

BEFORE THE BLITZKRIEG

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by RUPERT GRAYSON

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

"Oh, talk's cheap," said the girl to Otto. "I wonder how many guys have told me what they're going to do TOMORROW?" She knew perfectly well that reference to past affairs with men always infuriated him. "Now, let's get this straight, as I said before. I know something of what you've got on your mind. You don't tell me a lot, but that don't matter. I don't want to know details—just the results that appeal to me. You've got that sort of a stunt on, and you reckon there's big money at the end of it. Maybe you're right—but I know, just naturally, that it isn't on the level, and if there's big money there, the big risk is there as well. You may flop down on it."

"I shall not do that. There is no risk at all—or practically no risk. It is safe."

"So, you say!" she sneered. "And that's another tale I've heard before. However, that can go for the moment. I like you, Otto; you're a good guy and you've been decent with me. And I won't mind marrying you—so long as you can cough up the goods. And maybe I wouldn't mind waiting two or three weeks to see if your game, whatever it is, comes off."

His eyes suddenly lighted up.

"Ah! You will do that? You will promise me?"

She raised her hand to check him.

"Now we're getting to it! I'll promise nothing, understand—just NOTHING—except that I'll wait two or three weeks to see if you can deliver the goods—and if you can, I'll marry you. But I know what's in the back of your mind—you want me to promise I won't look at another man until that three weeks is up! That'll just sit down with a pack of patience cards, while you go off on this trip of yours to God knows where, and to God knows what. Well, there's nothing doing, that's all. You may be on the level; maybe you are! This trip of yours may be just business, or there may be another woman at the end of it, how do I know? The answer is I don't know, and I don't care—but I'm not playing at nunneries, and that's flat!"

She played her last card with neat finesse.

"That fellow I was talking to last night isn't so bad, anyway. He's amusing, and he seems to have plenty of dough!" She turned to the mirror once more, but this time she smiled at her reflection self-complacently, and gently caressed her flame-colored hair.

"Ach!" The ejaculation burst from him like an explosion, as he turned on his heel and walked slowly toward the window once more, his hands thrust into his pockets, shoulders hunched, and head bent in thought. Suddenly he said:

"Look you here! Sometimes you say to me that you would like a long trip in a plane. How would you like to come with me, eh? Then you will see that there is no woman at the other end, as you say."

She had to fight hard to keep any sign of triumph from her manner, and succeeded admirably. Instead, she laughed, with a sort of hard carelessness.

"Don't get me wrong, sweet one. I don't care tuppence if there is another woman—or twenty women. I don't care if you go off and never come back again—you're not the only man in the world, and I've never had to go short of one—or half a dozen, for that matter—yet. So don't make any stupid mistakes."

He sensed that he had struck the wrong note.

"Ah, but you would like the trip, would you not—with me?"

"Oh, I dare say I'd like it, all right. Where's it to, anyway?"

But he frowned and shook his head.

"That I cannot quite tell you. It is a secret. You know that this trip is to do with the plans that will make the big money for me—and for you. Really, perhaps I ought not to take you—her heart sank suddenly—but I cannot leave you here—with that fellow. Maybe you will see things—but you must keep your mouth shut. I think you will—because you want those furs and those motor cars, and this is how you will get them. Anyway, I think you will not talk."

"Don't be a fool!" she snapped at him. "You know I don't talk. Haven't I seen enough to tell me already that you're on the crook. But I haven't talked, have I? What do I care, anyway? Money's money however it comes. That's my motto."

"No," he said slowly. "I do not think you will talk. If you do, it there are others in this besides me, and they know whom to deal with those who talk." The movement of his great hands was illustrative. "So you will come on this trip?"

Her reply was a triumph of apparent carelessness.

"Good! We must start soon, so you had better get ready. You can bring only one medium-sized bag. The place we go to is warm—you will need light frocks—those that you wash will be good. Also, because sometimes at night it is cold, a warm coat and a jersey."

"Oh, all right! I'll see about it now, I suppose. Guess I'll have to go out and buy a few things, too."

"Give me first a kiss."

She kissed him, and then swung out of the room—jaunty, careless, defiant—but eager to get away so that she might give way to her triumph and excitement. And as she went she thought, a little sadly: "The kiss of Caiaphas!"

A little later in the day X received an enigmatic telegram.

which, however, he could decipher quite easily. It read:

"Cotton in some place where warm by day and cold by night leave today.—C."

By the time he received that Coral Merridew, sitting beside Otto Britton in a powerful car, was well on her way to Chenham.

