

HALF-ACRE in EDEN

CHAPTER XXVIII

Joan Bradford rather wanted to pick a fight with the butcher—the cut he had shown her and placed on the scales was far from what she had just described in detail—but she reflected that Mike would soon be soliciting advertising from him as well as all the other merchants in town, and a friend would be better than an enemy under such circumstances.

With a sweet smile, the full purport of which the butcher could not appreciate, she accepted the meat, paid for it, and walked out of the shop, her smile melting instantaneously in direct defiance of the temperature.

"The Hobbs Neck Gazette may be Mike's future," she lamented silently, "but it will be my finish if it keeps up. How can the wife of the editor be a conscientious free lance?"

Dorothy Osborn was coming out of the bakery next door.

"Come into the drug store for a soda," invited Joan. "I need refreshment and a sympathetic ear. Have you heard about the Bradford-McDougall enterprise?"

Dorothy had not heard, and Joan explained it. The paper would not be taken over for several weeks, she said, during which many details needed attention, and Mike, while keeping his job in the city, was staying up half the night over enthusiastic plans.

"I wanted a home of my own and I got a weekly newspaper," said Joan. "They ranged up on me—Mike and Bruce McDougall."

"I think it's grand," Dorothy disagreed. "I've lived here all my life and I remember when the Gazette was a prosperous and much better paper. I know you can make it go."

"Well, I hope so," said Joan, more optimistic than she should admit. "If just my own investment were at stake it wouldn't be so bad, but I'd hate to see Bruce lose, too, when he's never been involved in such a thing without us."

"He's a nice person," said Dorothy, dipping into a sundae. "You'll have to come over and see the sketch he did of me. Not beautiful, but true to life. I like him a lot, but he's odd, in a way, isn't he? I wonder if he likes it here?"

"You'd never get him to tell you," Joan replied. "He gets some of the darndest attacks of shyness I ever witnessed. A man like him—attractive, earning a good living—would make a good husband for some deserving girl, but, as far as I've been able to pierce his shell, he's not interested. Reserve—boy, he's got it!"

There was an old habit of gossip in Dorothy's makeup. During many years she had had an acid tongue, a bitter viewpoint. But the circumstances which had prompted her had been so miraculously supplanted with the prospect of a career on the stage that in her thankfulness, the bitterness had flooded away.

Yet the old habit of gossip remained. Kindlier gossip, now.

"I could tell a great deal about him," she said. "You and Mike are the oldest friends he has here, aren't you? Then it's no harm to tell you."

The night of the bank robbery and the pursuit of the bandits, the wreck of Marcia Clifford's car, and the Osborns, with McDougall, coming upon it.

McDougall with Marcia in his arms, on the way to the hospital; McDougall's face in the rear-view mirror.

McDougall forgetting everything else while he watched the doctors and nurses take Marcia away.

"May heaven help me!" said Joan when Dorothy had finished. "And that guy, to my certain knowledge, has never even asked her for a date. What do you do with a man like that?"

They parted in front of the drug store. In another day or two Dorothy was to start rehearsing in the new Lloyd Burton play, Joan drove home.

Mike did not intend to give up his job in the city until the Gazette had been actually turned over to him, and that could not be accomplished for several weeks. There were many odds and ends of business to be settled meanwhile, and McDougall, under assignment from Mike, did what he could during the greater leisure afforded by his own job.

It made him, he realized, a lot more contented than he had been for a long time—more, indeed, than at any time since his arrival in Bobbs Neck. To write and receive letters concerning details of the new venture, to dash here and there on errands necessary to the revival of the Gazette as Mike planned it, kept him busy and cheerful. It was stimulating to have tasks beyond his usual work, to have no time heavy on his hands.

It was exactly what he had needed. His daily sketches required two few hours, for, even though he spent considerable time looking for types and scenes, he worked quickly and precisely at his drawing board.

He was, moreover, immensely glad to be of any practical service in the partnership. He realized that only the addition of his investment to the Bradford's had made the purchase possible, but he knew, too, that only Mike's training could make a success of the paper. His own training had been as an artist, and until he had come east on his present job, it had left little time for him to absorb anything else.

On a morning a few days after his and Mike's great decision he remembered, as he shaved, how he had so recently entertained, before this same mirror, the notion that he was a bit lonely in Bobbs Neck. Only a few weeks had passed, and he had not only forgotten the very feeling of loneliness but was busier than he had ever been. It wouldn't take much more to fill all 24 hours of the day: besides his plate, at the breakfast table, the Sellers' maid brought up from downstairs, was the morning's mail. Word of his new position in the community had spread quickly and his patronage was solicited by almost everyone who had goods or service to sell. There were circulars and letters from the Main Street stores, invitations to join a church, the Stagecraft

LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIE

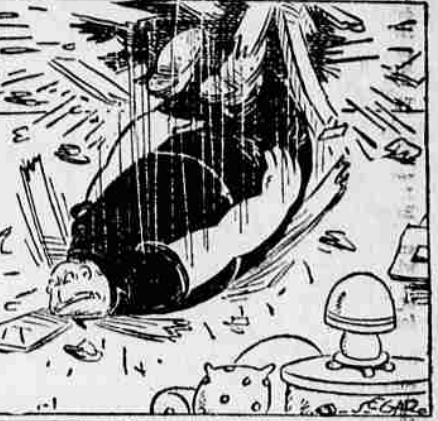
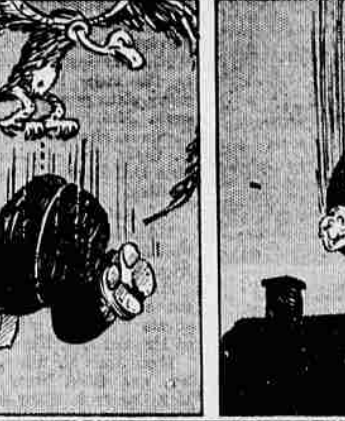
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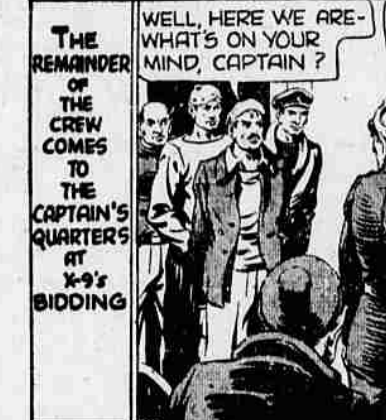
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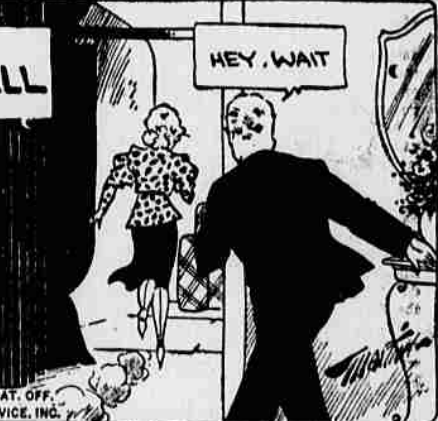
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