

WHERE'S EMILY?

by Carolyn Wells

CHAPTER XXV.

Sayre moved restlessly and laid down his fork. The others made pretense of eating, but soon gave it up.

With one impulse they rose from the table and went out on the terrace, where Prall brought coffee to them.

Abel Collins took Lawlor into Aunt Judy's little sitting room, which was secluded and safe from interruption.

"Now," said Abel, when the two men were seated, "all the cards on the table, please. Miss Duane is my godchild, and though her fortune is in the hands of trustees, I am the one most responsible for her personal welfare. What is your exact errand here?"

"All the cards on the table it is," agreed Lawlor. "I am here to make inquiries. You must not take it amiss, for it is in the line of police duty, and we have no choice in the matter. We must investigate."

"Yes, of course," Collins spoke heavily; he did not hanker after this investigation. Who could tell whether an investigation of the case of Emily Duane might lead?

"Well, now, Mr. Collins, as man to man, if you found a head woman, and lying beside her a fur rippet and a few diamonds that belonged to another woman, wouldn't you make inquiries? As man to man now, wouldn't you?"

"Lawlor," and Abel's blue eyes gazed at him. "I can't carry on this talk as man to man. You're the investigator, you're the inquisitor, but I'm only anxious to protect my little girl from this base, this outrageous calumny. Oh, I know you're honest enough in your suspicions and doubts, but Emily Duane couldn't have done this thing you imply—for I suppose you are implying—all cards on the table?"

"On the table it is. Well, then, sir, the chief thing—and I think that it might be that Miss Duane and Mrs. Pennington had a sort of tiff, and of course, they didn't fight, as men would, but there might have been a pull-about, push-about sort of time, and Mrs. Pennington went over, grabbing Miss Duane's neck chain and rippet as she went. Then, you see, Miss Duane being frightened, ran away."

"Like Little Miss Muffet," said Abel without a smile, for his mind was merely working subconsciously and his speech was automatic.

"Now, look here, Lawlor," he said, after a moment, "why not just as well say that there was a tiff—or was not, either way—but that Mrs. Pennington herself stepped a little too near the edge of the bridge, and Miss Duane tried to grab her as she went over. Miss Duane, not being strong enough, Mrs. Pennington fell, grabbing, as you say, at the fur and the necklace of her would-be rescuer?"

"Very good," said Lawlor, looking compassionately at Abel's earnest face. "Very good, but in that case, why didn't Miss Duane scream for help, or run home and tell the tale?"

"We here, don't think Miss Duane disappeared voluntarily," and Abel drew himself up with dignity.

"Uh-huh? Well, we do. Now Mr. Collins, I'm right-down sorry for you, and sorry for all the folks in this house, but gotta do my duty. First off, I'm ordered to ask certain questions of Mrs. Bell, or of the servants here. Then, I've orders to search Miss Duane's room."

"But her rooms are the whole house—she owns it all."

"Shucks! You know what I mean. Her room, boodere or whatever, where she keeps her man's notes and sweetie pictures. Her diary, if she has one, and all that sort of thing."

"Oh, behaw, Lawlor, you're 'way off. Miss Duane is not that sort of girl."

"All girls are the same sort. I didn't say there was any harm in these letters and things, did I?"

But a man of your age must know that when we set out to do this business we've got to do it."

Abel Collins did know it. He also knew that he could stave it off no longer, and the matter must come to a crisis.

"Very well," he said, and rang the bell.

Prall came.

"Prall," said Abel Collins, "take Mr. Lawlor to Miss Emily's rooms. Let him make such search as he wishes, and then bring him back to me."

The astute Abel had had a fair notion that Mrs. Juliana Bell would already have performed such stunts of omission as she saw fit in Emily's rooms, and he concluded not to trouble her further in the matter.

So Prall solemnly conducted the police detective to the rooms of Emily Duane.

Though not an uncouth or unkempt man, Lawlor looked about as much out of place as Christopher Sly in the bedchamber of the nameless lord.

He glanced round Emily's boudoir, which was done up that year in palest draperies of yellow and pink and mauve, with gilded furniture.

He stepped gingerly on the fair, soft rugs, but duty is duty, and setting his teeth, Lawlor went to work.

Even more than by the dainty trappings was the detective hampered by the terrifying Prall, who stood at attention with the yielding softness of a stone image. Only the eyes of the butler moved, but they followed the intruder's every gesture, until even the solid

Lawlor was so nervous he nearly screamed.

Learning the situation, Betty stole upstairs, and the sudden appearance of this gold-haired spritlike person completed the discomfort of the man who was only doing as he was told.

The prickles came to the back of his neck, perspiration bathed his brow, and his thick fingers seemed clumsy than ever as he tried to extract from ornate pigeonholes in a Louis Quatorze desk what might be incriminating evidence in the Duane case.

