## Elsie in New York

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No, bumptious reader, this story is not a continuation of the Elsie series. But if your Elsie had lived over here in our big city there might have been a chapter in her books not very different from this.

Especially for the vagrant feet of youth are the roads of Manhattan beset “with pitfall and with gin.” But the civic guardians of the young have made themselves acquainted with the snares of the wicked, and most of the dangerous paths are patrolled by their agents, who seek to turn straying ones away from the peril that menaces them. And this will tell you how they guided my Elsie safely through all peril to the goal that she was seeking.

Elsie’s father had been a cutter for Fox & Otter, cloaks and furs, on lower Broadway. He was an old man, with a slow and limping gait, so a pot-hunter of a newly licensed chauffeur ran him down one day when livelier game was scarce. They took the old man home, where he lay on his bed for a year and then died, leaving $2.50 in cash and a letter from Mr. Otter offering to do anything he could to help his faithful old employee. The old cutter regarded this letter as a valuable legacy to his daughter, and he put it into her hands with pride as the shears of the dread Cleaner and Repairer snipped off his thread of life.

That was the landlord’s cue; and forth he came and did his part in the great eviction scene. There was no snowstorm ready for Elsie to steal out into, drawing her little red woollen shawl about her shoulders, but she went out, regardless of the unities. And as for the red shawl—back to Blaney with it! Elsie’s fall tan coat was cheap, but it had the style and fit of the best at Fox & Otter’s. And her lucky stars had given her good looks, and eyes as blue and innocent as the new shade of note paper, and she had $1 left of the $2.50. And the letter from Mr. Otter. Keep your eye on the letter from Mr. Otter. That is the clue. I desire that everything be made plain as we go. Detective stories are so plentiful now that they do not sell.

And so we find Elsie, thus equipped, starting out in the world to seek her fortune. One trouble about the letter from Mr. Otter was that it did not bear the new address of the firm, which had moved about a month before. But Elsie thought she could find it. She had heard that policemen, when politely addressed, or thumbscrewed by an investigation committee, will give up information and addresses. So she boarded a downtown car at One Hundred and Seventy-seventh street and rode south to Forty-second, which she thought must surely be the end of the island. There she stood against the wall undecided, for the city’s roar and dash was new to her. Up where she had lived was rural New York, so far out that the milkmen awaken you in the morning by the squeaking of pumps instead of the rattling of cans.

A kind-faced, sunburned young man in a soft-brimmed hat went past Elsie into the Grand Central Depot. That was Hank Ross, of the Sunflower Ranch, in Idaho, on his way home from a visit to the East. Hank’s heart was heavy, for the Sunflower Ranch was a lonesome place, lacking the presence of a woman. He had hoped to find one during his visit who would congenially share his prosperity and home, but the girls of Gotham had not pleased his fancy. But, as he passed in, he noted, with a jumping of his pulses, the sweet, ingenuous face of Elsie and her pose of doubt and loneliness. With true and honest Western impulse he said to himself that here was his mate. He could love her, he knew; and he would surround her with so much comfort, and cherish her so carefully that she would be happy, and make two sunflowers grow on the ranch where there grew but one before.

Hank turned and went back to her. Backed by his never before questioned honesty of purpose, he approached the girl and removed his soft-brimmed hat. Elsie had but time to sum up his handsome frank face with one shy look of modest admiration when a burly cop hurled himself upon the ranchman, seized him by the collar and backed him against the wall. Two blocks away a burglar was coming out of an apartment-house with a bag of silverware on his shoulder; but that is neither here nor there.

“Carry on yez mashin’ tricks right before me eyes, will yez?” shouted the cop. “I’ll teach yez to speak to ladies on me beat that ye’re not acquainted with. Come along.”

Elsie turned away with a sigh as the ranchman was dragged away. She had liked the effect of his light blue eyes against his tanned complexion. She walked southward, thinking herself already in the district where her father used to work, and hoping to find some one who could direct her to the firm of Fox & Otter.

But did she want to find Mr. Otter? She had inherited much of the old cutter’s independence. How much better it would be if she could find work and support herself without calling on him for aid!

Elsie saw a sign “Employment Agency” and went in. Many girls were sitting against the wall in chairs. Several well-dressed ladies were looking them over. One white-haired, kind-faced old lady in rustling black silk hurried up to Elsie.

