SOPHIE KERR'S GREAT NOVEL

"STAY OUT OF MY LIFE!"

By Sophie Kerr

CHAPTER XVII

MY became subtly aware than Jane had known all the time of her going back to Marburg and where she was going to live, also that Jane was enjoying the contrast between her own appearance and Amy's. But it didn't matter much for here was Jane and they were walking and talking together. And Jane was all right and right, only different—hard perhaps and ungettable, but certainly not unhappy.

"Miss Rosa told me how wonderfully you've succeeded, Jane. She says you make heaps of money and have an apartment and—look—right in town. The work in the hall isn't quite finished, but the living room it, I did today." Amy flung open the door. Jane hesitated: "Is there anyone here?" she asked and Amy knew that she was afraid Howard might be there. She didn't want to see Howard. She didn't want to say his name. So perhaps she wasn't quite so splendid and carefree as she'd seemed at first. "There's no one," said Amy, and went in ahead, Jane following.

"It's rather nice," said Jane, after a pause. "A pity you haven't grasscloth on the walls instead of that paper. I have a sort of natural grasscloth in my apartment. It makes a wonderful background for pictures, and it has an interesting texture. I have silk curtains, not scrim. And I picked up some prints and etchings and some good old bits of brass and copper."

"It must be lovely," said Amy. "Do you live all alone or—?"

Jane swung around at her sharply. "Yes. I do. Of course I have my maid. Or is it only the provincial mind that sees anything wrong in a self-supporting woman living alone in these days."

"I was only asking for information. It certainly never occurred to me that there should be anything wrong about Jane. Don't twist my words."

Jane stormed on: "What no one appreciates is that there's an entirely new era begun for women. They're free to choose their work, to shape their lives as they want to. Marriage is only one of many possible careers and one of the least desirable. A woman has a right to bear children if she wants to outside of marriage—"

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Amy felt far more at home with the Jane who ranted wild ideas. "Oh stop," she said. Every child has the right to the protection of the ordinary established conventions. A woman may do as she pleases about marrying, but she certainly shouldn't bring a child into the world for its shame and disgrace. Children don't ask to be born. They're helpless."

"Of course you'd think that simply because you've always refused to go with the times."

Amy suddenly wanted to laugh at the absurdity of arguing with Jane on the subject of feminism at practically the first moment of their meeting.

"You're like Aunt Rosa," went on Jane vehemently. "The reason I came home was I intend to make her give me my inheritance, so that I can do something on my own. It's wicked for me to be managing that money when I could double it, over and over again but she doesn't believe a woman knows anything about business, anything at all, the old idiot! I'm losing every chance—" she quieted suddenly. She had not meant to tell anyone this. "And heavens," she said, "I must hurry back. She's going to have the lawyer come up. It's nice to see you, Amy, and your new house."

Amy caught her arm. "Jane," she said, "don't go like this. I've missed you so. Dear Jane—can't we be friends again?" But she knew it was useless to ask. Jane had turned to stone. Jane had not forgotten or forgiven.

"Goodby," said Jane. "I must go. I—I've nothing to say to you—I didn't want to see you at all." She started away.

But Amy ran after her. "Remember, Jane dear," she cried, "remember, I am always your friend. If there's ever anything in the world I can do for you, I will."

At these words another Jane looked at Amy, a Jane whose eyes were full of doubt and fear, a lonely frightened Jane who wanted kindness and help as in the years gone by. Amy had seen this Jane before at times when she had been slighted or laughed at or neglected by the other children, or when she had done something reckless and daring that needed pardon. This was the Jane Amy had always been so quick to champion, to defend, to comfort. But the glimpse of this other Jane lasted only an instant, was so brief that Amy almost doubted that she had seen it. All she now saw was the smart slim brown-clad figure walking swiftly and decisively away from her as from a stranger.

From the quality of the light edging the drawn shades, from the clink of china against silver in the kitchen, and from the heartening whiff of coffee from the same quarter, Jane knew that it was nine o'clock or thereabouts, of a clear morning, and that her maid, Kitty, was almost ready to bring in her breakfast tray. She rolled over and buried her face in her pillow and groaned. "I wish I'd never waked up. I wish I had the nerve to kill myself."

She had been in the middle of a dream like a memory. She and Amy, swinging their tennis rackets, were walking under the elms at Marburg, and they had been laughing together, but the dream blurred and she couldn't remember any more. Anyway she was awake. The dream was gone. She had to face another day of the consequences of her own folly.

She rose wearily, pulled a thin rose-colored negligee over her arms and stuck her feet into rose-red Chinese slippers. She went into the bathroom and turned on the water and as she stooped the mirror showed her face, thin, with purple half moons under her eyes, her sick mouth, her hair hanging dry and lifeless, and she shivered.

"I look a million," she thought, and after that she avoided the glass. She poured violet vinaigre de toilette into the bath and the sharp sweetness refreshed her a little, and she pinned up her hair and tied a ribbon about it.

She was back in bed after her bath when Kitty knocked. Kitty was West Indian, with an aboriginal profile, a British accent and a great talent for cooking and for minding her own business. The breakfast tray was spotless, every section of the grapefruit entirely loose, the bacon and rolls crisp, and the coffee black and strong and boiling hot. She set the tray on the table beside Jane's bed, pulled up the shades, brought an extra pillow and quietly, deftly tidied the room.

"Are you feeling better this morning, Miss?" she asked.

"No, I'm not. And I don't want any breakfast."

"Oh, do take some coffee, Miss. So strengthening, coffee."

