

# Outrageous Fortune

by Patricia Wentworth

**SYNOPSIS:** By chance Caroline Leigh has found her cousin, Jim Riddell. He tells her a fantastic story, claimed as fiction by Nesta Riddell, he is told by Nesta that she stole the famous Van Berg emerald and shot Elmer Van Berg. The worst is that Jim cannot remember the immediate past, except in flashes—and one of the flashes shows him drinking with Van Berg, and the emeralds in Van Berg's hand! Perhaps he did about the same, Jim tells Caroline. Caroline refuses to believe it, and plans to trace down Nesta's marriage record. She leaves Jim in Hale Place, his old home, but closed for the last few years.

## Chapter 24 TO LONDON

CAROLINE caught the seventhirty to London. All the time she and Jim were getting into Hale Place, while he was pulling down the blankets and she was saying someone might see her if she came back by day, she was concocting a secret plan.

In the end she ran away because she was afraid that he would guess what she meant to do. She thought he would have guessed if he hadn't been stupid with fatigue. She thought he was like a man half drugged. That was why he hadn't guessed; and it was lucky for her, because if he had guessed, he would have tried to stop her, and she meant to go.

It was past two o'clock when she came back to the cottage. The gate was unfastened and the door stood wide open as she had left it. If Patsy Ann had only known! To Patsy there was always a burglar round the next corner.

Caroline undressed and lay down under her great-grandmother's embroidered quilt, but she did not sleep. She was too flooded with joy to sleep. Her hands still kept the touch of Jim's hands; her ears still rang with all the sounds of his voice. She had no time to fall asleep.

At six she dressed, went tiptoe down the stairs, made tea, and rolled herself an egg. Then she wrote on the slate, "Gone to town," and propped it up against the bowl of fruit in the middle of the gate-lattice; after which she set out to walk four miles across the fields to Hinton, where she caught the train. She had the compartment to herself as far as Ledington, where it filled up. She wondered what she would do if Nesta Riddell were to get in. How dare she say Jim was her husband? It was the most unbelievable, impudent thing. Caroline tripped up over her own word. This wasn't unbelievable, because she had done it. The unbelievable thing was that she should claim a stranger. But she had claimed a stranger. Had she? If it was unbelievable, then Caroline didn't believe it. Then he wasn't a stranger. Where did this take her. She had a terrified sense of having betrayed herself and Jim.

She pushed the word that had tripped her right out of her mind and shut the door on it. She hadn't got to account for what Nesta Riddell had done. She had only to go to the Grove Road registry office and see James Riddell's name in a stranger's writing. That would prove that Nesta was lying, and that Jim was free. It was the easiest thing in the world, and she felt that she couldn't bear to see Jim again until she had the proof that it was not he who had signed the register as Nesta Riddell's husband. The train joggled along. It stopped at every station, but after Ledington the compartment was too full to take in any more passengers.

THERE was an old woman with a string bag full of vegetables and an enormous sheet of cottage flowers—crimson phlox, red and yellow single dahlias, full-blown cabbage roses, and clove carnations which scented the whole compartment.

She had a crushed black straw hat on the back of her head, a black Cashmere dress, and a thick black cloth coat. Her face was broad and red under scanty wisps of grey hair. She was very hot, because she lived two miles out of Ledington and had hurried to catch the train.

She fanned herself with a cabbage leaf, and as soon as she had got her breath she began to talk, first about the weather, and then about the Van Berg case. Three girls on the opposite seat, flimsily dressed slips of things with salmon-colored stockings, berets, and magenta lips went on whispering and giggling together while she told them how the snails were over-running her garden from one end to the other, and how she had set a slug trap—"And if I was to tell you what I caught, you wouldn't believe me."

A shy young man who was sitting with an unlighted cigarette looked out of the window. The Miss Borings, who kept a genteel woolshop in Mickelham Street, sat primly side by side in their neat, dowdy blue serge coats and skirts. They wore identical tucked muslin blouses with high collars and rolled gold collar-supports, and twin hats of dark blue straw with plain black ribbons.

The schoolboy next to them was immersed in the latest mystery thriller. The old gentleman with the beard went on filling his pipe. The young married couple opposite Caroline continued to hold one another's hands.

Snails have no charm to unite a carriage full of strangers in a common bond of interest. But no sooner had the stout woman pronounced the name Van Berg than everyone had something to say.

