to sit down and have breakfast with ’em, but I wouldn’t touch a thing.

“Do you know,” I says, short like, “that that girl of yours is going to elope?”

Her mother laughed. She’s fat and comfortable-looking and real easy-going. “Pshaw,” she says, “don’t let Maimee worry you! She’s always dreaming things, but she’s all right. It was real good of you, though, to come up,” she says to me. “Do have a cup of coffee. You look all wore out!”

I looked over at the father in despair. “Are you going to let this thing go on?”

He shook his head. “Mother manages the girl.” His eyes began to twinkle. “And I guess she knows her business!”

I went back to the shop. I had about twenty women in that morning, and I knew something was up. They all started to buzz about the goings-on of Maimee and Kerrigan, but I wouldn’t say a word.

Noon came and still I didn’t know what to do. I thought of going to that minister fellow and appealing to him, but I decided that if he had the nerve to put a thing like that across, nothing I could say would feeze him.

Along about four o'clock Maimee slipped in. "I want a hair-dress," she says, kind of excited. "There's that new way you were telling me about. Let's see how it looks."

My heart jumped into my throat and stuck. Here was my chance. I wouldn't have gone to her because I knew it was no use, but here she was and maybe I could pass her something.

"I was over to B—— yesterday." I starts in, "and I saw that friend of Kerrigan's walking around."

"Stop!" she scolds, sticking her little fingers in her ears. "I won't listen to a word!"

"All right," I says, "it's your funeral!"

She never answered me and I worked away at her hair, using all my nerve to keep my mind on the job. I glanced into the mirror now and then, but, Lord! she never saw me. I might as well have been in India as far as she was concerned. I finished my job and I turned her about.

"It's great!" I says with real artistic pride.

"You do very good work, Phileep" —her eyes danced as she spoke— "with your hands."

Now what did she mean by that? I puzzled over it as I put my things away, and then I went over my books to sort of ease my mind and settle it a bit. I didn't go out to supper, but stayed on and worked.

It came on to ten o'clock and I stretched and got up just as Kerrigan dashed in at the door.

"I've lost her!" He was white and I could see he was as nervous as a henpecked husband after church.

"No! How?" I asks.

"It was all that superwoman stuff," he groaned, "I let her go on about it as if I—oh, there's no use! She'll never look at me again when she knows!"

"When she knows what?" I asks, forgetting past snubs and things, seeing he'd come to me in his trouble.

"About that minister chap!"

"You know what that fellow is as well as I

do!" I looked him square in the eye.

"That's just what I mean," he tried to explain. "She's been so happy over it and I've gone and spoiled it all. But I couldn't help it. I had to have her. I couldn't live without her!"

"Holy Moses, man, talk sense!" I offers. "You mean you've deceived her? You haven't been over to B—— with her since four o'clock?"

"Yes, yes. I have!" he cried. "I've deceived her and she'll never overlook it in the world. I'm done for!" He dropped into the chair and sunk his face in his hands.

"You've no right to her," I speaks firmly. "You know how foolish she is with those supernotions of hers. You hadn't ought to have listened for a minute. I thought you were a square guy or I'd sure never have brought you two together. A man," I says severe like, "never forgets that he is a man and that it's his place to protect innocence wherever he meets it!" I was real proud of that speech and I wished that Maimee could have heard it.

He groaned, and just then my telephone rang. I gave him the sign as her voice came to me. "Is Jerry there?"

"Sure!" I grins at the anxiety in her words.

"Tell him to wait. I'm coming right over!"

At that he wilted. "I can't face her!" He took the handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the sweat off his face. "You tell her for me—there's a good fellow!"

She sailed in like an evening breeze and her eyes were two stars for brightness.

"Jerry," she scolded, "you naughty boy to run away from me like that! Just as though you weren't mine at all!"

"Tell her," he groaned.

She looked at me in surprise. "What have you got to do with it?" she asks, innocent as a baby with a rattle.

"He's deceived you!" I thought it was best to get it over at once. "And he thinks you'll never forgive him."

A queer little flash came over her face. "What do you mean?"

“Oh, Maimee, darling” —he stretches out his hands to her and the eyes of him would melt an ice-house off its foundation— “I couldn’t do it! I know I promised, but—I—I—loved you so!”

“You—promised?” Her eyes were wide as she gazed at him.

“Sure I did, lovey,” says Kerrigan, “but I couldn’t. You were too innocent and too trusting and too—”

“Oh!” She turned away with her face in her hands, and her shoulders shook.

“So I married you instead of—what you thought,” he confessed, “and it’s all off. You’ll never forgive me in the world!”

“What are you talking about?” I was so mixed that I was mad as a hornet. “You never married her. And if you did, that fellow is no preacher!”

“Oh, he is, he is. He’s taking a year’s vacation,” moaned the boy. “That’s what’s the matter—and she thought he was just a friend. And now—”

“You could spot him for a preacher a block away,” shrugged Maimee, “and I saw it from the first.”

“You saw it!” he gasped in bewilderment.

“Um-hum.” she nodded, “and I’m your regular wife, ain’t I?”

“My wife—oh, if I only hadn’t loved you so!” He dropped his head despairingly.

“Never mind about that,” says Maimee. I knew all along that you were crazy to marry me!” She flung me a little look of triumph.

“You knew—all along?” he whispers, “How—”

“Because I was, too,” she admits with a hysterical giggle.

He leaped to his feet and the color came flooding back into his face.

“Then you didn’t mean that—that—superwoman stuff? You—”

“Don’t be a silly!” she frowned. “Of course, I meant it. But a girl can change her mind, can’t she? And, please don’t begin our life together by running away like this. I want to know where you are—every blessed minute!”

“Darling!”

His arms went around her.

“I hope this is a good lesson to you, Phileep” —Maimee turned on me with scor— “to mind your own business!” And they went out. Gone, without a word of thanks or gratitude for all I had suffered for them. But I’m glad she’s got that superwoman stuff out of her system and I know who it was that turned the trick!