

The Free Press' Short Story

THE BLUNDERER

BY ESCA G. RODGER

IF Mr. Bob gets back and finds mistakes in our filing again...

At the thought, Jo Randall's lovely sensitive mouth puckered itself in an involuntary—ho-ho—sob.

Now where is the world was Mary Lou? Jo's smooth brown head came up in a quick glance at the clock.

"I'll have to speed up," Jo reflected. "Everything's got to be right when Mr. Bob gets back."

Bob Fielding didn't overlook mistakes. He was hard on a blunderer. Yet the driving young field manager exacted more of himself than of any-

one else, and he was friendly when there was time for friendliness. Jo had often wished she knew him better.

But he never would. "He doesn't think of me as a person he might like to know," Jo told herself hotly.

The door burst open and Mary Lou came in with a rush. "Easy!" Jo begged. "Don't make so much breeze you mix up these orders."

"Shh!" pleaded Mary Lou, tugging her coat and blue beret on a chair and slipping over to stand by Jo's desk while she tucked stray yellow wisps into her curly knot.

"It's all right this time," Mary Lou insisted. "Honest! Mr. Fielding asked me to stop on my way back from lunch and get him two tickets for the Guild play tomorrow night."

"In the center or on the side?" Jo asked cautiously. Mary Lou grinned. "You would bring that up, I never thought to ask. I just said, 'two in the seventh'."

"Your filing system's out of order," Jo chuckled. "I don't file things in my hand-bag!"

Suddenly, violently, she turned the bag upside down and shook it over Jo's desk top. Then, in the midst of the mad shower of keys, small change, compact, comb, crumpled handkerchief, hairpins, pencil, carnets, and a sample tube of tooth-paste, Mr. Fielding's bell-rang twice.

"Oh, oh!" she gasped, and dashed to her own desk for pad and pencil. "Please stuff all that junk back in the bag, Jo-po. I'm sorry!"

"Before Jo could move, the outer door opened to admit of all people—Mr. Bob!"

"How are you?" How's everything going?" "Why, why, all right," Jo stammered. If he'd only go into the inner office without noticing that mess on her desk!

"A little. Managed to make the three-day trip in two and a half." Then his eyes fell inevitably, it seemed to Jo, on the frivolous, not quite fastidious array of personal possessions; and his friendly smile changed, taking on a faintly ironical edge.

"Cleaning house?" he shrugged, and swung on into the inner office. Scarlett-faced, Jo swept the litter

into a heap. He'd thought those things were hers! He'd go on thinking that. She couldn't shout after him that she wasn't, that she didn't carry such a messy jumble of things in her bag, and that she didn't use office time for personal "house-cleaning."

It was a good-looking bag. Mary Lou could spend her salary on smart bags, for she didn't really need a job. But her father, an old friend of Mr. Fielding's, wanted her to work for awhile; he thought she would learn to be more responsible.

"Any time?" Jo tumbled to herself, snapping the blue bag shut. "Mary Lou could file orders from now till 1995, and she'd still file Sam Jones' order sheet in beside John Smith's and laugh and say they both began with S."

Then she brought herself up short. "Yeow! What a cat you're turning out to be. Get to work and forget Mary Lou's blunders. They're none of your business."

Fine. But inaccurate. In the very next half hour, Jo was to face Bob Fielding's scorching wrath as the result of one of Mary Lou's flights of filing fancy. Mary Lou came out of the inner office to clip some advertising columns Mr. Fielding wanted. Jo worked on sorting orders until the inner office bell rang once—her signal.

In the inner office, Bob Fielding was intently discussing with his father the latest reports turned in by the scores of salesmen out in the field.

"Bill Kendrick's slipping!" Bob was saying. "Look at those Lakeville figures on that condensed report. Bill made twice as many sales in Lakeville last month, I'm sure!"

"That's the first one," Crimson, Jo thrust it at him. "I'm looking for the second."

"Why weren't the two together? Well, hurry it, please." He strode back, ignoring the sheet she held out. Of course. Silly to offer it to him. He wanted to compare the two sheets; the first was no good alone.

The second Kendrick sheet wasn't anywhere in that file! Not anywhere. Oh, she couldn't go in and say that. Wait. Wait!

Breathlessly she jerked out the drawer that held the W order sheets. It would be in there, she was certain of it! Filed under W for William Kendricks. In one of Mary Lou's crazy-absent-minded moments.

She raced through the W orders to George Williams, Louise J. Williams, Martin Williamson. She'd surely find it in among those some where. That little idiot of a Mary Lou! And Bob Fielding was blaming her. Jo's eyes blurred.

