

Run, Sheep, Run

a story by Rosemary Howland

In our school there's one crowd that runs everything. Even though I'm in that crowd, I don't know exactly what it takes to belong. It's not money or brains or looks. It's sort of a sureness and coolness that either you have or you don't. Whatever it is, Mattie Babcock sure didn't have it.

The term had already started when Mattie entered Edison High. I was in the hall with Barney Tate when I first saw her. "Wow!" he said. "What is that?"

Mattie was a big girl. Not fat, but tall and big-boned. Her clothes hung on her as if she could have turned around inside them. Her face was plain, and her hair was drab. But the main thing you noticed was the way she gave everyone a big, toothy grin.

Mattie really wasn't a freak. She might have fit in somewhere. But she started off badly the very first day.

Have you seen new students in the lunchroom looking lost? They finally find an empty table in a corner. Not Mattie. She looked around happily, came over to our table and sat down. "Hi," she said. "I'm Mattie Babcock."

We all stopped talking. There were five of us at the table – the same five who always sat there. Finally, I realized Mattie was waiting for our names.

"I'm Nancy Martin," I said. The others gave their names. Carol Deering. Peggy Allen. Laurie Nelson. Beth Wade.

"I sure do like it here," Mattie said. "This sure is a swell school."

"I guess it's all right," Carol said.

"All right?" Mattie waved a fork at her. "It's lots better than that. In my old school, we didn't have anything like this. No gym. No auditorium." She went on raving about our school.

Afterwards, Peggy said, "I hope she hasn't adopted us. Something tells me she'd be hard to get rid of." That turned out to be true.

She got to be a joke. Barney Tate would put in a set of those plastic false teeth. "I'm Mattie Babcock," he'd say. "Isn't this a swell place?"

Everybody would laugh. I didn't feel mean about laughing. She was so dumb. In classes she was smart enough. But with other kids she was too dumb to know they were making fun of her. Even when we were rude to her, she just smiled. Everyone said that she just didn't have any feelings – except about Rick Sanders.

Mattie was too friendly with the rest of us. But when Rick was around, she froze. Her face got red when she looked at him.

Mattie wasn't the first girl to fall for Rick. Our crowd leads the school, and Rick leads our crowd. The thought of Mattie and Rick together was the joke of the year.

Rick didn't mind the kidding. He started talking about "my girl Mattie." He'd go out of his way to speak to her in the hall, while we tried not to laugh.

When I found out that Mattie was taking the whole thing seriously, I felt a little ashamed. She seemed to like me. She'd follow me around whenever I didn't brush her off. From the way she talked, she seemed to think Rick really liked her. Maybe she didn't really believe it. But that was what she wanted to believe.

It would have been all right if it hadn't been for the senior dance. Barney Tate had asked me long before. Rick Sanders was sure to ask either Carol or Beth. But nobody knew which one it would be.

One night some of us were hanging around. Barney winked at me and said, "I hear Rick is taking Mattie Babcock to the dance."

Rick pretended to be surprised. "How did the news get out?" he asked.

That's how it started. The next day, the whole school was laughing about the story. Everybody knew it was a joke. Everybody except Mattie.

After school, she came up to me. "Nancy, you get around a lot," she said. "I mean, I thought you might know who Rick Saunders is taking to the senior dance."

I didn't know what to say. She'd heard the whispering. And she believed it! I was mad at her for being stupid. I was mad at the crowd for starting the story. And I was mad at myself for not knowing how to stop it.

"I don't know," I finally said. "Rick hasn't asked anyone yet."

Her face brightened. "Well, I just wondered," she said.

That week, Laurie and Peggy were in charge of the bulletin board in the main hall. They put up a poster about the dance. They also put up pieces of paper in the shape of balloons. On each one were the names of a couple who were dates for the dance.

"It looks good," Barney said. "But something seems to be missing."

The next day a new balloon was on the board. It had the names of Rick Sanders and Mattie Babcock on it.