"It's a queer thing they don't seem to catch the man that shot Mr. Van Berg," she said, and the schoolboy emerged from his thriller with a jerk.

"They say they've got a clue," he began.

"That doesn't mean very much," said the old man. He tapped his pipe. "The sort of thing they say to keep the public quiet—like throwing a bone to a dog."

The girl with the large blue eyes rolled them at the shy young man and giggled.

The stout woman fanned herself. "I was up at the Hall yesterday—"

"Packham Hall!" said both Miss Borings together.

THE stout woman nodded. "Cook's my brother's second wife's cousin-in-law, and I took her over a couple of pots of honey. The shop stuff that watered down she don't relish it, so I took her some of mine—never been before where they didn't keep their own bees, and don't like it."

"And then to have a murder, or next door to it, well, she don't think she'll stay—such an upset, and not what she's used to. Why, when she heard the shot, she comes over that queer she couldn't have got out of bed, not if it had been the house on fire."

"Mrs. Rogers," she says—that being my name—"Mrs. Rogers, I give you my solemn identical word, I just pulled the clothes over my head and waited to see if I was going to be murdered in my bed. I don't look her right color yet."

"I don't know how I should feel if I was to hear someone being shot in the middle of the night," said the young married woman.

"I know what you'd do," said her husband—"pinch me, same as you're doing now."

The girl giggled, and the Miss Borings coughed.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Rogers. "It isn't everyone that's got someone to pinch. I'm a widow myself, and so's Mrs. Henry that I've been telling you about. Her husband was a policeman, so it doesn't put her about having the police in and out and all over the place, as you might say—and maybe she'd get told a thing or two as she wouldn't have got told if it weren't for her husband's official position."

Everyone leaned forward a little. The shy young man burst into speech.

"Did she tell you whom they suspected?"

Mrs. Rogers shook her head. "Were there any finger prints?" said the schoolboy. "They'll get him if there were."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Rogers darkly. "Well, I don't know as I ought to say, but seeing as we're all friends here—" She paused, fanning herself.

Caroline caught the inside of her lip between her teeth. Her hands held each other hard. A general murmur encouraged Mrs. Rogers to proceed.

"Well, it's something as hasn't got into the papers—I can tell you that—and everyone in the house told not to say a word. They'd have kept them from knowing if so be they could, but when there's a tray and glasses took for finger prints, there's going to be talk in the servants' hall whether or no."

"Ah—" said the old man with the beard.

Caroline's grip relaxed a trifle. She knew this already; it was what Jim had told her. But then it meant—it meant he had remembered right!

Caroline jumps suddenly from the train, Monday.

# GO-TO-CHURCH DAY FOR ST. MARKS SET

Sunday, October 22, has been designated "Go to Church Sunday" by the

vestry of St. Mark's Episcopal church, and it is earnestly requested that all members of the St. Mark's church and congregation and their friends attend the 11:15 service.

There will be special music and all strangers in the city will be welcomed, as well as all other persons, who do not have a permanent church home. They are cordially invited to come

and worship with the members of the Episcopal church.

PEIPING, China, Oct. 19.—(AP)—Dr. Sven Hedin, Swedish explorer who has been engaged by the Chinese government for a trip to Sinkiang province preliminary to an attempt to open up the territory economically, will depart on the journey Saturday.

# HOTTEST OCTOBER PLUS FIRE HAZARD

SAN FRANCISCO, Oct. 19.—(AP)—Fires in long-dry timber and brush

became an increasing menace in California today as an October heat wave clung on.

Three brush blazes in the Los Angeles region and two fires raging through Redwood timber in the vicinity of Santa Cruz were attributed by officials to the heat.

Two cases of heat prostration, neither fatal, were reported in Los Angeles yesterday as the mercury

rose to 92 degrees, three degrees below the previous day's maximum.

Sultry air movements from the interior, which for three days have replaced the usual ocean breezes, brought San Francisco the warmest October 18 of record. The high thermometer reading was 88.

Kentucky had 539 homicides in 1932.