She blinked away the blur and stared down despairingly at the last order beginning with William. No William Kendrick order in there! Where could it be?

Desperately she went through the rest of the W sheets, clear through to the tall gray X divider, the last of the file, escaping work because no salesman's name began with X. Jo stared at it in a daze of unreasonableness.

"You're use useless as Mary Lou!" she muttered. "Well, she'd tried every guess she could make! Mr. Bob was going to have to wait until she'd gone through all the files, folder by folder. It might take two days. She'd better go and tell him so."

She went, half sick with chagrin. When she had finished her announcement, she thought she saw a sympathetic twinkle in Mr. Fielding's eyes, but the look in Mr. Bob's was like a lash.

"After all," he said, "the reason we employ two filing clerks is so we can have prompt service. This isn't the first delay by any means, and I'm wondering if we couldn't get better results with just one person on the filing."

What do you think, Miss Randall?" Jo's breath seemed strangling in her throat. She couldn't speak. She could hardly think. So Bob Fielding wanted to fire her! For mistakes she hadn't made. She'd have to go, and Mary Lou would stay on. Mary Lou, the blunderer! It wasn't fair, but she wouldn't explain—she couldn't. With a struggle she found her voice.

"If you want me to go," she said, "it's all right."

Mr. Fielding interrupted. "Easy now, Bob, let's think over this filing clerk situation. Run along, Miss Jo. We can get on without those Kendrick sheets."

Blindly Jo turned and went out, back to her desk; but she couldn't work; her mind was in a turmoil. She burned with resentment. Bob Fielding had been unjust!

Neither that handling affair nor the order sheet slip-up had been her fault. She'd clear up her desk and walk out of Fielding & Fielding's without even finishing the day! No. That would be childish. Better keep her self-respect even if she had lost her job. She'd wait and get every file in irreproachable order for Mr. Fielding before she left.

But she hoped Mr. Bob wouldn't be able to find anything he wanted! She set her teeth—and then surprised herself by relaxing in a shabby grin. What a silly hope that was! She began to consider things more calmly, conscious now of her own loss of her job. Where would she get another? Besides, she wanted to make good on this one.

But she had made good! They'd find it out, too, after she'd gone and the files were left in Mary Lou's crazy care. Wait till Mr. Bob got in one of his mad rushes of work—Mary Lou'd slow him down. Only she'd slow down Mr. Fielding, too.

Jo's face grew very sober. She wanted things to go well in this office; she had taken pride in her work. Why should she lose that pride in a fury of resentment? Shame, creeping over her. She was giving up, quitting under fire. What was the right way to handle this situation? She sat thinking hard.

Mary Lou, who had been glancing at her, finally got up and came over. "What's the trouble, Jo?"

Jo, with a new-born resolution crystallizing, looked at Mary Lou for a moment without speaking. She shrank from what must be done. Yet that was the right way to straighten out such a muddle as this. The sane, honest, mature way, best for all concerned.

"Mary Lou," she began, and went on swiftly, concisely, a little huskily, until a startled, white-faced Mary Lou interrupted: "Jo, I understand—I know what you want. All it's the thing to do, of course. Let's go in right now, before I get shivery."

It seemed to Jo as she and Mary Lou went together to knock on the inner office door that this was the hardest thing she had ever done. Mary Lou's colorless face made her heart ache. She wished "Come in!" and the two of them were standing before Mr. Fielding and Mr. Bob.

"About the filing!" Mary Lou jerked. "It's all my fault, it always is. I'm just sloppy about filing, I guess, but you can't fire Jo for it, Mr. Bob—it isn't fair!"

"What?" ejaculated Mr. Bob. Miss Randall, did you really think we'd—"Of course she did!" Mary Lou gulped indignantly, groping for her handkerchief. "Didn't you say so? But Jo's grand at filing, and she was grand to give me a chance to tell you that I'm the blunderer, and not let me hate myself because I'd let you..."

"Wait, wait," protested Mr. Fielding. "This is getting too complicated. Bob, I told you Miss Jo really thought you wanted to dismiss her. His eyes twinkled at his son's rueful face. "Now let's straighten this out. Mary Lou, I've suspected for some weeks that you were a pest in the file. Hereafter, Miss Jo's to have full charge of them. You keep out of it!"

"Yes, sir," said Mary Lou. "It's all right. I'll—" "Don't you tell us you'll go," Mr. Fielding interrupted. "That's Miss Jo's line." His eyes twinkled at the girl who blushed. "You're going to be reception clerk, Mary Lou, and errand-runner-in-chief for Fielding & Fielding."