I don't know why I didn't take it down. I thought of it. But Barney was there, waiting for me to laugh. I remember thinking I'd come back later when no one was around. But later turned out to be too late. When I came back, Mattie was there, too.

Even Mattie must have known it was a joke. But just then, Rick Sanders came down the hall.

It would have been better if he'd gotten mad. But he likes to act like a good sport. After he looked at the board, he turned to Mattie and winked. "Well, Mattie," he said, "It looks like we're a couple."

It was a smooth way of passing it off. Mattie should have known it was just a way of talking. But she didn't understand about joking. I watched her smiling and blushing. And I felt a little sick.

The story spread through the school.

"She actually believes it," Peggy said. "Can you imagine?"

The next day Mattie waited for me outside my first class. "I need your advice," she said. "It's about the senior dance."

I felt myself getting cold all over. She said, "I don't have a formal. In my old school, we didn't have formal dances. But now I need one." She laughed happily. "I talked to my mother. She has this purple velvet evening dress. It's old and it's not in style. But she thought she could make it over for me. Nancy, do you think that would be all right to wear?"

I wanted to explain everything to her. I wanted to explain it carefully and kindly, so that nobody would ever be able to do anything like this to her again. But Laurie and Peggy were waiting for me down the hall. "Come on, Nancy," Laurie called.

My thoughts got mixed up. I could only say "I don't know. Maybe purple velvet is a little old-fashioned."

"Come on, Nancy," Laurie called.

I started away, but Mattie grabbed my arm. "Maybe you'd come over to my house and look at it, Nancy."

I backed away. "Sure," I said. "But I can't today. Maybe tomorrow."

"Tomorrow will be swell," she said.

"It's about time," Laurie said as I joined them. "The suspense is over."

"What suspense?"

"Rick Sanders," Peggy said. "He finally asked Carol to the dance."

So the next day there was a new balloon on the bulletin board. It had the names of Rick Sanders and Carol Deering on it. I stayed away from the board all morning. I didn't want to be there when Mattie saw it. I wasn't. Peggy told me about it.

"Nothing happened," she said, sounding almost disappointed. "She just turned and walked away."

I don't know what I expected. Maybe I expected Mattie to cry. Maybe I expected her to quit school or run away. She didn't do anything. She kept on going to classes. But she wasn't the same. She didn't smile any more. And there was something about the way she looked at me that scared me. I kept feeling there was something I ought to do.

It was two days before I dared speak to her. I'd stayed late to finish a chemistry experiment. When I got to the locker room, it was empty except for her.

"Mattie?" I said.

She didn't turn around or answer me. She kept taking things out of her locker.

"What are you doing?" I asked stupidly.

"Cleaning up my locker," she said without turning.

I stood there, wishing I knew what to say. "Mattie, I - I'm sorry."

She looked at me then. The way she looked at me was terrible. "You could have told me," she said. "Why didn't you?"

I knew it was no use trying to make excuses. I couldn't say, "It wasn't *my* fault. I was just going along with the crowd." So I didn't say anything. Then I walked away, knowing what it was that I had to do.

I had to get out of the crowd. I had to stop being afraid of what they'd say or what they'd think. I had to decide for myself whether people like Mattie had feelings.

I meant to drop out of the crowd for good. I meant to call Barney and break our date for the dance. I meant to be just myself. I really meant to.

I had it all straight in my head. But that evening Peggy dropped in, and we got to talking. By the time she left, everything was confused.

I didn't break up with the crowd. I still go with Barney, though I'll never like him as much as I used to. Our crowd still runs everything at school. Things are almost the same as ever.

Sometimes I see Mattie in the hall, minding her business and never smiling. Then I think Mattie's not so bad. If somebody would show her how to make the best of that eagerness she used to have. If somebody ...

But then I remember all that Peggy said. A person would be crazy to toss aside the best crowd in the school. As for Mattie, you can't feel responsible for everyone who comes along. A person has a right to choose her own friends. Hasn't she? You have to let people like Mattie take care of themselves. Don't you?