(To Be Continued)

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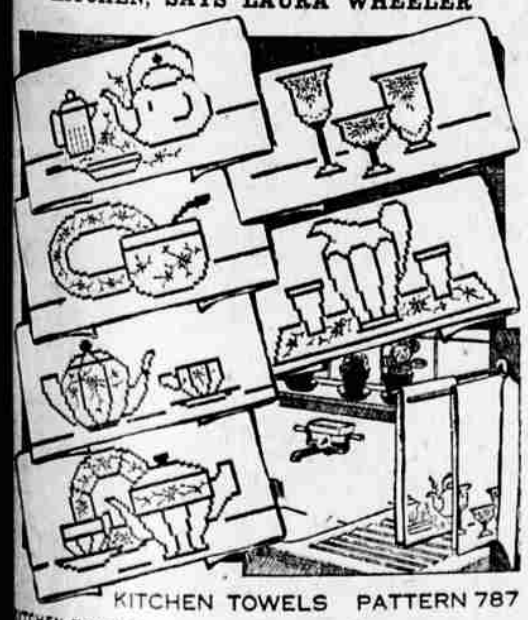

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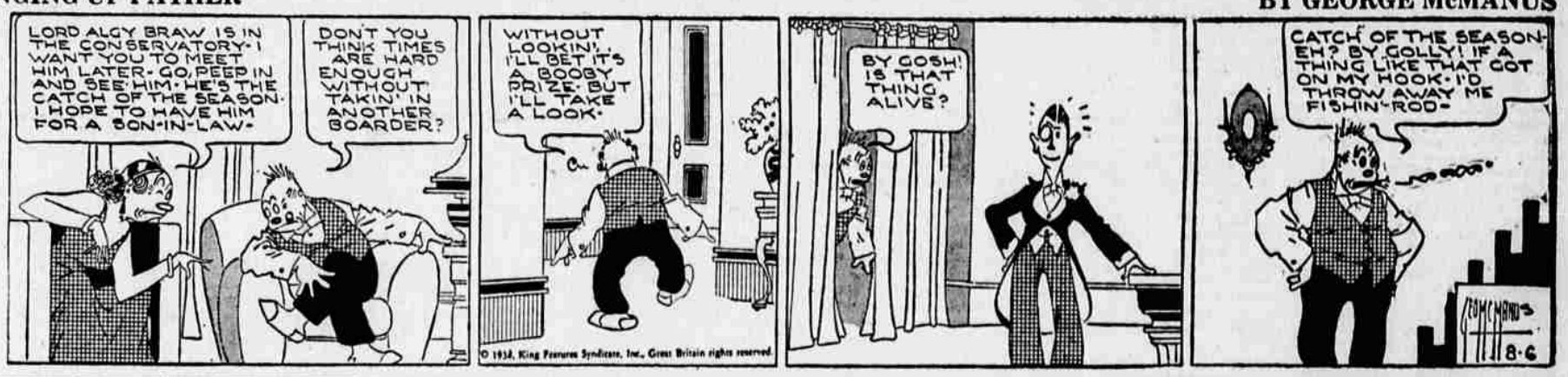

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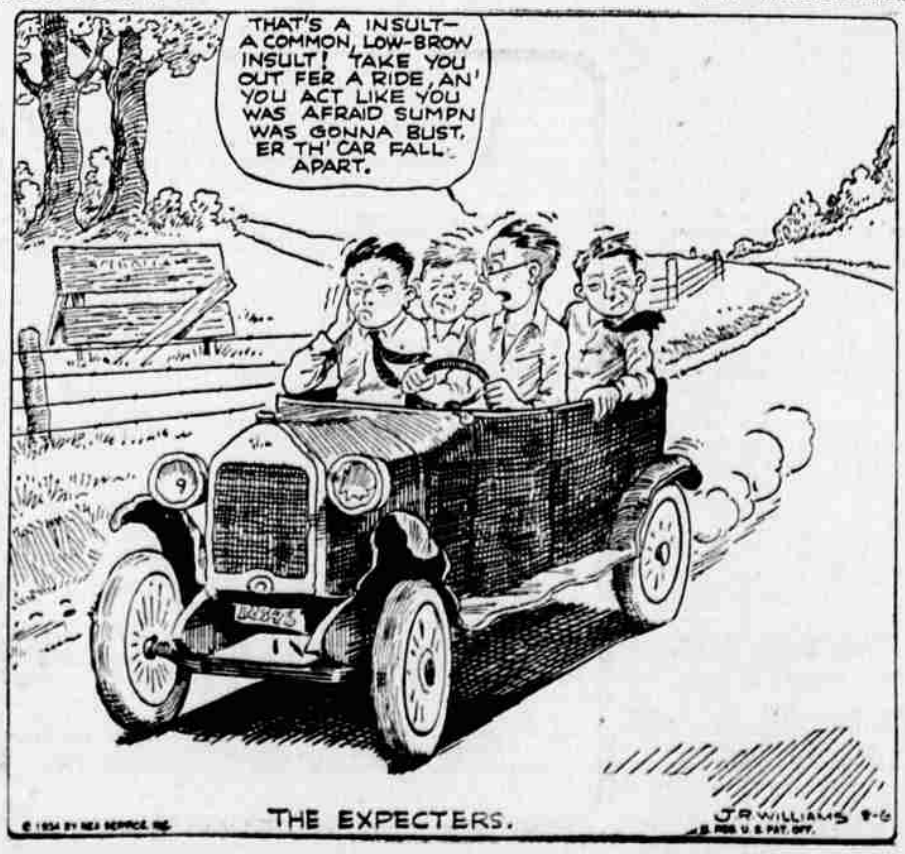

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