

Summer Sweethearts

By Mabel McElliot
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CHAPTER XXXIV



wrong in trusting him. He has a good face. I liked him from the start." The girl lifted her head. "You did? Really and truly?" "He's not bad," Violet Mercer assured her. "There's some mystery here. It can probably be cleared up. Wait and see."

"If my father finds out—or Bertine—" Katharine went on, "I might as well be dead."

"Don't talk like that. Do you suppose?" ventured Mrs. Mercer. "That neither one of them—your father or stepmother—has a single folly with which to reproach themselves?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

"Nonsense," said Violet briskly. "Anyhow, you're not to worry about them. Brace up, child. The world hasn't come to an end. I know it looks frightful to you, but probably in a week from now the whole affair will be straightened out."

"You think so?"

"I really do."

But after the girl had gone away Violet Mercer was not so certain. What a strange tangle of circumstances it was! Certainly, on the face of it, one wouldn't say that a young man who was engaged to one girl and married to another who, further, disappeared on the night following the ceremony, sounded particularly honorable. Especially since two detectives had visited him just an hour or two before his departure.

In a hospital ward in the city, high above the turgid stream that was the East River, Michael Heather lay. He tossed and turned on his narrow bed, and occasionally muttered an incoherent word or two.

Miss Smithers, the nurse on duty in the ward, glanced at his interestingly as she made an entry in his chart. "Good-looking fellow," she said to the supervisor who was a friend of hers. "It's too bad."

A newspaper reporter whose "beat" included this particular hospital wrote a brief paragraph about a hatless young man "possibly 27 years old" who had been injured in a taxicab accident at Park Avenue and 48th Street. The city editor ran a blue pencil through a good many items that night. So the story of Michael's misadventure appeared only in the early editions of the newspaper. The late edition, which came to the Stryker's table at Innisbrook, did not contain this account. Katharine, distraught as she was, searched the papers for mention of accidents, since Violet Mercer had, sensibly enough, suggested that some such happening might explain Michael's silence. She did not really believe in the possibility. By this time she was fairly well convinced that Michael Heather had played a cruel joke on the girl who had married him.

So the day passed, and the mystery deepened. And in Katharine's sick heart hope fluttered and died.

Sally said furiously, "I don't understand it. I simply don't get it at all!" She glared at the inoffensive Tips and at Clarence, stooped and graying, in the background.

"You say he said he was going to the city?" Sally demanded.

Clarence nodded. They had been over the ground several times before, but if the young lady wanted to ask the same questions over and over he had no choice but to answer them.

"He say he goin' to the city," Clarence elaborated, with a sidelong roll of chocolate eyes in a dark face. "He say 'fo' me to lock up."

"And that was day before yesterday?"

"Yes'm. In the evenin'. We ain't heard nothing from him since."

Sally waved an afternoon newspaper in his eyes. "Have you seen this?"

"No'm. Ain't seen nothin'." Clarence's eyes executed a sudden roll of apprehension. "They ain't nothin' in it 'bout Mist' Michael, is they?"

Sally laughed—an unpleasant laugh, drawing back the corners of her lips from small predatory teeth.

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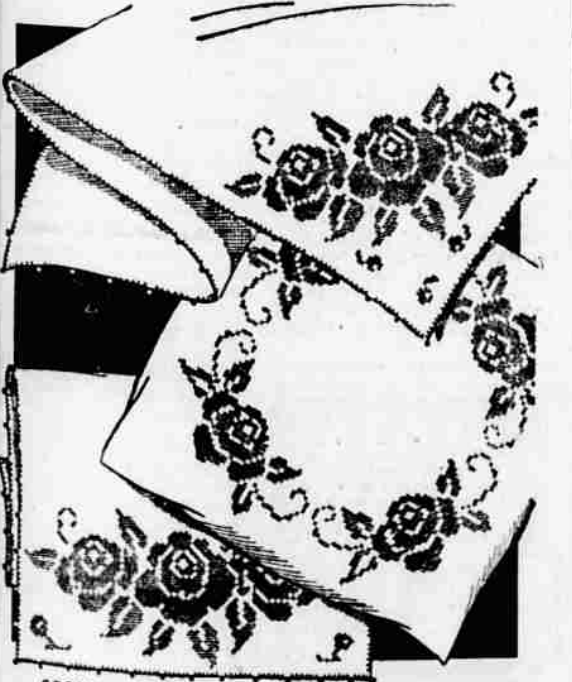
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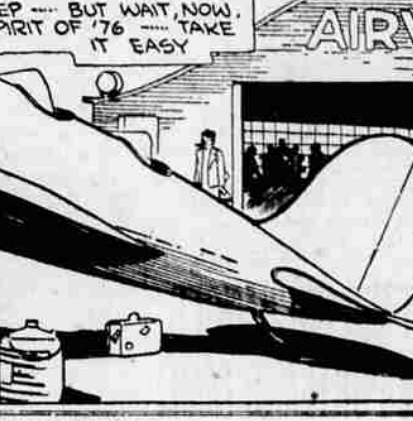
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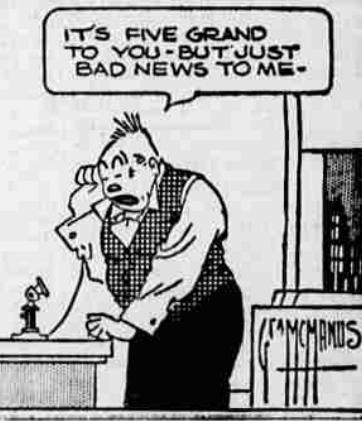


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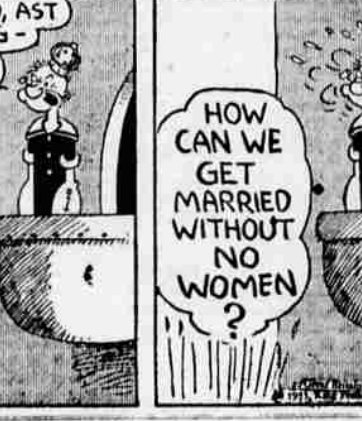
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