"You poor man! You're all tired out!" cooed Betty's soft, cool voice. "Let me help you. Have you finished this lot?"

Defly she slipped a pile of papers into a drawer and pushed it shut.

"Now, over here—or have you already done this side?"

"No, miss, I ain't. But I don't need no help."

Ordinarily, Lawlor's English was fair, but under stress of embarrassment it went by the board. He was a well-meaning sort and a most kind-hearted man. He had daughters of his own, and he wished no harm to Emily Duane, but he most fervently wished this Lorelei-like young woman and that staid wooden soldier of a butler at the top of the North Pole or at the bottom of the North Sea, he didn't care which.

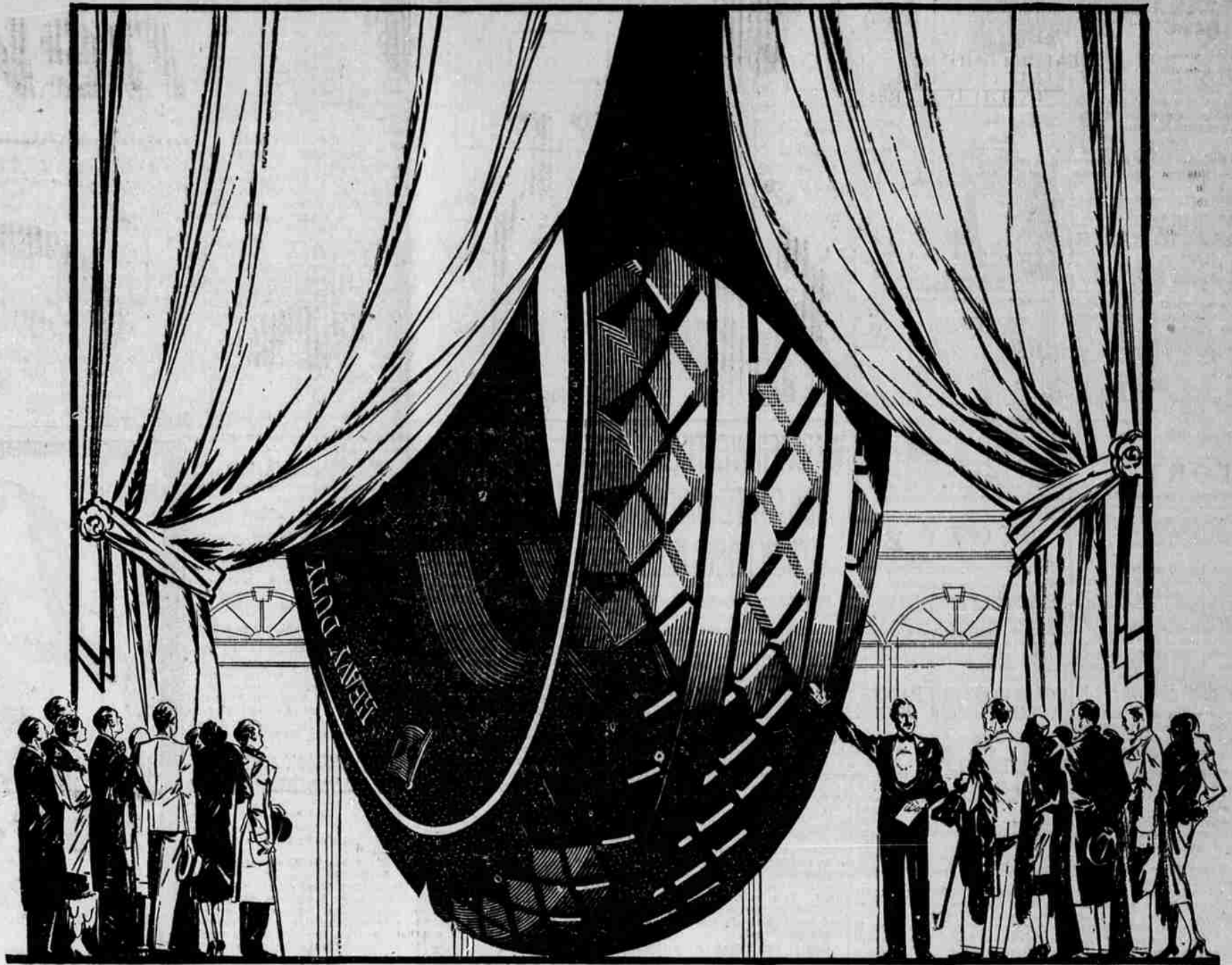
Nor was he set more at ease when he caught sight in a mirror of a slight wink on Betty's part and the merest fractional part of a nod from Prall.

(To Be Continued Tomorrow)
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