“My dear,” she said in a sweet, gentle voice, “are you looking for a position? I like your face and appearance so much. I want a young woman who will be half maid and half companion to me. You will have a good home and I will pay you $30 a month.”

Before Elsie could stammer forth her gratified acceptance, a young woman with gold glasses on her bony nose and her hands in her jacket pockets seized her arm and drew her aside.

“I am Miss Ticklebaum,” said she, “of the Association for the Prevention of Jobs Being Put Up on Working Girls Looking for Jobs. We prevented forty-seven girls from securing positions last week. I am here to protect you. Beware of any one who offers you a job. How do you know that this woman does not want to make you work as a breaker-boy in a coal mine or murder you to get your teeth? If you accept work of any kind without permission of our association you will be arrested by one of our agents.”

“But what am I to do?” asked Elsie. “I have no home or money. I must do something. Why am I not allowed to accept this kind lady’s offer?”

“I do not know,” said Miss Ticklebaum. “That is the affair of our Committee on the Abolishment of Employers. It is my duty simply to see that you do not get work. You will give me your name and address and report to our secretary every Thursday. We have 600 girls on the waiting list who will in time be allowed to accept positions as vacancies occur on our roll of Qualified Employers, which now comprises twenty-seven names. There is prayer, music and lemonade in our chapel the third Sunday of every month.”

Elsie hurried away after thanking Miss Ticklebaum for her timely warning and advice. After all, it seemed that she must try to find Mr. Otter.

But after walking a few blocks she saw a sign, “Cashier wanted,” in the window of a confectionery store. In she went and applied for the place, after casting a quick glance over her shoulder to assure herself that the job-preventer was not on her trail.

The proprietor of the confectionery was a benevolent old man with a peppermint flavor, who decided, after questioning Elsie pretty closely, that she was the very girl he wanted. Her services were needed at once, so Elsie, with a thankful heart, drew off her tan coat and prepared to mount the cashier’s stool.

But before she could do so a gaunt lady wearing steel spectacles and black mittens stood before her, with a long finger pointing, and exclaimed: “Young woman, hesitate!”

Elsie hesitated.

“Do you know,” said the black-and-steel lady, “that in accepting this position you may this day cause the loss of a hundred lives in agonizing physical torture and the sending as many souls to perdition?”

“Why, no,” said Elsie, in frightened tones. “How could I do that?”

“Rum,” said the lady—“the demon rum. Do you know why so many lives are lost when a theatre catches fire? Brandy balls. The demon rum lurking in brandy balls. Our society women while in theatres sit grossly intoxicated from eating these candies filled with brandy. When the fire fiend sweeps down upon them they are unable to escape. The candy stores are the devil’s distilleries. If you assist in the distribution of these insidious confections you assist in the destruction of the bodies and souls of your fellow-beings, and in the filling of our jails, asylums and almshouses. Think, girl, ere you touch the money for which brandy balls are sold.”

“Dear me,” said Elsie, bewildered. “I didn’t know there was rum in brandy balls. But I must live by some means. What shall I do?”

“Decline the position,” said the lady, “and come with me. I will tell you what to do.”

After Elsie had told the confectioner that she had changed her mind about the cashiership she put on her coat and followed the lady to the sidewalk, where awaited an elegant victoria.

“Seek some other work,” said the black-and-steel lady, “and assist in crushing the hydra-headed demon rum.” And she got into the victoria and drove away.

“I guess that puts it up to Mr. Otter again,” said Elsie, ruefully, turning down the street. “And I’m sorry, too, for I’d much rather make my way without help.”

Near Fourteenth street Elsie saw a placard tacked on the side of a doorway that read: “Fifty girls, neat sewers, wanted immediately on theatrical costumes. Good pay.”

She was about to enter, when a solemn man, dressed all in black, laid his hand on her arm.

“My dear girl,” he said, “I entreat you not to enter that dressing-room of the devil.”

“Goodness me!” exclaimed Elsie, with some impatience. “The devil seems to have a cinch on all the business in New York. What’s wrong about the place?”

“It is here,” said the solemn man, “that the regalia of Satan—in other words, the costumes worn on the stage—are manufactured. The stage is the road to ruin and destruction. Would you imperil your soul by lending the work of your hands to its support? Do you know, my dear girl, what the theatre leads to? Do you know where actors and actresses go after the curtain of the playhouse has fallen upon them for the last time?”

“Sure,” said Elsie. “Into vaudeville. But do you think it would be wicked for me to make a little money to live on by sewing? I must get something to do pretty soon.”