"I'll love that!" cried Mary Lou, dropping her handkerchief. "I'll run my feet off for you, Mr. Fielding. And for Mr. Bob, too," she added as an afterthought. "I'd be glad to be forgiven," Mr. Bob said meekly, restoring the handkerchief.

His subdued twinkle reminded Jo of his father's, and she wanted to smile back at him. But her hurt resentment lingered, and she looked away, letting her eyes rest on an open cabinet file.

"Oh, Mr. Fielding," exclaimed Mary Lou. "About errands. I have those Guild play tickets for you." She laughed guiltily. "I dumped everything in my bag out on Jo's desk looking for them, and then they were in it. I found them in my coat pocket and they're seventh row, centre. I'll get them."

She scudded out, and Bob Fielding looked at Jo. "So that was it," he said. "I'm sorry again, Miss Jo. Is

Mary Lou the prize blunderer around here, or am I?" But Jo's memory curiously stirred, by the tall gray divider in the cabinet file, was looking back at him in appalled dismay. "I think I am!" she gasped, and dashed out of the office.

She was back in a moment, with Mary Lou at her heels. Mary Lou was triumphantly waving the Guild tickets, but Jo was even more triumphantly flourishing the missing Kendrick order sheet.

"It was behind the X divider!" she explained. "I found it last month in with the W sheets filed for William. Instead of Kendrick, you know and dropped it behind the X divider for a minute for safe-keeping, and then forgot it. I'm the prize blunderer myself."

Suddenly the inner office rocked with laughter. Then, as it subsided, Mr. Fielding, after a glance at the tickets Mary Lou still held, began to chuckle again.

"I can't use those," he said. "I'd forgotten another engagement for tomorrow night. And just as I was feeling pleasantly perfect among all you mistake makers! Well, after all, it's hampering to feel too perfect. Enroll me in the blunderers' club, too—and return those tickets, Mary Lou."

"Wait," said Mr. Bob. "Maybe I can use them. Let me have them, Mary Lou. And how about our getting back on the job now?"

Back at her desk, Jo drew a long breath. What an afternoon. She wasn't proud of herself, but she'd seen things through and she didn't have to be ashamed of herself either. All at once she realized that a boy fielding was standing by her desk.

"Miss Jo," he was saying. "I hear the Guild's putting on a fine entertainment tomorrow night. Won't you prove your forgiving spirit by going with me?"

Jo's heart was pounding. "I'd love to go," she gasped. "I've always wished you'd ask me to go somewhere." Then she turned scarlet. "Ouch! I didn't mean to say that!"

"Another blunder!" Bob Fielding with a new look in his eyes, and laughed, but he stood gazing down at added in a lower tone: "Thanks, in I'm glad you made that one."

Keep Children In Rural Life Urges Doctor

Expert Warns They Deteriorate In London and Should Go To Country to Stay and Thrive

LONDON, (CP)—London children should be evacuated permanently from the capital, said Dr. Charles Oshfield, director of the Child Welfare Commission, warning that those who remain are "deteriorating physically, becoming mentally listless and degenerating in all respects."

Workers among slum children of London, declared the Harley Street doctor, find rickets is beginning to increase. "That pale faces, tense nerves, weakened bodies are becoming more and more prevalent among the children who are spending most of their time in shelters and underground habitations."

Need Light and Air "The children are suffering from lack of light, lack of air, lack of fresh vegetables, and lack of the ability to spend a half-penny or a penny upon oranges, bananas and apples."

In addition there is a shelter rash beginning to show itself, which is not scabies, but which is probably the result of the conditions under which the children are living.

Not only are the children deteriorating physically, but having nothing to do and no school training, they are becoming mentally listless and degenerating in all respects. "It is in the country alone that the children can now be provided with a sufficiency of those greens and salads and fresh vegetables which, essential as they are to the children's health, are now lacking in their dietary."

Writing to the British Medical Journal, Dr. Oshfield contended the London County Council was spending money wastefully. Many children had never been evacuated, he declared. A high percentage had been evacuated once and returned. Some had been evacuated twice or even three times. Some mothers planned to evacuate their children again as soon as the weather improved.

The idea growing up in their minds is that they can use the evacuated scheme as a means of getting a holiday in the country for themselves, and for their children.

Nazis Confiscate Children's Food German authorities in Warsaw have confiscated all herrings, sausages and meats prepared for feeding children in the holidays, and 15,000 pounds of lard, sausage and meat in the central stock-house of the Metropolitan Committee of Social Assistance.

WAR 25 Years Ago

Kut-el-Amara was Lost But a Year Later Baghdad Was Taken By British

BY H. H. GORDON Twenty-five years after the British campaign in Mesopotamia suffered a severe check at Kut-el-Amara, British soldiers are again on duty in the strategic area that lies between Turkey and India.

