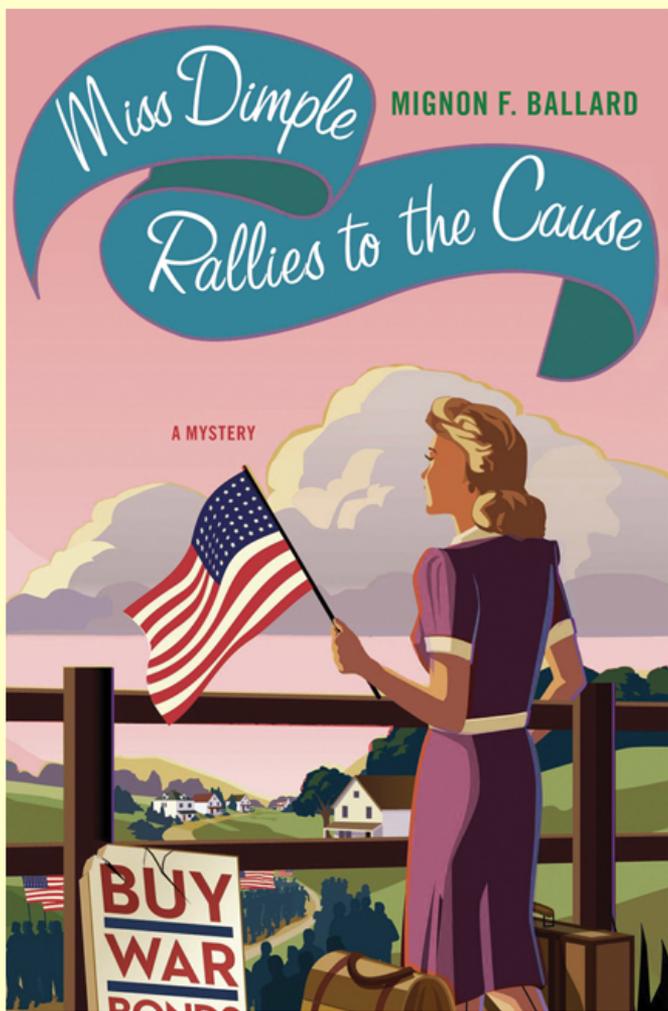


**READ IT FIRST**



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

MISS DIMPLE RALLIES TO THE CAUSE. Copyright © 2011 by Mignon F. Ballard. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

[www.minotaurbooks.com](http://www.minotaurbooks.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ballard, Mignon Franklin.

Miss Dimple rallies to the cause : a mystery / Mignon F. Ballard.—1st ed.  
p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-312-61475-1

1. Women teachers—Fiction. 2. Elementary school teachers—Fiction.
3. Georgia—History—20th century—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3552.A466M59 2011

813'.54—dc23

2011026760

First Edition: December 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## CHAPTER ONE

*D*arkness was an ally and trees don't tell. How deep was deep enough? The shovel struck a stone, a root, but the earth was softer here. Soon leaves would blanket this secluded spot. Oh, God, forgive me!



“Virginia?” Miss Dimple Kilpatrick stood in the doorway of the Elderberry Library and looked about. On low shelves beneath leaded casement windows, open now in early September, worn volumes tumbled against one another, waiting for the next reader, and Miss Dimple hesitated before rejecting the urge to straighten them. Cattus, the gray-striped resident cat, slept curled in the rocking chair by the empty stone fireplace, and a vase of wilting pink roses shed petals on the dark, glossy surface of the piano in the corner. Probably left over from the Woman’s Club meeting earlier in the week, Miss Dimple thought, stepping closer to inhale their dainty fragrance. Cattus, so named by the librarian, Virginia Balliew, who had taught Latin years ago before she married Albert, jumped down and curled around her ankles, and Dimple stooped briefly to stroke

her. If she didn't love teaching so, Dimple Kilpatrick thought she would be perfectly happy spending her days in this blissfully peaceful place, and she'd have to admit she was sometimes a little envious of her librarian friend.

"Virginia?" she called again, noticing the half-filled mug of coffee on the large oak desk where a stack of books waited to be checked in and her friend's familiar blue raincoat on the coat rack behind it. Probably taking a restroom break, she thought, or chatting with a patron in the tiny nonfiction section in the rear. Virginia didn't run what Dimple considered "a tight ship" and was more relaxed in her routine than she herself could possibly endure, but the tiny log building everyone called "the cabin" was the hub of their town, with people constantly drifting in and out to browse through books, catch up on local news, or stretch out on the old cracked leather chaise lounge to read. It wasn't unusual to find somebody belting out the latest tune on the piano, and Virginia herself was known to entertain listeners with "Take Me Home Again, Kathleen," when the mood struck her. It was the only song she could play all the way through.