“The flesh-pots of Egypt,” exclaimed the reverend gentleman, uplifting his hands. “I beseech you, my child, to turn away from this place of sin and iniquity.”

“But what will I do for a living?” asked Elsie. “I don’t care to sew for this musical comedy, if it’s as rank as you say it is; but I’ve got to have a job.”

“The Lord will provide,” said the solemn man. “There is a free Bible class every Sunday afternoon in the basement of the cigar store next to the church. Peace be with you. Amen. Farewell.”

Elsie went on her way. She was soon in the downtown district where factories abound. On a large brick building was a gilt sign, “Posey & Trimmer, Artificial Flowers.” Below it was hung a newly stretched canvas bearing the words, “Five hundred girls wanted to learn trade. Good wages from the start. Apply one flight up.”

Elsie started toward the door, near which were gathered in groups some twenty or thirty girls. One big girl with a black straw hat tipped down over her eyes stepped in front of her.

“Say, you’se,” said the girl, “are you’se goin’ in there after a job?”

“Yes,” said Elsie; “I must have work.”

“Now don’t do it,” said the girl. “I’m chairman of our Scab Committee. There’s 400 of us girls locked out just because we demanded 50 cents a week raise in wages, and ice water, and for the foreman to shave off his mustache. You’re too nice a looking girl to be a scab. Wouldn’t you please help us along by trying to find a job somewhere else, or would you’se rather have your face pushed in?”

“I’ll try somewhere else,” said Elsie.

She walked aimlessly eastward on Broadway, and there her heart leaped to see the sign, “Fox & Otter,” stretching entirely across the front of a tall building. It was as though an unseen guide had led her to it through the by-ways of her fruitless search for work.

She hurried into the store and sent in to Mr. Otter by a clerk her name and the letter he had written her father. She was shown directly into his private office.

Mr. Otter arose from his desk as Elsie entered and took both hands with a hearty smile of welcome. He was a slightly corpulent man of nearly middle age, a little bald, gold spectacled, polite, well dressed, radiating.

“Well, well, and so this is Beatty’s little daughter! Your father was one of our most efficient and valued employees. He left nothing? Well, well. I hope we have not forgotten his faithful services. I am sure there is a vacancy now among our models. Oh, it is easy work—nothing easier.”

Mr. Otter struck a bell. A long-nosed clerk thrust a portion of himself inside the door.

“Send Miss Hawkins in,” said Mr. Otter. Miss Hawkins came.

“Miss Hawkins,” said Mr. Otter, “bring for Miss Beatty to try on one of those Russian sable coats and—let’s see—one of those latest model black tulle hats with white tips.”

Elsie stood before the full-length mirror with pink cheeks and quick breath. Her eyes shone like faint stars. She was beautiful. Alas! she was beautiful.

I wish I could stop this story here. Confound it! I will. No; it’s got to run it out. I didn’t make it up. I’m just repeating it.

I’d like to throw bouquets at the wise cop, and the lady who rescues Girls from Jobs, and the prohibitionist who is trying to crush brandy balls, and the sky pilot who objects to costumes for stage people (there are others), and all the thousands of good people who are at work protecting young people from the pitfalls of a great city; and then wind up by pointing out how they were the means of Elsie reaching her father’s benefactor and her kind friend and rescuer from poverty. This would make a fine Elsie story of the old sort. I’d like to do this; but there’s just a word or two to follow.

While Elsie was admiring herself in the mirror, Mr. Otter went to the telephone booth and called up some number. Don’t ask me what it was.

“Oscar,” said he, “I want you to reserve the same table for me this evening. … What? Why, the one in the Moorish room to the left of the shrubbery. … Yes; two. … Yes, the usual brand; and the ’85 Johannisburger with the roast. If it isn’t the right temperature I’ll break your neck. … No; not her … No, indeed … A new one—a peacherino, Oscar, a peacherino!”

Tired and tiresome reader, I will conclude, if you please, with a paraphrase of a few words that you will remember were written by him—by him of Gad’s Hill, before whom, if you doff not your hat, you shall stand with a covered pumpkin—aye, sir, a pumpkin.

Lost, Your Excellency. Lost, Associations and Societies. Lost, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Lost, Reformers and Lawmakers, born with heavenly compassion in your hearts, but with the reverence of money in your souls. And lost thus around us every day.