Protection of British oil interests was the prime reason for the dispatch of the 143 days in the little town on the Persian Gulf recently and it was one of the factors that led to the campaign in the First Great War.

On April 29, 1916, Gen. Charles Townshend and the remnants of his Indian division surrendered to the Turks at Kut-el-Amara when on the point of starvation after a siege of 143 days in the little town on the Tigris. At the time of the capitulation some 9,000 British and Indian troops made up the garrison.

Calculated to impress the Arab population, Townshend's sweep up the Tigris toward Baghdad later in 1915 was a feat that brought joy in Allied countries—at a time when the failure of the Dardanelles expedition and immobilization of Anglo-French troops at Salonika had provided disappointing news. But the British in Mesopotamia paid the penalty for a move inadequately planned.

Relief Failed When almost in sight of Baghdad, Townshend was compelled to retreat more than 100 miles to Kut through lack of reinforcements and efforts to relieve him failed. These attempts cost the British 24,000 casualties. Of 2,680 British non-commissioned officers and privates taken at Kut, 1,300 died and some 400 were never traced. The Indian soldiers fared no better and a large number perished in making their way across the Syrian desert.

During the ensuing summer a big Baghdad offensive was planned. Great developments took place on the Anglo-Indian line of communications and a large amount of heavy artillery was accumulated. At the head of a force four times as large as Townshend's, Sir Stanley Maude finally took Baghdad on March 10, 1917.

CANBERRA (CP)—Preliminary estimates for establishing and equipping the Australian Armored Corps—now training in Australia (amounted to more than \$97,500,000.

Make Full Year A Mother's Day

May 11 Good Time to Start With Resolve to Keep It Up

Canadian Press Staff Writer Mother's Day dated for May 11 this year ought to be a 365-day event. She's on the job that much and she ought to rate consideration and kindness that often.

But Mother's Day itself is like New Year's Day a good time to make resolutions. Naturally, children enjoy the spectacular presentation of gifts on Mother's Day. It is fun to see her happy. But that isn't enough.

Here is a good start in making resolutions for year-round consideration of Mother: Help her have at least a short vacation. Perhaps you cannot remember her even having one. If it is impossible for her to leave home, let her vacation at home.

Co-operation If the whole family pitches in to take over housekeeping duties, you may not live as well for a while but you will give her a chance to rest, read or get about the neighborhood.

If Charlie does the dishes, Maggie the cleaning and Dad chips in with some of his own good cooking, Mother can have a holiday at home. It is a good way to find out how she keeps the family going smoothly. You will appreciate more than ever the effort she makes.

You could be sure, too, that she entertains a friend or two of her own instead of being hostess to the family's guests all of the time.

You can give her regular opportunities to get away by herself even if she has nothing to do but window shop, go to a museum or to a park. She is a human being, you know, and deserves a breathing spell some time.

Canada Counts Forest Wealth

OTTAWA, (CP)—An inventory of Canada's forest resources, represented by trees growing over an area estimated at 1,254,082 square miles, is going forward in offices of the Dominion Forest Service.

Maps giving information on wood resources of 112,137 square miles have already been prepared for Dominion services photographs in addition to 70,000 square miles—where aerial surveys by provinces and companies have made maps possible.

Total aerial photographs available cover about 500,000 square miles of agricultural and forest land in Canada and from these, by means of expert knowledge and delicate instruments officials of the forest service are able to take data required to indicate the wood reserves of the Dominion. The total land area of Canada is 3,857,247 square miles.

BOBBIE'S SAFE The head of the house was reading a newspaper article very carefully. Presently he remarked to his wife: "Do you know, dear, I think there is something in what this article says—that the cleverness of the father often proves a stumbling-block to the son."

His wife heaved a sigh of relief. "Well, thank goodness," she said, "your Bobby won't have anything to fall over."

You Roll Them Better With OGDEN'S FINE CUT CIGARETTE TOBACCO

HAVE You PLEDGED ALL YOU CAN TO BUY WAR SAVINGS CERTIFICATES regularly? YOU KNOW that Canada's War Effort requires a steady flow of money—week by week, month by month—loaned from the savings of her people. IF YOU HAVEN'T pledged yourself—ACT NOW! Canada needs ALL you can save and lend. There are three ways to pledge: 1. Ask your employer to deduct a specified sum from your salary or wages each pay day. 2. Authorize your bank to deduct it each month from your savings account. 3. Sign an "Honour Pledge" to buy Stamps or Certificates for a specified amount at regular intervals. Keep up your Pledge!... INCREASE YOUR REGULAR INVESTMENTS IN WAR SAVINGS CERTIFICATES