# S'MATTER POP—

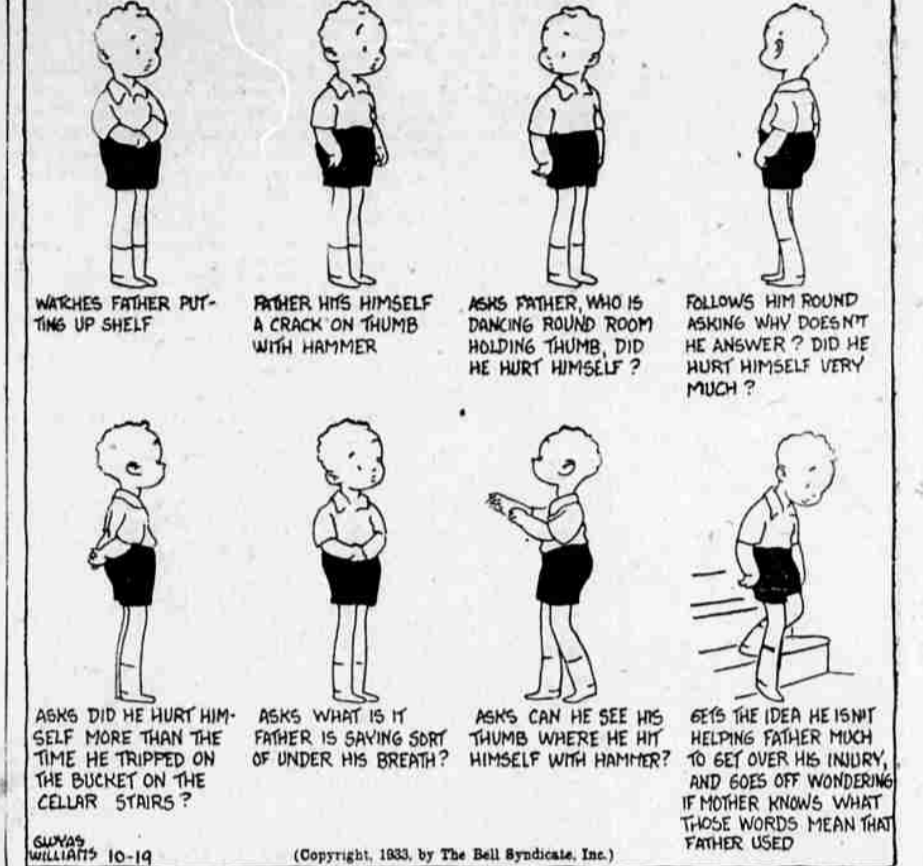
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# THE NEBBS—Always Welcome

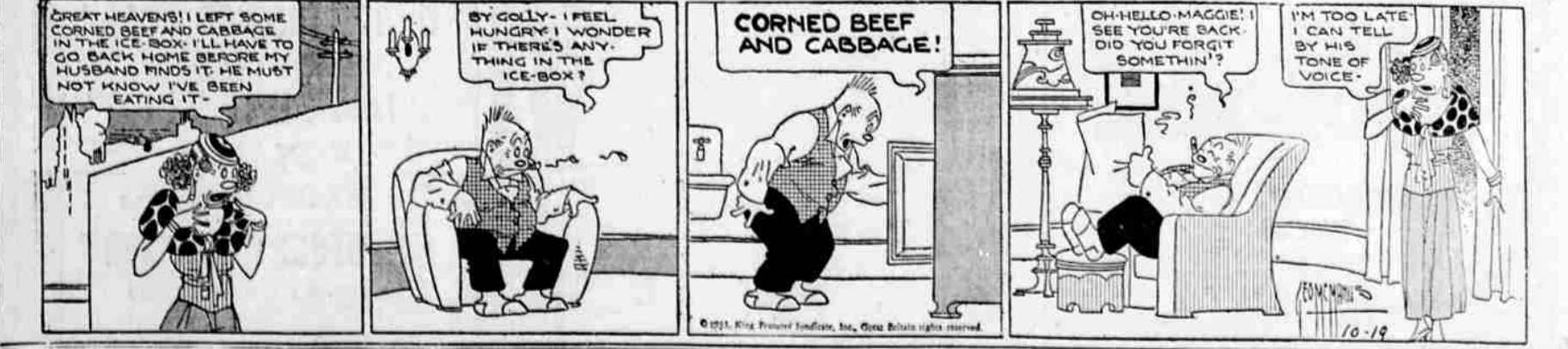
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# BRINGING UP FATHER

By George McManus



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