The room smelled of old books, old wood smoke, and new fall apples heaped in a wooden bowl on the window sill, and Miss Dimple basked in the comfort of it. She added the two Christie mysteries she was returning to books that had come in earlier and stuck her head in the back room just as a figure darted between the stacks. She was just in time to glimpse the top of Virginia's once-red hair over the row of fraying *World Book Encyclopedias*.

"What in the world are you doing back here, Virginia? I've called to you two times. You might want to consider getting your hearing checked," Miss Dimple demanded.

"Oh, thank goodness it's you!" Her friend emerged sneezing. "I really have to dust back here . . . I thought you were Emmaline. She's supposed to be headed this way, and I'm just not in the mood to deal with her today."

“What about tomorrow?” Dimple suggested, smiling.

“Then, either.” Virginia followed her back into the larger room and switched on an ancient electric fan in the window. “Must be almost ninety in here. I was hoping that shower this morning would cool things off.”

“I don’t suppose that new Eberhart book’s come in,” Miss Dimple said, frowning as she checked authors under *E*. “And what’s all this about Emmaline? Is she still after you about the War Bond Rally?”

Virginia held up a copy of *Wolf in Man’s Clothing*. “Came in just this morning. I hid it behind Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.” She sighed, scooping Cattus onto her lap. “You know how Emmaline is—won’t take no for an answer. She’s been after me to ask her nephew to promote the rally, and I really don’t need the help, but Buddy’s between jobs again and she thinks it might be a good idea to give him something to do.”

Miss Dimple accepted the book with halfhearted dismay. “I know you shouldn’t have held this for me, but I’m so glad you did,” she said, setting the book aside with her bottomless handbag embroidered with multicolored yarn flowers. “Now, Buddy, he’s her brother’s son, isn’t he? Used to sell insurance.”

Virginia nodded. “And farm equipment . . . wholesale groceries . . . even furniture, if I remember right. Must be in his forties now, and too old for the service—thank the Lord—although I understand he drills with the Home Guard.” She laughed. “God help us if we have to depend on Buddy Oglesby to stand between us and the enemy!”

“But this is strictly volunteer. You’re not being paid to be in charge of the rally, and he certainly couldn’t expect compensation,” Miss Dimple pointed out as she selected a Lord Peter Wimsey mystery for Virginia to stamp.

“Emmaline thinks it will boost his confidence, and heaven knows he needs it.” Cattus leapt to the floor in pursuit of a shadow, and

Virginia stood and studied the wisteria vines outside the window behind her. "She's due here any minute for that meeting, and there's no way I can avoid her, so I suppose I'll just have to think of *something* to keep Buddy busy." She sighed. "You know I'm glad to do whatever's asked of me for the war effort, but if I had known Emmaline was going to take charge of entertainment for the rally, I might've had second thoughts."

"What meeting?" Miss Dimple gathered up her books and started for the door.

"A planning meeting for the entertainment." Virginia smiled. "Are you interested?"

She didn't expect an answer, and she didn't get one. "According to the *Eagle*, there's to be some kind of pageant at the high school," Dimple said, referring to the town newspaper. "I wondered who would direct it."

"Well, wonder no longer," Virginia said, shaking her head. "And I understand there will be a parade as well."

Dimple Kilpatrick nodded, thinking of the reason for the rally. "I think we could all use a bit of festivity. You can put me down for ticket sales."

The country was winding up its second full year in a war against the Axis, which included Germany, Japan, and Italy, and although the British Eighth Army had landed in Southern Italy, German troops still occupied Rome.

"Did I hear somebody mention a parade? That oughta liven things up around here!" Delia Varnadore, who had just turned twenty and looked even younger, maneuvered a baby carriage containing her six-month-old son through the doorway and wheeled it to one side. "Wonder if I could still remember how to twirl a baton," she said, giving the carriage a jiggle.

Miss Dimple doubted if she could've forgotten in the three years since she'd graduated from high school and married Ned Varnadore. "We were discussing the upcoming bond rally," she whispered,

peeking at the sleeping child. "I believe he looks something like your father." Charles Carr, if she remembered correctly, had that full lower lip and hair the color of daffodils.

"Oh, you don't have to whisper," Delia told her. "Tommy . . . well, we call him Pooh . . . can sleep through anything. Even the train doesn't bother him. Remember when you used to read us about Winnie the Pooh, Miss Dimple? Doesn't my little baby bear remind you of him?"

Miss Dimple didn't see the resemblance but she smiled and agreed just the same.