But, actually, they did not leave until night. At Chenham there was much activity in the Nest that afternoon and evening. There are a number of hard ground places in the marshes where an airplane can make a good landing, and it is not unusual at certain times of the year to see bonfires out on the flats. That night there were four, in a sort of square, and soon after midnight a slow-flying plane swooped down into the center of that square. It took a man and a woman aboard, and went off again.

It was Gun's alert mind and quick action that saved him. Without hesitation he pushed the automatic into place in front of the keys and, in the same movement, shook Trent roughly, calling:

"Hey, Trent! Come on, wake up! There isn't much time if we've got to talk, you know!"

After a moment or two Trent roused and sat up, stretching and yawning.

"Good Lord, is it time? I don't know what's the matter with me! I've been sleeping like a corpse—never heard that damned alarm clock go, either—and, by heck, I've got a mouth like one, too. Feel as though I've been on the booze, but I certainly haven't!"

Then he looked at Gun, who was coolly completing his dressing.

"You were up pretty sharp, for all your tiredness."

"Naturally," said Gun, lacing his shoes. "If Hazeldene has the slightest suspicion of what I've been up to—well, the whole thing's finished, and he'll probably strangle me."

(Continued on Page Nine)

OUT OUR WAY

By J. R. Williams



OUR BOARDING HOUSE . . . with . . . Major Hoople



LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIE



Double Trouble



THIS CURIOUS WORLD



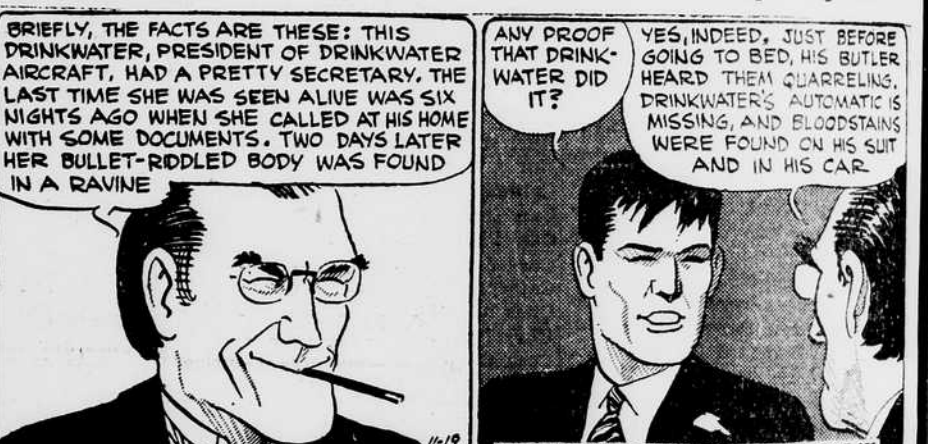
WASH TUBBS



Circumstantial Evidence



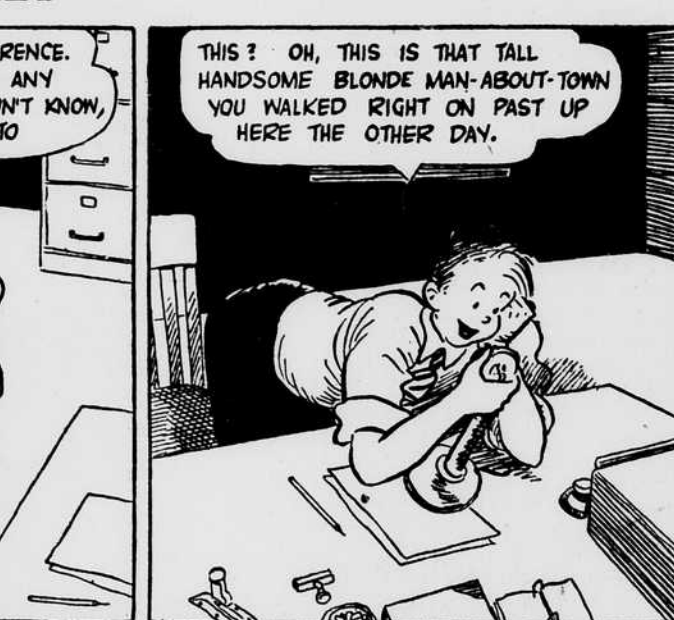
It's A Date



GASOLINE ALLEY



THE GUMPS



Fit As A Busted Fiddle



BELA LANAN—COURT REPORTER



BRICK BRADFORD—Seeks the Diamond Doll



THE STRANGE CASE OF BLOOD AND FEATHERS



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