"Charlie's on the way," Delia said, referring to her older sister, who was beginning her second year teaching the third grade at Elderberry Grammar School, where Miss Dimple Kilpatrick had been shaping first graders for so many years she'd almost lost count. "She stopped by Mr. Cooper's to pick up a few things for supper. Jesse Dean called to let us know they got in a couple of bushels of sweet corn, and that's probably going to be the last of it till next summer."

Miss Dimple looked forward to enjoying some of the same at Phoebe Chadwick's rooming house, where she stayed. She had walked part of the way to town with the Chadwick's cook, Odessa Kirby, who was on the same mission. Jesse Dean Greeson, the grocer's young clerk, usually notified their regular customers when something special came in, and with wartime rationing, many foods were in short supply.

"I'm here to learn more about that pageant," Delia added, dropping into a chair. "Maybe that will give me something to do."

"I'd think you'd have your hands full with this little elf," Virginia said with an admiring glance at the baby.

"He keeps me busy, all right, but his conversational skills leave something to be desired. Most of my friends are away at college and Charlie's teaching all day." Delia shrugged. "With Mama working part-time at the ordnance plant over in Milledgeville, I miss having somebody to talk to."

“And what do you hear from Ned?” Miss Dimple asked. Ned Varnadore had been a bright child, but a bit impulsive. She’d never forget how he’d nearly frightened her to death when he came close to being hit by a car while chasing a ball into the street, and hoped he had become more cautious.

Delia’s face brightened. “I just came from the post office. I try to write him every day, but it’s been a while since we’ve heard anything . . . he’s in Italy, you know.” She stood abruptly and turned away to examine the titles at hand, and Dimple exchanged knowing looks with Virginia. Hardly more than a child herself, Delia Varnadore was lonely, frightened, and primarily responsible for a tiny life while her young husband risked his in a foreign land.

“Hope I’m not late!” Delia’s sister, Charlie, appeared in the doorway and paused to shift her bag of groceries to the floor before stepping in front of the fan. “I’ve had enough of this rain! Humidity’s awful out there, and it’s not much better in here. Aunt Lou promised to drop by later with a churn of peach ice cream, but it looks like we might have to drink it.”

As refreshment chairman of the club, Louise Willingham took advantage of that fact to miss much of the business part of the meetings, and everyone looked forward to the good things she would bring. Today she was using some of the last of the summer peaches for a favorite dessert.

“Let’s hope it holds off until after they get the cotton in,” Virginia said. “I understand they’re letting the schools out to help pick this Thursday if the fair weather lasts.” Everybody knew you couldn’t get a good price for wet cotton and a few days of sun should help to dry out the fields and the crop.

Charlie wasn’t sure how much actual picking to expect from her boisterous third graders, who considered the outing a good excuse for a picnic, but with most of the young men away at war, local farmers had to rely on whatever help they could get. She laughed. “Some of the mothers had the class making their own child-size

cotton sacks this morning out of whatever they could find in the rag bag, and I wish you could see the results!" She looked about. "They haven't started the meeting, have they? Annie's not here yet, and I know she promised to help choreograph some of the dance numbers."

Virginia looked at her watch. "Emmaline should be here soon, and I believe Reynolds Murphy has agreed to help organize the parade."

Charlie was glad. The owner of the local ten-cent store where just about everyone traded seemed glum since his wife ran off with that notions salesman a few years before and left him with their ten-year-old son. She hoped this would help him focus on something positive.

Delia tucked a receiving blanket around little Tommy's toes, although the day was still summertime hot. "Who else is coming?" she said.

"I believe Mr. Weaver mentioned something about it at dinner," Charlie told her. Sebastian Weaver, the new chorus director at the high school, had taken up residence at Phoebe Chadwick's rooming house, where Charlie's friend Annie and Miss Dimple lived, and Charlie and several others from the community took their midday meals there as well.

"He seems awfully quiet, don't you think, Miss Dimple?" she continued. "Maybe this will give him a chance to get to know people."

"I expect he's shy," Miss Dimple said, "and probably a bit overwhelmed. I hear he's a gifted musician."

"We're lucky to have him, then," Virginia said as she put a handful of books back on the shelves. "I don't think that woman they had before could carry a tune in a bucket."

"Have you met the new coach yet?" she asked Charlie. "The one who took Frank Carver's place when he left for the army. I hear he and his wife are living with your aunt and uncle."

"Not *with them* exactly," Charlie explained. "They're renting

that little garage apartment behind them. Aunt Lou said his wife told her he caught malaria on some island or other and was wounded in the war. That's why he walks with a limp, but he doesn't like to talk about it. Nobody's used that apartment in years, but there aren't many places available here."

"Oh, it's the cutest place!" Delia chimed in. "Uncle Ed had it cleaned and painted and Aunt Lou has the kitchen fixed up nice. They're supposed to move in sometime this week."

"We'll have to do something to welcome them. A party, don't you think?" Virginia suggested.

Charlie nodded. "Aunt Lou's already a jump ahead of you," she said. "I think she plans some kind of shindig in October."

"Maybe his wife would enjoy being a part of the pageant," Virginia suggested. "Why don't you mention it to her, Delia? It would be a good way to introduce her to the community. After all, there's no reason one can't contribute to the war effort and have fun as well."

Delia agreed wholeheartedly. After all, didn't everybody say she should be in the movies when she had the lead in her class play? Maybe there would be a good part for her in the pageant. It wouldn't hurt to suggest it to the director.

But when Emmaline Brumlow arrived a few minutes later, she had other things on her mind.

One didn't have to know Emmaline well to know the woman bore no nonsense. She was almost as tall as Delia's sister, Charlie, who at five feet ten towered over her friend and fellow teacher, Annie Gardner. Bright circles of rouge made Emmaline look as if she had a fever, and since the war she'd taken to wearing tailored suits that had been cut down from her late husband's extensive wardrobe. Today's was a lightweight tan wool with the ever-present shoulder pads and a hint of a peplum. Delia thought her green felt hat looked a lot like a sand bucket turned upside down on her head with a bunch of feathers sticking out and, biting back a smile,

avoided looking at her sister. Charlie had been keen on Emmaline's son, Hugh, before he enlisted in the navy the year before. Having finished the medical part of his training to become a navy corpsman, Hugh had since completed his instruction at Pendleton marine base in California and was now serving somewhere in the Pacific. Although the two still corresponded, her sister claimed they were just good friends. Privately, Delia hoped Charlie wouldn't burn that bridge behind her. Not only was Hugh Brumlow good-looking, but his family owned the biggest dry-goods store in town, where before the war you could buy clothing almost as stylish as anything you'd find in Atlanta. If the two of them married, she might even get a family discount there. Delia had mentioned this once to her sister, who fell into an uncontrollable fit of laughter at the notion.

Now Emmaline set her bulging briefcase aside and instructed Charlie to position the club's lectern in front of the fireplace. "We'll begin as soon as everyone arrives," she announced, glancing at her watch, and Miss Dimple took that opportunity to discreetly leave. Glancing back at Virginia, she felt a pang of pity, but it was of brief duration. She exchanged pleasantries with the Weaver fellow, Phoebe Chadwick's new boarder, as he passed her along the walkway, and paused to speak to Annie, who hurried along behind him.

"Please tell me I'm not late!" Annie implored, stopping to catch her breath. "Emmaline will have a conniption fit, but I just couldn't go off and leave Miss Phoebe in such a state."

Miss Dimple frowned. The hostess of their rooming house had seemed fine when she left there an hour before. "Why, what's the matter? Is she ill?"

"It's Harrison," Annie explained. "You know, her nephew—or great nephew, I guess. Her niece's son—the one she talks about all the time . . ."

Miss Dimple nodded. Phoebe Chadwick doted on the boy to

the point where people were beginning to roll their eyes at the mention of his name. "What's wrong with Harrison?"

"He's been drafted into the army." Annie shrugged. "Phoebe must've known it would happen sooner or later, but she just went to pieces when her niece telephoned with the news. I thought I was going to have to call Doc Morrison, but she calmed down a little when I got her to drink some hot tea and elevate her feet. I didn't know what else to do, and Odessa had already left for town."

Miss Dimple patted the young woman's shoulder. "You did just fine. Odessa should be along shortly, and I'll be on my way as soon as I see if Mr. Cooper has my order in. I'd like to make my Victory Muffins tonight, but I'm almost out of soy flour and a little low on molasses as well."

Leaving Annie to face the disapproval of Emmaline Brumlow, Dimple Kilpatrick opened her umbrella to ward off the sun and continued on her way. The umbrella was large enough for three and had once been purple, in keeping with most of her wardrobe, and, in addition to shielding her from the elements, was used to spear and dispose of unsightly litter along the way.

In time, she hoped, Phoebe Chadwick would come to terms with her nephew's military duty, as had so many others. Several young men she had taught and loved as children had lost their lives in defense of freedom, and others were in danger of doing the same. Newsreels, radio, and newspapers brought the fighting close to hand, and learning of death and defeat was constant and unavoidable. It gnawed away at her heart, but Dimple Kilpatrick had not one doubt that her country would be victorious.



**MISS DIMPLE RALLIES TO THE  
CAUSE**

**BUY THE BOOK NOW**

**Amazon  
Barnes & Noble  
IndieBound**

**LEARN MORE ABOUT THE BOOK**

**macmillan.com**

